



Discussion Boards: Valuable? Overused? Discuss.

Instructors and students alike are growing tired of the discussion board formula. Innovative approaches point to the potential for more meaningful online learning experiences.

By [Mark Lieberman](#)

March 27, 2019



Discussion boards have been a staple of online courses for decades. But Carolyn Speer, manager of instructional design and access at [Wichita State University](#), thinks many instructors default to using them incorrectly.

Instructors often kick off a discussion board assignment by asking each student to respond to an assigned reading. To prevent plagiarism, some

learning management systems are set up, either by the platform or by policies of the institution or instructor, to only reveal the full contents of a discussion thread after a student has already posted.

“It sounds to me most of the time that what they want is a deep writing assignment done by each individual student on a topic with potentially an opportunity for students to comment on other students’ work,” Speer said. “At least in our LMS, it’s better to do that in a blog.”

Though Speer questions the utility of discussion boards, she doesn’t think they should be discarded. Lively discussions are among the hallmarks of face-to-face courses. Skeptics of online learning argue it’s difficult to replicate their value online -- but Speer isn’t a skeptic. “If two people can fall in love online, they can learn American history online,” she said.

Speer isn’t alone in seeking to refresh the discussion forum as the key source of person-to-person interaction in online courses. Educators are pursuing a variety of strategies for fostering student engagement. One approach is to emphasize quality and thoughtfulness of responses over quantity and frequency. Another puts the instructor in the driver’s seat, steering conversations to sharper insights as they might from the front of a classroom. The goal that unifies all of these efforts? Constructing a learning experience around collaboration as a means to deeper understanding.

Discussion boards are likely familiar to the millions of students who have taken at least one online course, and to plenty of face-to-face students as well. Though many instructors place less grading weight on discussion board participation compared with exams or essays, the value of interaction between students can’t be underestimated, according to Vanessa Dennen, professor of instructional systems and learning technologies at [Florida State University](#).

“It is a place to keep them apace with other people, to see who the other people are in the class,” Dennen said. “That ties into all sorts of self-efficacy beliefs, along with a sense of community.”

What Online Discussions Can Do

Learning management systems are the primary vessel for discussion forums in online courses. Designers at Blackboard, among the first major LMS providers to service higher education, initially drew on discussion forums that already existed in “technical circles,” according to Phil Miller, Blackboard’s chief learning and innovation officer.

At first, Miller said, many instructors used them primarily to allow students to introduce themselves at the beginning of a course. Over time, Blackboard started receiving requests for more innovative variations, like a “fishbowl” approach in which the instructor and a handful of students discuss a topic while the rest of the class observes.

That evolution mirrors the trajectory of many experienced online instructors. Charles Hodges, a professor of instructional technology at [Georgia Southern University](#), spent the early years of his online teaching career requiring students to answer a discussion post inspired by that week’s reading. Over a 16-week semester, this process became exhausting for him, and difficult at times for his students to navigate.

When Hodges noticed that most of his students were responding to the prompt within the last 30 minutes before the Sunday deadline, he decided to instead require students to make an initial post by Wednesday, allowing a few days for discussion to percolate. He also refined his prompts, asking probing questions like “What was the most challenging part of the chapter for you to

grasp?” or “How could the reading material apply to your professional practice?” rather than simply requesting a bland recap of highlights from the chapter.

Still, though, “it felt a little rushed,” Hodges said.

A few years ago, Hodges landed on two big fixes that proved successful. First, he cut in half the number of discussion posts per semester. Second, he now allows students to respond to discussion prompts with PowerPoint presentations, YouTube videos and concept maps in addition to written text. For some discussions, he makes explicit suggestions for multimedia projects that would enhance students’ understanding.

Students spend the first week of each two-week discussion module producing their response. Then they spend the second week evaluating each other’s work using prompts from Hodges like “Compare your concept map to the rest of the class. What’s missing? What’s different?”

“They are doing fewer discussions, but hopefully those discussions are more meaningful, more in-depth,” Hodges said.

No matter how much Hodges experiments, some students will only want to use the discussion boards the minimum amount for credit, he admits. But motivated students in his class, many of whom are practicing teachers, form relationships that extend beyond the class itself.

“They do develop a little bit of a rapport between themselves ... They notice somebody that’s teaching in the same grade or content area,” Hodges said.

“They make those connections pretty fast.”

Dennen thinks discussion boards can help students who might feel overwhelmed by the material get a firsthand look at what they can gain from their peers.

“Twenty-five percent of my class is going to feel uncertain about a topic initially. But then the 25 percent of my class that feels quite confident about it and very gung-ho is going to go ahead with the discussion activity,” Dennen said. “They’re providing a model for the rest of the students of what to do. Their model feels a lot more achievable [than mine].”

Rote online discussions also put students in marginalized groups at a disadvantage, according to Sean Michael Morris, director of digital learning at the [University of Mary Washington](#). He’s concerned that formulaic discussion prompts prevent students from adequately expressing themselves or even forming their identity -- particularly if every student, regardless of background or identity, is expected to weigh in with roughly similar reactions.

“By asking open-ended questions, by giving students the opportunity for dialogue in an unassessed or ungraded space, the discussion forum can become a site within online learning for ‘college’ to happen,” Morris said.

The Instructor’s Role

The ultimate goal of a discussion board assignment is to get students talking to each other. But instructors rethinking their discussion boards emphasize that they play an active role throughout the process.

Some students might be shy or reluctant to participate early on. In the first couple weeks of her courses, Dennen makes a point to privately send emails to students who haven’t contributed much. Students sometimes assume that they’re far behind their classmates whose discussion board posts make them

seem like “experts”; Dennen helps assure them that students often feel that way and they shouldn’t let it deter them from engaging.

“That’s the most important time to give students super-timely feedback and grades on their discussion performance, to let them know if their performance was on track or not,” Dennen said. “It sets the tone for the whole rest of the course.”

At Wichita State, Speer has developed a discussion board model that would seem to be far more time-consuming than average -- but she’s not complaining.

She teaches quantitative methods and research methods classes in the institution’s criminal justice program, as well as an introductory course in American government. For each course, she starts the semester by creating five or so discussion threads, each on a pre-established topic. Students must respond to at least one thread, but they can respond to as many as they want. Later in the semester, she offers students the option to start their own threads, warning them not to duplicate someone else’s.

Instead of assigning a grade based on whether or not a student posted, or the number of words in a response, Speer gives high marks to posts that “advance the discussion.” Each student who posts is building on what other students said, as in a face-to-face conversation.

“You can restate and affirm all day if you want to,” Speer said. “I’m not giving credit for that.”

Over time, grading has become more efficient as Speer has developed a routine of steering conversations toward certain topics that generate

discussion. Speer also marks down for “cluster posting” on any day, and even more so for cluster posting on the last day before posts are due. She says she’s never received a negative comment about her discussion board approach on a student evaluation.

“I don’t dread my discussion boards. They don’t feel like they’re work for me,” Speer said. “They’re not heavy. They’re not *my* discussion boards.”

New Variations

The popular video-creation tool Voicethread has been a boon to innovators of online discussions. At [Bryant University](#), discussion boards consist of a mix of written “essay-like” responses, usually informed by research, with “experiential” video posts that express an opinion or tell a story, according to Bonnie Budd, Bryant’s director of online learning.

“These students are all over the country, different time zones,” Budd said.

“They become an actual conversation and not just an assignment.”

Budd has also helped introduce to the university a discussion post format known as [3CQ](#), developed by Jennifer Stewart-Mitchell, a K-12 teacher who frequently publishes curriculum ideas. Each student’s response must include a compliment, a comment, a connection (3C) and a question (Q).

“It gives them a framework to get away from ‘I agree,’” Budd said.

Enthusiasm for online discussions varies, even among instructors who use them. Patrick Lowenthal, associate professor of educational technology at Boise State University, believes the federal requirement that online courses

include “regular and substantive interaction” between students and teachers sets the tone for an emphasis on discussion boards that sometimes lacks necessary context.

“Sometimes we overuse online discussions,” Lowenthal said. He thinks instructors get concerned, for instance, about letting students work on a project for a week without posting on a discussion board prompt.

Lowenthal encourages instructors to be more flexible -- an online course in programming might lend itself less to online discussions than a course in English literature, for instance. Sometimes discussions are more effective if students in the class are split into groups who then report back to the whole group after conversing privately.

In some cases, discussion boards function along the lines of social networks students are already using. Desire2 Learn (D2L), for instance, offers instructors the option for a "single thread of conversation" that extends through the entire semester. The company is also looking closely at the functionality of the workplace chat application Slack, according to Kenneth Chapman, vice president of market strategy for D2L.

"I'm seeing much more of an understanding that the online space needs to feel more like a campus," Chapman said.

Learning management system providers are also working on automating certain aspects of the discussion board process to ease the burden of time and effort on instructors, particularly in high-enrollment courses with dozens of posts to parse. Blackboard has developed and is currently piloting algorithms that can assess the level of critical thinking that students use when answering

questions. Instructors can receive readouts that help inform the grades they assign.

“What we are not doing is we are not judging the subject matter of the post,” Miller said. “We’re not trying to say is this right or wrong. We are just evaluating the depth and the writing structure of the post.” That function draws on the [Flesch-Kincaid Readability Index](#), a military-approved readability standard.

That feature, particularly as it gets closer to evaluating the content of a student’s response, has gotten “a little pushback” from instructors who “aren’t ready for that,” Miller admits.

But discussion boards aren’t going away any time soon. Nor is the impulse to improve them.

“You might hear in a workshop on how to design your online class, you have to have discussions,” Hodges said. “But you really have to figure out on your own what’s going to work for your students in terms of best practices for how to facilitate those discussions.”

<http://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/article/2019/03/27/new-approaches-discussion-boards-aim-dynamic-online-learning>