All About the Online Discussion Board

SPEAKERS
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Tierney King 00:01
This is the Faculty Focus Live podcast sponsored by the Teaching Professor Online Conference where you can join us from the comfort of your own home and transform how you teach and how your students learn. 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. Despite their universal use in online teaching, online discussions often fall flat. But it doesn't have to be this way. In this episode, we'll discuss how multiple due dates for discussion can foster more thoughtful responses; we'll talk about the importance of using Universal Design for Learning to guide your discussion; we'll discuss the importance of putting yourself in the student perspective when writing your discussion prompts; and finally, we'll go over techniques for fostering a community within your discussion board and class. To start, Stephanie Delaney explains how she uses multiple due dates for her discussions, and how UDL can establish better access for everyone in the class, in her program, The Discussion Board and Beyond: How Can I Engage Students Online?

Stephanie Delaney 01:09
My tip for having a more engaging discussion board is to have multiple due dates. Now, I like this idea because there's nothing more discouraging than having all of the students post in the last 15 minutes of the discussion board. You know, if it's due Friday at midnight, and everybody's posting, you know, from 11 pm to midnight, that makes for a really flat discussion. People aren't having a thoughtful conversation back and forth, rather than you're just throwing stuff up and responding as quickly as possible. This is also really discouraging for the student who was the one that posted on the first day, or the second day early in the discussion and has days and days go by when nobody responds to them, or the student has really, you know, restricted time to work on the class. And they get in, they post in a timely manner at the beginning, nobody responds to them. And by time somebody does, or by time somebody even post something for them to respond to, they don't have time anymore. And then their grade goes down because they didn't reply to their peers. Even though they were on top of things. At the beginning, it was the people who waited till the end that made it so that they couldn't reply. So I've seen that pop up in classes too. And that's just really frustrating for everybody. So if you have multiple due dates, that can be eliminated, you have one due date for the post, the initial post, and then a later due date a few days later for the response. I like to have my initial posts do are actually like Devin both do on a weekday. I know a lot of people like to have their posts due on weekends. And that in theory

gives the students some extra time. But the problem I've seen there is that the students who use that extra time and wait until the weekend when they realize they have a question about the assignment or some concerns. And they go to write to the instructor and they're writing at a time I don't really care to be responding. On the weekend, I would rather be doing something else. So if I have it due during the week, when they get to the last minute and have questions, I'm there available to respond. Let's talk about things that you can do beyond the discussion board to make your entire class more engaging. Before I do that, I want you to have a context for what we're thinking when we add extra when we create different types of assignments in the class. I love the idea of Universal Design for Learning, and hopefully you've heard of it. Hopefully you're already using Universal Design for Learning in your course. But if you're not already using Universal Design for Learning, I commend to you the CAST website where you can learn more about this idea. But basically Universal Design for Learning takes into account this idea of like curbs on the sidewalk when when you when they created those curves on the sidewalk, they made them so it could be easier for wheelchairs to go up and down on the sidewalks in town. But it actually also made it easier for strollers and easier for skateboarders and bicyclists and just people who have limited mobility and can't step up on a curved very well. So they created one accommodation, but it really created better access for everybody. And that idea of Universal Design for Learning is about creating better access for everybody and making your class more accessible to everyone. And indeed, this type of instructional approach can also make your class more culturally responsive. And the idea of culturally responsive learning is where the learning brings the identities of all of your students into the classroom helping them all to feel seen and feel welcome in your classroom. And using Universal Design for Learning is a great step towards making your course more culturally responsive, you'll also want to have multiple means of representation. That's how you present the information to the students. So you might have video, you might have audio clips, you might have plain text. So different ways to present the information to the students, so that the students have different ways to absorb the information. Finally, multiple means of expression, give the students different ways of sharing the information back to you. So in a discussion board context, they might write a post, which is what we usually see. But they might also make a video or do an audio response or post an image that that represents their learning. So having multiple means of expression allows students to have different ways to present their learning.

Tierney King 05:59
As you consider UDL and due dates, you'll also want to consider how to engage your students in discussion. In this program B. Jean Mandernach explains what students need in a discussion prompt, and how you can put the responsibility of thought, creativity, and insight on the student for more engaging responses.

Jean Mandernach 06:18
And I'm going to go through now, some really concrete things that you can think about when you're designing this discussion prompt to ensure that you can really engage students in that discussion. The first thing is that you have to be clear. Oftentimes, we write the discussion from our perspective, as a faculty member. But our viewpoint is very different from a student's viewpoint, our language is different, our understanding is different. Our awareness of all the contextual factors is different. 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

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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. The other thing you want to do is really think about being open. You want to give students the opportunity to share different perspectives. So you want to avoid kind of leading them down one path, and really put it on the students to think about all the alternatives. So perhaps you're going to say rather than focusing on what are your thoughts about this, here's the challenge. What are the potential solutions? And what do we think about those potential solutions? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each of these potential options? The more you can turn it around and put the responsibility for thought and creativity and insight on the student, the more you're going to have to discuss, because now students are going to generate answers that other students can now critique and respond to as well. You also want to be sure that you're asking students to go beyond just stating their answer or their opinion, and really getting them to dig into the why. That's where really interesting discussion happens. We might have half the class agree on a course of action, but why they agreed is going to be very different. So rather than just asking for opinions, or asking for perspectives, ask them to give an opinion and then justify it, explain why provide their insight, provide their logic, provide their rationale. And then you can even go on with that discussion prompt, say, you know, in addition to providing your own insight and rationale, I want you to generate how other people might argue with you. How do you generate the other side of that perspective with that other people might see when they're reading your answer. So you really want to think about how do I get them to go beyond the surface level? And really dig deeper into that question. You also want to be specific enough that students know what they're answering. Sometimes questions are so vague, and general, again, in our attempts to allow creativity, the students get done. And they say, I don't even know like, from what perspective from what angle. So you might want to give them some of those context factors. Tell them from this perspective, answer this, or what can be really interesting is say, pick a specific perspective, share that perspective and give the answer from that angle. Because now people in your class can all go into the same topic. And somebody might say, well, I'm going to answer it from the perspective of a traditional college age student. Somebody else can take that same one and say, "I'm actually going to answer this from the perspective of a single working parent who is also going back to school." And another person could come in and say, "You know, I'm going to answer it from the perspective of a faculty member." And now you can come as an instructor, and you can say, "Wow, what do we see here? Do we notice any themes? Do these converge are the rationale different depending on our perspectives?" And so it gives the discussion something to actually discuss.

Tierney King 10:29
As you take students beyond the surface level of the question, you also want to ensure you're fostering a sense of community. You want your students to use the discussion board as their own personal directory of questions, of community, and acceptance. In this program, What are Three Proven Ways to Manage an Online Discussion Board and Actively Engage Students? Nathan Pritts explains how to successfully do this.

Nathan Pritts 10:54

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The last aspect, I think, to fostering your sense of community in the classroom, is to question your students to push them towards new levels of thinking and to direct them to particular areas. You can explicitly reference the fact that you're part of this community of learners and ask questions of everybody who might be reading this individual response. Just because you're asking a question doesn't mean that the student didn't answer the prompt fully or properly. But it gives them something else to think about related to the content, maybe not essential. But it helps them to understand that this isn't just simply a binary yes or no right or wrong environment. This is a place where we get to discuss and consider different aspects of the course content. And discussing it really means that we're considering it from a variety of different angles and pushing ourselves. So as you respond on the discussion board, in an attempt to foster community, make sure that you're addressing students, of course, you're addressing them directly, you're giving them your name and their name, you're saying, Hello, Nate, when you begin your response, and you're signing off with Dr prints, at the end of your response, to let them know that you've crafted this uniquely for them, but you're expanding on the content as well. You're also creating those connections in the classroom or fostering those connections in the classroom by explicitly identifying them, and calling them out in your responses. And finally, your question in your students pushing them deeper and further into the course content to have a real true back and forth conversation discussion about it.

Tierney King 12:34
You also want to take note that every single one of your students is unique in their own way. This diversity is a great way to foster community and encourage students to use their individual talents to work together during discussion.

Nathan Pritts 12:46
Another important aspect of this though, is to broaden out beyond the course content. These are students that you're dealing with, these are online learners, this may be an entirely new modality for them, or this might be something that they're really used to, they might be new to coming back to school, or they might be already in their 50th class, let's hope not their 50th.So I think it's important to realize that you're dealing with a student learner, who is yes, currently in your class, but has taken a variety of other classes has a variety of other experiences. And I think the discussion board is a great place where we can push past content, and start to really acknowledge the knowledge skills and abilities that students have developed through the course of their lives, the course of the other classes they've taken on their way to their major or their eventual career choice. Using the discussion board to respond to course learning outcomes is pretty intuitive and makes a lot of sense when you're sitting there typing and engaging with the individual prompt, taking that moment to pull out of the individual context that you're in in that particular class. And think a little bit about study skills or about success strategies, or about different ways we can learn about possible career choices. I think a lot of times a discussion board prompt, when interpreted a little broadly can give us that chance to have that conversation and help to push students toward a more complete understanding of their entire schooling, not just the class but where that class fits in. And it gives you a chance to engage with them. And we know that that engagement can lead to a deeper feeling of participatory buy in and success in the classroom.

Tierney King 14:38

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