


# Facilitating and Moderating Online Discussions


**Understanding the Environment** – When assigning an online discussion activity we must understand that we are not just setting up rules and regulations for how the activity should be executed. We must also pay special attention to the students who will be participating in the discussion. Their previous technical experiences or lack thereof with online discussions can make or break the momentum of a thread. Additionally, ensuring that students understand the philosophy behind constructive, thoughtful and timely responses can also shape how the discourse will evolve. As a moderator you may want to ask yourself the following questions:



- **Do my students have prior experience participating in online discussions?**

 Previous to assigning a discussion assignment it would be advisable to poll students to assess which ones have no online discussion experience. If you find that this is the case, you may want to recommend that these students spend some time reading and posting to a “test” discussion board.


- **Do my students understand the importance of prompt and insightful feedback in order to create an environment for successful discourse?**

 You may want to keep a discussion board from a previous semester as a sample of the quality and depth of the type of discourse you would like to have unfold. For those unfamiliar to this type of communication, yes/no or short answers may be presumed to be sufficient.


**Creating the Environment** – When creating the environment for a discussion it is critical that expectations and clear guidelines are provided. This will structure the discussion arena and will steer students towards the learning objectives. The following questions will assist you in determining what information is necessary for optimal student progress.




- **Have I provided enough information for the students to be productive and self-sufficient?**

 There is nothing more frustrating for students than a lack of information on how the discussion should proceed and unfold. Be very specific in your initial instructions for the impending discussion. Make sure you address the following in your discussion instructions: the objectives, learning outcomes, process for discussion and how their progress will be monitored during the discussion. *It is important to note that students are aware that you will be monitoring the progress and that they will be contacted by you (the instructor) if suitable participation is not being observed.*


- **Am I clear on which aspects of the discussion will require collaboration versus self-reflection?**

 In the process of creating the discussion topics be sure that it is clear to the student when they are supposed to be participating in a group discussion and/or self-reflection. It is clearer for the student to have the group discussion topic and the self-reflection question listed as two distinct threaded topics.

- **Is the time line in which the students need to complete the discussion activity reasonable and doable?**

 Nothing will stunt the progress or quality of a discussion like an unrealistic timeline. Finding the balance between too short or too long is a challenge. Depending on your topic you will have to determine the length and quality of the type of postings you will like to see occur. For example, if a photograph is posted and everyone is required to post a critique based on composition, color, light, etc. and then respond to one other student’s critique...then we can assume that this could be easily accomplished within a week’s time. If however, you gave the students two days to post then you are forcing them to respond with most likely a shallow and quick reply. The opposite can be true as well. Too much time can drag out a discussion. This creates a scenario in which those who are prompt with their postings end up waiting around for the laggards of the group to come around and respond. This type of elongated timeline causes frustration and disinterest in the topic after a week or two.

- **What type of ground rules will I need to establish in order for a productive discussion to take place?**


 Setting up ground rules as the moderator is a good idea especially if the topic being discussed can be subjective. Clarifying that the discussion is a formal or social one in nature will guide the type of responses that each student will post. Tangents about things unrelated to the topic are easy to do when a social tone is detected within a discussion. Of course, a reminder on the use of netiquette is a wise choice. An important factor to layout ahead of time is to state how often students should be checking the boards. Furthermore, making sure that each student understands and realizes that they should critique ideas and not the individual.


**Preparing the Students** – The environment for lively discussions are ready and in place, but are the students ready and in place for a lively discussion? As the moderator it will behoove you to help mold the student’s participation skills. Encouraging students to use the following positive participation techniques will ensure a much smoother discussion and less ruffled feathers.




- **Read, Think, Write**

 Quality responses not quantity meet the learning objectives.

 Critique should be positive/constructive. Before posting your response re-read your text, be objective...put yourself in the other students shoes, would you be offended or appreciative of the response being posted.


 Don’t be a lurker and wait for someone else to respond and then tag onto their ideas. Be original and share your thoughts and ideas.


 Don’t be upset if no one responds right away to your posting. We want all posting to be well thought out and succinct. For some people it may take a little longer to compose their response so that it will be constructive and meet the learning objectives.


**Preparing Yourself to Moderate** – So you have the environment set, the guidelines have been stated, the students are on standby, now we need to make sure you’re off and moderating. As the moderator it is important that you allow the student discussion to evolve and that interjection on the topic by you are few. By involving yourself so deeply in the discussion is quite time consuming and takes away from the critical thinking and problem solving processes we are trying to encourage and develop in our students learning experience. The following will help you to guide and shape rather than lead and influence.



- **Read, Think, Guide**

 It is important that you are monitoring the level of participation on a discussion. If you find that someone is not participating then you may want to drop a private email to the student reminding them of the importance (grade, team work, etc.) of posting. Additionally, if someone is dominating a discussion the same email tactic can be applied to remind the student that others need an opportunity to respond so to lie back so that others will be inclined to participate.

 If students are off-track and seriously missing the objective(s) of the online discussion it is a good idea to “jump in” and steer the discussion or clarify the objectives. It is helpful to filter and sort out messages that may not pertain to the discussion at hand.

 It is also a good moderating strategy to summarize your thoughts about the topic as well as the discussion only after the assignment has been completed. It is empowering and positive reinforcement for students to see their posting referenced in your summation of the discussion.