

Techniques to Enhance Online Discussions

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General Considerations

- Discussion is more than Q&A
 - But we'll live with that to start
- On-line is much the same as in-person
 - But we'll see the differences in a minute
- Most important preparation is to answer
- “Why are you having the discussion?”

Why?

- Cover issues that don't have answers
- Cover “ethical” issues
- Promote synthesis of knowledge
- Highlight foundations for real life solutions (History of failed solutions)
- Change pace of instruction
- Cover new factual information...really.

Planning = Success

- Know what you want to accomplish
- Select topics to cover
- Plot discussion diagram
 - Write questions
 - Come up with possible responses
 - Decide on follow-up responses
- Prepare references ahead of time

An Example

- Discussion on:
 - Need to educational testing
 - Problems with educational testing
 - Ways to overcome these problems
- Key starting point for discussion: “No Child Left behind Act”

Start

- **The Challenge:** For too long, America's education system has not been accountable for results and too many children have been locked in underachieving schools and left behind.
- **The Solution:** Information is power; testing and gathering independent data are the ways to get information into the hands of parents, educators and taxpayers.

Source:<http://www.ed.gov/nclb/accountability/ayp/testing.html>

Questions

- Why do we need testing?
- What kind of testing is there?
- What is a standardized test?
- How useful do you think the SAT is?
- How often should children in school be measured against the rest of the country?

Why do we need testing? (or do we?)

- Positive
 - Ensure children are learning.
 - Or at least learning how to take tests!
 - Monitor school efficiency.
 - Criterion vs Norm referenced
 - Ensure people can get a job.
 - Promote teachers/techniques.
 - Union issues
- Negative
 - Waste of time
 - People are different
 - “Normalized” (See standardized)
 - All political
 - Central control (thought police)
 - Evolution & Intelligent Design
 - All eggs in one basket

Overview

- Planned discussion with prepared answers and follow-up questions
- Can work in-person or on-line
- Can work with large groups or small
- Think “Fred Friendly”
 - <http://www.fredfriendly.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=home>

Example: “In The Balance”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- What is the media’s responsibility to the public? to public health officials?
- When the media reports late-breaking news, what can they do to prevent the public’s over-reaction?
- If the news station runs this story about the woman on the plane, what information about the disease should the station make sure to include?
- Should government officials ever be allowed to tell the media what stories they can and cannot report?
- Is the media liable for public pandemonium inspired by inaccurate reporting?
- If you heard on the news about an outbreak of an infectious disease, where could you get accurate information quickly?

MODERATOR TIPS:

To help inspire discussion in this scenario, you could add the following variables:

- The mayor of Metropolis decides to hold a news conference. What’s the game plan to avoid panic and handle this potential problem?
- At the press conference, a reporter from a competing news station challenges the mayor, first saying that plane shouldn’t be allowed to land, then wondering if the airport should shut down all flights from that part of Africa.

On-line vs In-person

- On-line
 - Slower
 - Less moderation
 - Students can skip it
 - Harder to encourage participation
 - Anonymous option
 - Hard to tell who's slacking off
 - No visual cues!
- In-Person
 - Faster
 - Constant moderation
 - Students can't skip
 - Easier to encourage participation
 - Can't be anonymous
 - Easier to tell who's slacking
 - Visual cues

On-line vs In-person

■ On-line

- Easy to look back
- No reason to take notes
- Easier to follow along
- Less “wet blanket” effect

■ In-Person

- Hard to remember what all was said
- If it’s important, takes notes
- Must listen and develop a response at the same time
- Bored students dampen discussion

Other Challenges

- Motivation
 - Large class size
 - Lack of experience with asynchronous
 - Loss of control
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Motivation

- Assign credit
- Split responsibilities (large class size)
- Only basis for some test questions
- Make it Interesting
- Keep discussion moving

Large class size

- Ask limiting questions:
 - “Line one reason why ...”
 - Use Fishbowl technique
 - Modified fishbowl - > Roleplay
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Lack of experience with asynchronous

- Practice.
- Start small/easy
- Force use of discussion board for other class issues
 - Readings update
 - Homework questions
- Accept non-universal enthusiasm
- “What do you want?”

Students think

“Discussion =...”

- Teacher looking for validation of own ideas
- Teacher looking for bull-session
- Teacher not prepared for class
- Teacher wants emotional displays
- Teacher looking for conflict
- Teacher looking for...?

Loss of control

- Actually, you may have more...
- Be wary of emotional issues on-line
- Check often in the beginning
- Keep discussion moving
- Try to match faces with names.

The Anonymous Question?

- Use can encourage input
- Can also encourage attacks
- Can add some humor
- I find more risk than benefit.

References

- Discussion should cover some common topic supported by textbook, reserve readings, web sites.
 - Keep it a discussion, not a debate
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Post-Discussion

- Provide de-briefing
 - Summarize what TOPICS students should have learned, don't give cheat sheet
- Go over problems
 - People wandering off topic
 - People replying to wrong thread
 - People quoting too much, not enough
- Make it a learning process

Moderators roles

- Be Prepared!
- Guide discussion
 - Keep focused
 - Cut off wandering/rambling
 - Stop monopolizing discussion
- Let discussion continue if fruitful, even if it doesn't follow your plan.

Key tips

- Ask why discussion
- Lay out topics to cover
- Develop questions/answers/variables
- Set up discussion to meet class
 - Size
 - Experience
 - Expectations
- Check often
- Set timeline before starting

Discussion?

A copy of this presentation will be available
at: [Http://pdraus.n3.net](http://pdraus.n3.net)