Online Discussion Survival Tips

Discussion boards are very useful in online courses because discussions promote learner interaction with the course content, with other learners, and with you (the instructor). Although useful for learning, discussion boards can be much work for online instructors! Instructors need to frequently monitor the online discussions, provide prompt responses & comments, and grade student postings in a timely fashion. The number of discussion board postings also can increase exponentially overnight, particularly around due dates & in large online courses. You must BE STRATEGIC to ensure that discussions are meaningful, address course outcomes & enhance student learning. In this newsletter issue, we will share some "survival tips" to handle the workload of managing online discussions. Also see the Stearns Center website for resources about **Online Discussions** and **Facilitating Online Discussions.**

Four Survival Tips to Manage Online Discussions

Survival Tip #1: Specify Discussion Protocols & Use Rubrics for Grading

Students need to know what is expected of them in the online discussions.
- Provide specific guidelines and protocols for online discussion participation (*i.e.*, what, where, when & how often to post responses).
- Provide models for how you expect students to build their responses, sharing examples of "good" discussion postings and demonstrating what you want in your own postings.
- **Use rubrics as a grading tool.** Create a holistic or analytic rubric to grade discussions, depending on what is needed in your course. Holistic rubrics may be quicker to use for grading but may not provide as much detailed feedback to students. Analytic rubrics take more time to use for grading but provide more detailed information to students. Decide what is most useful for your course.
- Share the rubrics (to be used to evaluate postings) with your students, from the start of the course and include in your syllabus.
- **Build your discussion rubric in Blackboard** and use it to grade your Blackboard discussions (see Tip #4).

Survival Tip #2: Assign Students Roles in the Discussion

Encourage students to respond to one another, otherwise they will "recite" to you, looking for the "definitive" response.
- Enhance student-student interaction within the discussion by assigning each student with a specific "role" in the online discussion.
- Each role will frame their participation, engagement & participation.
- Roles may include: Facilitator, Devil's Advocate, Connector, Explorer, Summarizer.
- For discussions of case studies, each student may be assigned a particular role or point of view to present and role-play in the discussion.

Four Survival Tips to Manage Online Discussions (continued)

Survival Tip #3: Read, But Don't Respond To *Every* Posting In Discussion Forum

Should you reply to all discussion board posts? Which posts to respond to?
- In active and/or large online courses, it is unfeasible for an instructor to respond to each and every discussion posting. Make sure that you read each posting; however, be selective in responding to student postings within the discussion forums.
- Comment on groups of postings (*i.e.,* respond to several student postings at a time).
- Comment on postings that may need clarification, correction or guidance.
- Ask additional questions, if needed to clarify concepts or to assess student understanding.
- Comment on particularly good postings, identifying what makes these postings good (*e.g.,* effective use of citations, critical thinking, grasp of concepts, etc.).
- Respond specifically to each student by name in online discussions during the online course. Make sure to acknowledge all students individually at least once in the discussions during the course.
- After the discussion concludes, summarize the major points of the discussion, and point out significant contributions. Identify common errors or difficult concepts, and direct the class to resources to enhance understanding. Post these discussion summaries or wrap-ups in the discussion forum or in course announcements.
- You also may assign students the "Summarizer" role in discussions (see Tip #2).

Survival Tip #4: Use Blackboard Tools for Grading Discussions

Assess the quality of students' posts, not just frequency or number of posts.
- Use Blackboard's "Subscribe" setting for alerts about new discussion posts. For help with Blackboard discussion forum settings, please contact ITS Blackboard Course Support at **courses@gmu.edu**.
- Use rubrics to assess quality (see Tip #1). **Create your discussion rubrics in Blackboard.**
- Refresh and review how to use Blackboard to read & grade discussion forum postings. You may grade all of a student's postings in a Blackboard discussion forum (See **Grading Discussion Forums**). Or you may grade individual threads within a Blackboard discussion forum (See **Grading Discussion Threads**). Use the grading method that works best for your course.

Additional Resources for Managing Online Discussions
- Kelly, R. (2014). **Strategies for Managing Online Discussions.** Faculty Focus. Magna Publications. (accessed online 27 September 2020).

- Simon, E. (2018). **10 Tips for Effective Online Discussions.** EDUCAUSE Review. (accessed online 27 September 2020).

Contact Us!

Office of Digital Learning | Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning
Phone: 703-993-6200 | Email: **stearns@gmu.edu**
Suite 412 Innovation Hall, Fairfax Campus
George Mason University