

Help! Asynchronous Online Discussion Posts: How to Make Them Effective Without Zapping Faculty's Time and Energy

Abstract

This roundtable focuses on improving online discussion posts while preserving faculty time and resources. With the swift transition to online learning due to COVID-19, faculty members instituted discussion posts to continue peer-to-peer interaction. As faculty cope with the uncertainty of Fall 2020 and beyond, we must better understand how to engage students in remote formats. We hope to facilitate discussions around creating engaging prompts, encouraging students to share contradictory viewpoints, and providing feedback in a timely, fair, and effective manner. The outcome will be a best practices document for those interested in using online discussion posts in future classes.

Keywords:

Discussion posts; online asynchronous learning; student engagement

Introduction

The switch to online learning during COVID-19 was abrupt and gave us little time to prepare engaging online activities in the same way our students were used to during our face-to-face classes. Falling back on what we were familiar with from teaching previous online courses, the authors quickly prepared weekly discussion posts in hopes that students would continue to engage with each other and the material asynchronously. Once our classes went live online, we quickly realized that we created a time-sucking nightmare for ourselves each week when we spent hours grading and providing feedback on low-stakes assignments. At our respective universities, we were each grading and providing feedback on upwards of 100 discussion posts per week!

Additionally, our instructions to students were to form their own response and then respond to two peers to receive full credit. While this forced peer-to-peer interaction, some responses lacked thoughtfulness, depth, and mastery of the topic, which made it unclear if the responses actually helped students think deeper about the subjects. Often times, students simply give an “I agree” and go on to restate the original poster’s thoughts without fully considering the entire issue, including alternative viewpoints. After reflecting on why this was the case, we realized that we must take some responsibility for students’ lack of thoughtful replies. It got us to consider how we pose questions to students, the types of prompts we develop, directions for giving feedback, and if we can increase the level of debate among students. We believe students can be a key resource for feedback, but we as the facilitators of the discussion might have to be more creative or thoughtful in our facilitation and direction.

As our universities are continuing to make decisions about what the fall semesters will look like, the authors have been thinking more about how we can best use discussion posts in

online classes to engage students and encourage peer-to-peer learning while maximizing our own time and still providing helpful feedback (beyond simple ratings for participation points).

Discussion boards are a staple in online classes (Hicks, Gray, & Bond, 2019), even when not responding to a crisis. Thus, this session should therefore be helpful to anyone who has taught online or will consider teaching online in the future.

The focus of this roundtable discussion will be sharing ideas about approaches, materials, and strategies that participants have found useful and effective when using asynchronous discussion posts in online learning. There are four intended outcomes of the session:

1. Share experiences with how to create engaging discussion questions, feedback directions, and encourage sharing of contradictory viewpoints and ideas.
2. Share how faculty have gotten students excited about engaging with peers and how to model engagement as a faculty member.
3. Discuss how to grade discussion posts fairly and efficiently.
4. Discuss the best ways to provide feedback on discussion posts in a timely manner.

Through these discussions, we hope to use the attendees' collective experiences and ideas to develop a "best practices" lists for how to use discussion posts effectively. This will act as a resource for all MOBTS members who will integrate discussion posts into future online courses. The target audience for the roundtable is any teaching faculty who have used discussion posts in the past and/or who plan to use discussion posts in future online classes.

Theoretical Foundation and Teaching Implications

Class and small group discussion are a common active learning strategy. It is known to improve student engagement, reflection, and critical thinking by requiring students to synthesize information, apply personal examples, and develop informed opinions in both face-to-face

(Mainkar, 2008) and online platforms (Comer & Lenaghan, 2012). These objectives are consistent with Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom, 1956; Krathwohl & Anderson, 2009). In order to form a well-thought out argument, students must first comprehend the course material. Instead of regurgitating information, discussion prompts support higher order thinking through synthesis of concepts and students' own thoughts and experiences (Fukami & Mayer, 2019; Krathwohl & Anderson, 2009). Finally, students evaluate others' responses, provide feedback based on their own knowledge and comprehension of the content (Krathwohl & Anderson, 2009), and engage in peer-to-peer interactions in an otherwise isolated learning environment. From a course design perspective, discussion posts are easy to implement. They are often built into learning management systems (LMS) and allow for feedback and grading within the platform.

Despite the benefits that discussion posts offer, with the swift transition to online learning due to COVID-19, many faculty members quickly adopted discussion posts in the hopes of replacing, and to some extent replicating, previous in-class discussions and interactions among faculty and students. It is likely, however, that the manner in which this was done was hasty, fell short of the desired objectives, and imposed unforeseen burdens on faculty who were then tasked with grading what was formally a more organic, in-person experience. Similar to all other course assignments, if the objective of the discussion posts is not clear and the faculty member has limited time (or does not spend the time) to form well-designed prompts, the costs of discussion posts are high, in terms of faculty time, resources, and unachieved learning objectives. Therefore, it is important to consider three important questions: 1) What and how do we prompt discussion posts?; 2) Are students actually discussing in ways that advance the learning objectives of the course?; and 3) How can faculty evaluate students effectively and efficiently?

What do we prompt? Discussions are only as good as the prompt. Provocative questions and integrating a shared experience such as TedTalks and/or podcasts (Donaldson, Caldwell, & Borkoski, 2018) may be better for eliciting deeper discussion. Part of the roundtable will focus on better understanding how to write prompts that are engaging, interesting, and achieve course learning objectives. We hope to share inspiration for prompts, materials that have worked well for us, and get session participants to share their ideas about what makes a good discussion prompt. For example, the use of self-assessments as part of a prompt has worked particularly well for one author.

Are students actually discussing? There appears to be an assumption that if actions are occurring within a discussion forum, then discussion is happening. That may not be the case. Let us take the typical structure of a discussion forum (professor posts prompts, students respond, students reply to other students' responses), for example. In a face-to-face classroom, it is unlikely that we would pose a question, have each student respond individually and then respond, at random, to a select number of previous student responses. Yet, this seems to be a common structure online. Alternative structures for discussion, such as using small groups and adopting specific leaders of discussions (Hara, Bonk, & Angeli, 2000) may be superior to the default structure and will be discussed during the roundtable.

How will students be evaluated? The vexing question of evaluating discussions is perhaps even greater in a remote learning environment because there are large amounts of text generated from student engagement. There are numerous strategies that can be applied, but we hope to facilitate a discussion around most successful strategies. For example, are discussion prompts only appropriate for participation points? Does an instructor randomly grade a certain percentage of the posts each week? Is it the instructor's responsibility to make a unique comment

on every student's post each week even when the student is receiving peer feedback? We hope to facilitate a discussion of the integration of learning objectives and teaching philosophy into guiding how discussion forums are evaluated.

Session Description

The session will run as a facilitated discussion. We will begin by asking participants about their experiences with discussion posts, their goals for using discussion posts, how/why they enhance asynchronous learning, and how they believe students respond to assigned discussions posts. These initial questions will serve as an ice breaker for the roundtable. The authors will also share our own experiences with using discussion posts; each has used discussion posts with some success. However, we (and we presume many others) are looking for ways to make discussions more engaging as well as strategies for streamlining the evaluation process. Questions throughout the roundtable discussion will center on these main objectives. Comments will be documented and referenced to continue to encourage participant involvement. As facilitators, we will also make sure the discussion stays focused and everyone has a chance to share their own ideas. The authors will gather contact information to share the final "best practices" document that comes from our session.

The session will be run with a clear agenda. Since the conference is virtual, the facilitators will use Zoom's capabilities to help facilitate the session. For example, depending on the size of the group, facilitators will use Zoom's breakout room feature to put people into smaller groups before coming together to share ideas with the larger group. Facilitators will also use a Google Doc and Zoom's screen-sharing capabilities to document ideas generated during the session. The agenda for the 60-minute session will be as follows:

Time (min)	Topic	Format	Outcome
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5	Welcome	Large group	Introduce presenters and purpose
10	Ice Breaker	Large group	<p>Ask participants to share:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Their experiences with online discussion posts 2. Student reactions to online discussion posts 3. Why they choose to use online discussion posts <p>Facilitators will document the responses and use this to guide the rest of the session.</p>
20	Student Engagement	Small or Large group	<p><i>Depending on the size of the session, Zoom breakout rooms will be used for this portion of the roundtable.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The first part of the roundtable will focus on student engagement and peer-to-peer feedback. • Based on responses in the ice breaker, the facilitators will pose 2-3 questions to the group, allow them time to brainstorm, and then come together to share ideas.
20	Faculty grading and feedback	Small or Large group	<p><i>Depending on the size of the session, Zoom breakout rooms will be used for this portion of the roundtable.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The second part of the roundtable will focus on managing discussion posts from a faculty perspective (time, grading, feedback). • The facilitators will pose 2-3 questions to the group, allow them time to brainstorm, and then come together to share ideas.
5	Summary and reflection	Large group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The facilitators will summarize what was discussed. • Participants will be asked to email any materials they have used successfully to the facilitators • Participants will be asked to provide their contact information so the facilitators can share the ‘best practices’ document generated from the session along with the materials that are received after the session.
60	Total		

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