



Episode 5: Online Discussion Boards: Creative Ideas to Spark Better Conversations and Engage Students

SPEAKERS

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Tierney King 00:01

This is the Faculty Focus Live podcast, sponsored by the Teaching Professor. I'm your host, Tierney King, and I'm here to bring you inspiration, energy, and creative strategies that you can utilize in your everyday teaching. Online discussion boards. It's something that's come up a lot this past year as we've

migrated to the online platform. One of the main questions is, how do you get your online discussions to be more than just "Hey, Teresa, I agree with your statement. That's a great point." So today, we're going to go over a few things that you can do with your online discussion board, from using responses to give narrative shape, to creating questions, and then specific activities you can use in your discussion board to spark responses that aren't so mundane. So we'll start with Jean Mandernach's 20-Minute Mentor, How Do I Create Questions that Stimulate Engaging Conversations in Online Discussion Boards? Here, she dives into how we can get students thinking about why they're participating in the discussion, and what they can gain from the discussion.

Jean Mandernach 01:13

One of the most common complaints I hear from online instructors is my discussion isn't engaging students. It's boring. Students are literally coming in, answering the question, and then they come back and they say, "I agree" to whatever. And you know, they make a couple of pure replies, but there's no depth, there's no meat, there's no heart to that discussion. Unfortunately, in many cases, the problem isn't the students. It's us as instructors. We can't think of a discussion board as this magical thing that just because we post it, students are going to dive in, and they're going to benefit from it. And they're really going to learn and engage and love the experience. And so we really need to think of the why driving our discussion. What do we hope students will gain from participating in this discussion? We really need to start every single discussion with a lesson plan. And you start that lesson plan and you say, here's the purpose of the discussion, here's the objectives we're trying to get from participating in the discussion this week. And then as the instructor, I go beyond just here's the objectives, and I share that with the students. You know, here's the goal, here's what we want to accomplish. But then I also make a list and I say, here's all the different concepts that should come up all the different theories, questions, misconceptions problems, that as an instructor teaching this course for years and years and years I can anticipate will arise or should arise in this discussion. And I actually make that list on a lesson plan.

Tierney King 02:43

Once your students understand and realize the point of the discussion, now it's time to make sure it's a topic that inspires them in some shape or form. It should motivate them to want to discuss and share their thoughts.

Jean Mandernach 02:56

If you want to have a good discussion, you need to make sure that it's something everybody can participate in. If you're going to ask them to share experiences, they need to have experiences that they can share. So you need to make sure your prompt, that question that kicks off the discussion, is something that students can relate to, that they can grab on to, that they can make meaningful, and that they're really actually able to answer. The best discussion questions are going to connect their lives, their worlds, their thoughts, to the course content. So it's not just a place where everybody shares, reflections or reacts. Because frankly, if we use that it's really just using the discussion board as a journal, which is different than a discussion. A discussion is somewhere to discuss and to debate and to think about it. So you have to start with a discussable problem, situation, example or experience. So you want to write that discussion from the viewpoint of a student, you want to use the clearest, shortest, most concise language possible to be able to communicate that discussion question. Now, this isn't to imply that you can't have a whole scenario or a case study or other information that's part of that prompt. But at the end of it, students need to have a really clear vision. Well, what is it I'm supposed to answer? What am I supposed to address? What do I say to kick off this discussion? So you might have something really big and long and elaborate, but there has to be a clear direct prompt that ends that discussion.

Tierney King 04:37

Okay, so you've given your students reason for the discussion, and you've connected them to the question. But as you begin reading responses, you realize your students aren't emulating the type of energy you want to exude from their post. So what exactly can you do in your online discussion boards to actively engage students? What can you do to make students feel as if the discussion board isn't just another generic Q&A session, and how can you reconceptualize the discussion board so it's something both you and your students are excited to read. Nathan Pritts discusses three proven ways to manage your online discussion board, and actively engage students in his 20-Minute Mentor.

Nathan Pritts 05:19

So I want to talk about three ways, three proven ways, that you can take charge of the discussion forum, and really assert your control as the instructor and make it work for you rather than feeling as if you're being run ragged by a series of requirements that don't really resonate with you and your job of trying to get the content across. Those three ways are asking you, as the instructor, to model the engagement that you expect from your students. It also gives you an opportunity to foster this sense of community. And it gives you a chance to share expertise beyond whatever instructional content you might already be piling into your classroom, whether it's lectures or videos, instructor guidance documents, this will give you an additional place to share your expertise. So how do we do these three things? Let's delve a little bit deeper into each of these and give some examples so that you can operationalize this in your classroom. The first, modeling engagement, seems relatively straightforward. If you're on the discussion board, your students will see you there and they'll respond

to that, they'll be able to understand that you are communicating that it's an important area, and that they will also do the same thing. But it's important, I think, to pull back a little bit from just your own generalized sense of what might be the most effective way to engage. Think about the deadlines in the class. When do students have to post on the discussion board? What are those markers? Are there particular days? Or is there a particular cadence? You should be mirroring that yourself. If a student needs to be on the discussion board, at least twice in a class week, then you should also be on there at least twice, probably much more. But you also need to assess your own workflow as well. When are you likely to be able to commit to sitting there for 30 minutes, 45 minutes, 60 minutes, and read through discussion board posts and respond to them. The second stage of this is fostering community. This is a way of imagining your work on the discussion board as much more than just simply interacting with the individual course learning outcomes for the week, but realizing that you're dealing with a classroom of people, and you want to forge connections there within that. When you do that, when you get students to buy into not only the community of learners, but also your place in it, they're going to be more motivated to participate and more motivated to succeed. It's also important to identify and forge these connections. If student A writes about a particular topic, and you see that student C is writing about something very similar, you can call that out. Identify to student C that student A talked about something similar, and then forge those connections. You can directly ask student C if they've taken a look at student A's post, what do they think about it? Obviously, you can get a lot more nuanced and complex. But for the purposes of this, I think it's just important to realize that you can connect students on the discussion board, don't assume that every student is reading the post of every other student. If there is some life experience, or relationship to the content that you're seeing is similar, you may simply be able to call that out and kind of weave that together and create that connection, at least between those two students. The last area I want to talk about is the idea of sharing your expertise on the discussion board. I know from my perspective, a lot of times when I'm reading discussion responses from students, my response to them is already formulating as I read. I know that I need to redirect something that they've said if it's been slightly inaccurate or incomplete. I know I need to encourage them to dig deeper, as we just talked about, on particular concepts. And I think that at a lot of times, we have our responses almost already written before we start typing. And what that means is that has been purely responsive. And again, I want us to reconceptualize the discussion board as a place where we can actually do some teaching where there can be active learning taking place. Again, it's not a binary, it's not just a simple back and forth. But it is literally providing food for thought and putting our own stamp on it as well. If our responses to our students have been almost fully programmed as a result of what they've written and our own sense of the content, well, then we don't have a lot left over for us to put our own personal stamp on it as instructors. And that's why I think sharing our expertise on the discussion board is really important.

Tierney King 10:10

Now we have a bunch of ideas and strategies we can implement behind the scenes of the discussion board and throughout the discussion. But what about actual activities we can implement on the discussion board? We'll take a few tips and tricks from Meixun Zheng and her Magna Online Seminar, How to Design and Facilitate Online Discussions that Improve Student Learning and Engagement.

Meixun Zheng 10:34

When we talk about online discussions, one of the most frequently implemented activities is to assign students some readings or videos and ask them to write down their analysis or their response to the readings or the viewings. But there are many activities that you can try instead of sticking to this same activity for the whole course, because time after time if you use the same activity or the same format, students might feel bored and feel it's dry. And this is similar to if you have the same food for lunch for three or four months in a row, you will feel dry and bored, right? So it's the same with learning. So you can think about what other activity you can design to engage them continuously. And here, I'd like to share three other alternatives with you. One is called a 3-2-1 activity. Some of you might have heard about this or have done this. In this activity, you ask a student to share in a discussion board three most important things they have learned, two ideas for potential application or implementation, and one more question they want to ask about the topic. Or you can say, one more thing they would still like to learn about this topic. So this is a highly adaptable activity you can use for your online discussion. Or you can also use it for your face-to-face class. I also really like the jigsaw activity. I have used this one as a student, not as an online teacher. But I really enjoyed this activity as a student. In this activity, you divide the students into small groups. And each group is responsible for researching and discussing one different aspect of the same issue. For example, in health care, you can ask one group of students to research the reasons for the break out of an infectious disease. And then a group can research the symptoms. And a third group can research the prevention. Just an example. The third activity which I would really encourage you to try is called the six thinking hats. So the six thinking hats is a good tool for you to promote creative thinking and group collaboration in online discussions. In this activity, you would divide the students into small groups. And each group member is assigned a different role. And this role is identified with its own colored thinking hat. So the student who will wear the white hat will focus on the facts, what information is available. And the red hat will be expressing feelings and emotions. And the blue hat is a very important one. It will control or manage the discussion of thinking processes and make sure the group achieves its discussion goals. And the green hat is an opportunity for creative thinking, coming up with new and innovative ideas and to think out of the box. The yellow hat will focus on the positive sides of things and try to identify the benefits and values of a solution. On the other hand, the black hat, as you can see, will be focusing on the negative sides of things and discuss why something might not work as expected.

Tierney King 13:57

Whether you use something like the three to one activity, the six thinking hats, or even superhero role playing. There are numerous strategies to take your online discussion board to the next level. Your online discussion no longer has to be a chore to read. You can find all the mentioned resources from this podcast and more free articles and free reports and discussions in the summary description.