Six Considerations for Making Discussion Board Learning Effective

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We all have a great deal of experience in the traditional face-to-face educational world. Faculty have spent decades as students and now a great deal of time on the other side of the classroom. Few of us, however, have much (or indeed any) experience in the online world as students. Despite this, we are sometimes called upon to instantly become experts in this new and unfamiliar medium.

I often hear instructors say things like, “Students hate discussion boards,” “Discussion boards do not foster deep learning,” and “Discussion boards are just busy work.” This is like saying, “Students hate white boards,” “Oral questions and answers do not foster deep learning,” and “In-class quizzes are just busy work.” A discussion board is neither good nor bad inherently and does not imply any particular pedagogy. It is just a tool, one of many available to the online instructor. Perhaps more meaningful questions are, “For which learning activities are discussion boards useful?” and “How can I use discussion boards more effectively?” This article is intended to address the second question.

There is no magic formula for making discussion boards powerful learning tools. There are, however, six considerations which should be taken into account when designing a lesson using a discussion board. You may find that some of these considerations are generally applicable to many learning activities. These six considerations are interdependence, size, identity, task, norms, and synergy.

1. Interdependence
Interdependence is a measure of how much the individual students are required to depend on each other to complete a task. Do the students need others? And do the others need the student? If a student can succeed without the group, then there is no interdependence. If the group can succeed without that student, there is no interdependence. This is tightly coupled with the notion of community—a group of people sharing a common goal or interest and invested in the success of other members of the community.

To enhance interdependence in your discussion board, try to anticipate potential challenges which may hinder interdependence in the course. This may include assessment strategies such as curving grades. Now try to come up with tools and strategies that will encourage students to help each other. Some of these are teamwork, community, social pressure, unified mission, greater good, charity, and needing others' posts to complete their assignment.

2. Size
If the discussion board group size is too small, then one non-contributor could sink it. If it is too large, there could be social loafing—benefiting from the work of others without contributing—or it could be very difficult for people to keep current. There are three common group size categories: small (4–6), medium (10–13) and large (17+). Small groups are appropriate when the students feel a high level of commitment and the discussion is highly focused. Medium groups are applicable in a wide variety of learning activities; research suggests that medium is the ideal size in most situations. It is usually necessary to
assign roles (such as mediator) in medium sized groups. Large groups work only when there are a large number of simultaneous discussions and the students do not need to participate in all of them. In other words, a large group can be subdivided into smaller ones by topic. It is best to choose the group size intentionally based on the nature of the learning task.

3. Identity
Each discussion board should have a readily-understood identity that answers the question, “Why are we here?” If every member of the discussion board cannot readily answer this question, then the group will have an identity crisis. Unfortunately, some discussion boards are created simply “because there needs to be one here,” leaving the students with no clear sense of purpose.

At the head of every discussion board, have an identity statement explaining to the student (and possibly to the architect of the learning activity) why the discussion board exists.

4. Task
The task is the objective that the discussion board is designed to accomplish. This can be one of the most challenging parts of setting up an effective a discussion board. There needs to be an established criterion for success, indicating that “we know we are done and have succeeded when the following is accomplished.” If a discussion board task is simply to “read and discuss,” this is not really a task. What are we asking people to do in concrete terms while discussing?

At the head of every discussion board, describe the task. This includes the “exit criteria”—how we know we are done and have completed the task.

5. Norms
What are the rules and guidelines for the discussion board? Are there clearly-stated standards, such as writing quality, formatting, or use of citations? Is there a culture indicated, such as degree of formality, writing style, or use of humor? These need to be clearly identified and universally communicated so it is readily apparent what falls inside and outside the norms. All members of the discussion board should be able to recite and/or explain all aspects of the norms. Finally, the moderator needs to be proactive about enforcing them. This often means removing posts that fall outside the norms.

In Week one, post a document explaining the norms and verify that it is understood with a quiz. In the “Instructor Notes,” explain how the norms are to be enforced.

6. Synergy
There needs to be a high level of activity to create a sense of momentum in the group. The students need to feel that the discussion board is moving along and that they will “miss out” if they are absent for any period of time. You can measure synergy by looking at the rate of posts through the life of the discussion board. In other words, boards only having posts near the deadline have low synergy. You can also measure synergy by how many different times a contributor posts. If they only drop in once, there is low synergy. If they come back several times, especially on a given thread, then the synergy level is higher. Urgency is a powerful tool when trying to create synergy; discussion boards open for a short period of time often have synergy.

Anticipation can also be a powerful tool. You can try to direct the discussion to the “great reveal” or the “aha moment.” For example, you could post a question that seems to have an obvious answer. As more is revealed and the students dig deeper into the question, it might turn out that the obvious answer was incorrect.

You should directly address the synergy issue. Come up with a list of 4–5 tools (urgency, anticipation, aha, skin-in-the-game, relevance, personal interest, etc.) that you could employ to encourage synergy in a given discussion board.

Examples

The following are a few examples of discussion boards I have used.

Developer’s Forum
The developer’s forum is a weekly discussion board set up to be one-stop-shopping for getting help on homework problems.

OBJECTIVE: Skills (The student will be able to use a given programming construct to solve a problem).
INTERDEPENDENCE: Students cannot pass the class without getting help on stumbling blocks. The developer’s forum is the student’s lifeline and the help comes from other students.

SIZE: The entire class, though it is sub-divided by topic/question.
IDENTITY: The purpose is stated and readily apparent: to get questions answered.
TASK: Students are finished when they have accumulated 100 points: 30 for a good question/answer, zero for poor ones.
NORMS: A five page document describes the norms and the instructor is asked to police the site three times a day.
SYNERGY: Students ask questions when they encounter problems. Students answer questions when it is convenient. There is activity on the forum 24/6 (because Sundays are rest days!).

Class Debate
The class debate is a place where controversial and non-obvious topics are debated.

OBJECTIVE: Critical thinking (The students will be able to find issues and identify underlying assumptions inherit in a given argument).
INTERDEPENDENCE: The debate can only function when another student has posted an idea that can be supported or refuted.
SIZE: The entire class, though sub-divided by topic/question. Often I have teams take sides: 5 vs. 5.
IDENTITY: The purpose is clearly stated: get to the bottom of a collection of topics.
TASK: Students are finished when they have accumulated 100 points, awarded according to the quality of posts.
NORMS: A three page document describes “professional writing.” All points must be cited and in essay form.
SYNERGY: New questions/topics are posted twice a day. Students know that it is easiest to be the first to respond so they check the discussion board multiple times a day.

Disagreement
The disagreement discussion board is where students find inconsistencies or other issues with the author’s text.

OBJECTIVE: Critical thinking (The students will be able to critique the quality of a given article and identify the assumptions on which an author’s conclusions were made.).
INTERDEPENDENCE: The students need to post a disagreement, then support/refute two other disagreements, then address the points made by others. The students can only complete the assignment if others participate.

SIZE: The entire class, though sub-divided by disagreement.
IDENTITY: Clearly stated in the problem definition.
TASK: They are done when they have made four posts: initial, two responses, and conclusion.
NORMS: Everything must be cited and in essay form. There is a four-page “professional writing” document.
SYNERGY: Students check their posts continually to see how it fares in the face of criticism from their peers.

Prototypes
Students are to try new things with the tools presented in the course of the week, then comment on other’s ideas.

OBJECTIVE: Skills (The students will be able to create a given effect using a variety of web technologies).

INTERDEPENDENCE: Students can only advance to the next level in their learning as others critique their prototypes and as they are inspired by the prototypes of their peers.

SIZE: Medium groups (10–12) where each student knows each other. Groups are stable throughout the semester.
IDENTITY: Clearly stated—to learn how to do new things using web technologies.
TASK: They are done when they have made two prototypes and have commented on four others.
NORMS: Respectful, positive. Just a short paragraph describing what is expected and the instructor is asked to moderate.
SYNERGY: Students check their posts continually to see how it fares in the face of criticism from their peers.