



LEARNING TO TEACH ONLINE

Conducting effective online discussions

Aims and overview

Discussions are an important component of many forms of online student interaction. For students to benefit from an online discussion, it is important for teachers to generate relevant topics, effectively moderate student activity and participate regularly. This episode will highlight several strategies to help you manage online discussions more effectively, and make them more beneficial for your students.

Written by Simon McIntyre



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“Everybody has an equal opportunity, and everyone can contribute at once. That means everybody can participate in an active way...” (Professor Ian Macdonald)

“Because of that element where you can sit back and think and then respond to someone, the discussion quality is really high.” (student)

“... it enabled them to go a little further, a little deeper into the course content, and in that way it was a very useful learning strategy...” (Dr Gay McDonald)

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The role of discussion

Active discussions can facilitate relationship building, idea sharing, collaboration and the creation of a personal presence in the class. They can help generate increased interaction between students, reducing the feeling of isolation that can sometimes occur in online learning. A teacher does not always have to engage with students on a one-to-one basis online. With effective moderation, online discussions can be a very powerful learning strategy, offering every student an equal opportunity to actively participate in the construction, testing and application of knowledge, rather than passively accepting the knowledge of the teacher. This type of engagement can help students explore ideas and content to a much deeper level, and assist in the development of communication and collaboration skills. There are several different types of online discussion in educational contexts, including:

- **Question and answer:** *Where students can get help with any issues or problems they may encounter from the teacher and each other*
- **Problem solving, analysis or idea sharing:** *Students and their teacher discuss collaborative projects, lectures, hold a brainstorming session, or participate in similar activities*
- **Social:** *Students need a place where they can get to know each other on a more personal level. This can help students build trust, and improve collaboration and group work.*

Whether face-to-face or online, students will usually speak to each other outside of class about activities or assignments. More often this type of informal learning is taking place in online social networks, email or instant messaging. By incorporating this type of learning back into the class through well designed discussion topics relating to key elements of the students' learning process, everyone in the class can benefit from being exposed to and participating in the process.

We recommend that you spend a little time investigating the ideas presented in the episodes [‘Engaging and motivating students’](#) and [‘Managing your time when teaching online’](#) in conjunction with this episode, as you may also find them relevant to conducting meaningful and effective discussions online.

Planning an online discussion

- **Make discussions relevant and worthwhile:** *Students need to perceive there to be a value in the discussion in order to fully engage. Make sure it relates to current lectures, assignments etc, and that by participating in the discussion students gain knowledge that they can directly apply to their learning*
- **Assessment:** *Decide whether the discussion will be assessable or not. If it is a vital component of an assignment for example, it may be a good idea to assess contributions to demonstrate to students that discussion is valuable and taken seriously. However this may not be appropriate for all situations. If a discussion is assessable, make sure you clearly communicate the assessment criteria to students*
- **Ensure students are technically competent:** *In order to participate equally, students need to have a thorough understanding of the technology in which the discussions are to take place. [Scaffold](#) technical training into early classes and have a mechanism in place to support students throughout the class*
- **Define an acceptable tone of language:** *Make sure students understand the level of formality or academic rigour required in different discussions. For example, less formal language may be appropriate for working discussions around group work, but more formal tones may be required for presentation of ideas*

- **Consider the use of large or small group discussions:** A large discussion with an entire class group may be useful to talk about broad concepts, whereas a smaller group discussion may be more useful for group work or peer feedback. If you work in large classes, smaller discussion groups can also be easier to follow
- **Allow space for social interaction:** Set aside spaces in your online class where students can have more informal, social discussions. This is important in helping them get to know one another, and in building trust and a sense of familiarity which in turn can help students contribute more in discussions
- **Set up a question and answer area:** By answering student questions in a special [thread](#) that all students can see, you will save time by not having to repeat answers to individuals. Make sure you answer any questions as quickly as possible. Students will also often answer each other's questions, saving you time and building a sense of collegiality. This way everyone in the class can benefit from the answers provided.

Useful strategies for creating and moderating effective online discussions

- **Establish criteria:** Explain to students what is expected of them in an online discussion in terms of quantity or length of response, supporting evidence or links, citing resources, how to respond to others, referring to and drawing upon contributions etc
- **Set a clear deadline:** Make sure students know how long a discussion will last, and that you expect them to post throughout this time frame rather than the last minute. A clear deadline is also useful in preventing students going back after a discussion is over and posting to simply to satisfy the requirement of the class
- **Moderate and lead by example:** Be present in the discussion, and guide the direction of the discussion by participating in the same way you expect your students to. A teacher who is absent from a discussion will only send the message to students that their contributions are not valued
- **Stay positive:** A friendly demeanour can be very motivating for students and encourage them to contribute and participate more in a discussion
- **Praise students who participate well:** Highlight good examples of discussion posts, congratulate those who do participate to motivate those that do not
- **Summarise the conversation periodically:** Discuss how different contributions have been relevant and how students can use this information in their current assignment or task. Refer to students by name when they have made significant contributions
- **Don't dominate the discussion:** Give students a chance to participate. This will encourage students to see themselves as equal contributors. If you dominate the discussion and post too much, it can stifle students' willingness to express their own opinions for fear of contradicting their teacher
- **Deal with any issues privately:** If students are not participating, or there is conflict in the group, it is a good idea to deal with these issues outside of the public discussion. Email can be useful in such instances

Synchronous or Asynchronous discussion?

There are two main ways that discussion can occur online, [synchronously](#) or [asynchronously](#). Synchronous discussion (sometimes referred to as conferencing or chat) means everyone is present during a set time, and discussions are held 'live' much like in a face-to-face conversation. Asynchronous discussions work on the principle that participants will not necessarily be able to contribute to the discussion synchronously. Messages are left chronologically over a longer period of time, enabling people to join in the discussion without having to all be present at once.

Synchronous discussion

Synchronous discussions are useful when participants need instant communication or feedback. They are best used in smaller groups if everyone is expected to participate as time can be a limiting factor. Many different types of learning management systems or open web social media (such as [Facebook](#)) have some kind of synchronous chat system built in, however there are also a range of specific tools designed to facilitate synchronous discussion, including the following examples:

Instant messaging (text based)

- [AIM](#), [ICQ](#)

Video and voice chat

- [Skype](#), [iChat](#)

Web conferencing (incorporating chat and video, file sharing, the ability to deliver presentations etc)

- [Adobe Connect](#), [Blackboard Collaborate](#)

Benefits of synchronous discussion

- Immediate feedback, no time lag between questions and answers
- Issues or questions can often be resolved quickly
- Less chance for confusion, as there is an opportunity to immediately clarify issues

Considerations

- All participants must be available at the same time, which can be difficult due to time constraints, location etc
- The pace of the conversation can be rapid. Often the depth of the conversation can suffer, particularly if there are many participants, and some points or questions can be missed
- Not everyone may be able to get an equal opportunity to contribute. Those participants who are shy or have trouble with the language being used could be at a disadvantage
- Discussions can become fragmented and harder to follow if many different topics are raised
- The discussions are temporal. Unless the software records the discussion, it can be lost after the fact
- A moderator needs to work hard to ensure participants all have an opportunity to contribute, given that the discussion takes place in a limited amount of time

Asynchronous discussion

Asynchronous discussions are very useful for when participants are dispersed around the world in different time zones, or cannot easily meet online at one time. They work particularly well for class discussions where students study online at different times of the day. Most Learning Management Systems (LMS) have in-built discussion forums such as [Blackboard](#) and [Moodle](#). Even commenting on blogs, [YouTube](#) or [Twitter](#) could be considered a form of asynchronous discussion. Other specifically built asynchronous discussions platforms include:

Discussion forums (text based)

- [vBulletin](#), [Omnium](#), [Google Groups](#)

Video and voice

- [Voicethread](#), [Blackboard Collaborate](#)

Benefits of asynchronous discussion

- *Participants can contribute to a discussion over a long period of time without all having to be present at once*
- *There is time available for reflection and consideration before responding*
- *Everyone gets an equal chance to contribute, as there are no time restraints (other than the due date of the thread if applicable), and participants don't have to compete with others for the right to speak*
- *All discussions are archived. This provides a useful record of learning for both students and teachers can refer back to throughout the class*
- *Not bound by class-time. Discussion can continue for longer, allowing everyone the opportunity to contribute*

Considerations

- *There can be a lack of immediacy with this type of discussion with delays between responses*
- *If not visited regularly, there can often be a lot of posts to catch up on if the discussion is very active*
- *There can be a greater opportunity for misunderstandings, as issues may not be resolved immediately*
- *Topics of conversation can diversify, a moderator is often required to keep the thread on topic*

Conclusion

Moderating online discussions effectively can take practice and patience. However, the impact on student learning can outweigh the effort required to develop these skills. Careful consideration of the purpose and relevance of the discussion is required from the outset, and it is important to ensure that your students understand what is expected of them and how the discussion relates to their learning. We hope that the strategies in this episode prove to be useful for your own teaching.

Additional reading*

An, H., Shin, S., & Lim, K. (2009). [The effects of different instructor facilitation approaches on students' interactions during asynchronous online discussions](#). *Computers & Education*, 53(3), 749-760.

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Rovai, A. P. (2007). [Facilitating online discussions effectively](#). *The Internet and Higher Education*, 10(1), 77-88.

Salmon, G. (2003). [E-Moderating: The Key to Teaching and Learning Online](#) (3 ed.): Routledge Falmer.

**Note: Some readings are held in subscription only databases. In most cases accessing the link from your institution's network will enable access*

Acknowledgements

Interview and Production: *Simon McIntyre and Karin Watson*

Camera and Post: *Creative Development – L&T@UNSW*

Edit: *Sarah Spackman*

COFA Online would like to extend a special thank you to the students, academics and institutions who generously donated their time and expertise to this episode:



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About the project

The [Learning to Teach Online](#) project is a free professional development resource designed to help teachers from any discipline, whether experienced in online teaching or not, to gain a working understanding of successful online teaching pedagogies that they can apply in their own unique teaching situations. It hopes to encourage dialogue, discussion and the sharing of ideas about online learning and teaching across disciplines and between institutions around the world.

About COFA Online

COFA Online is an academic unit at the College of Fine Arts (COFA), The University of New South Wales (UNSW), Sydney, Australia. It has been innovating online pedagogy, academic professional development and effective online learning strategies since 2003.

About The University of New South Wales

UNSW has an enrolment of approximately 40,000 students, and is the leading international university in Australia with over 10,000 international enrolments from over 130 nations. UNSW was also ranked as the top university in 2009 in the Australian Government Learning and Teaching Performance Fund for the quality of its teaching.



Australian Learning and Teaching Council

Support for this activity has been provided by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council Ltd, an initiative of the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. The views expressed in this activity do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council.



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