**Tips for Effective Online Discussion: Jim Witte Nov 9 2010**

- **1 Tip 1: Create discussions with a purpose**
  - 1.1 discussion is a means to an end (not an end unto itself). Be sure you <u>and your students</u> understand what is to be accomplished, and how success will be measured. Tie discussion directly to the goals of your course. Examples:
    - 1.1.1 students discussing to solve a problem
    - 1.1.2 students "putting themselves in another person's shoes" to understand different points of view
    - 1.1.3 students examining assumptions
    - 1.1.4 students marshaling evidence to support assertions
    - 1.1.5 students articulating their own ideas, relating course ideas to their own experience
    - 1.1.6 gathering up student questions on a topic, or for a guest speaker
    - 1.1.7 students provide each other with constructive criticism on paper drafts, presentation slides, etc.
    - 1.1.8 provide collaboration space to work on a group project
- **2 Tip 2: Develop comfortable discussion questions focused on specific problems rather than broad, opinion-type questions**
  - 2.1 avoid questions that elicit simple definitions or facts (both f2f and online discussions)
  - 2.2 questions that simply ask for opinions can be problematic if not done right
    *students may be reluctant to express their own opinions if they think they may be challenged. You can use surveys/polls to gather opinions and provide a confidential summary to the class.*
  - 2.3 better question examples:
    - 2.3.1 give an example in the real world of the second law of thermodynamics (heat flows from hot regions to cold regions, not the other way around).
    - 2.3.2 what ideas in the readings resonated with you, was especially important to you? why?
    - 2.3.3 what ideas in the readings did you most disagree with? why?
- **3 Tip 3: Separate procedural communication from learning discussions. Here is an example discussion organization:**
  - 3.1 General Course forums
    *discussion forums that are available for the duration of the course. You can attach descriptive text to each discussion forum to describe what the forum is intended for. For general course forums that allow student questions/postings, it's helpful to set expectations regarding response time. 1 day response time is common. If you will not be posting on weekends, let students know that.*
    - 3.1.1 General news and announcements forum
      *communications from the instructors to the students. Students may read announcements, but not post.*
    - 3.1.2 General questions forum
      *students post questions to the instructor that everyone might be in. Students post helpful tips on technology, etc. For a large course, you may want to create separate question areas for each teaching assistant, as a way of "routing" questions to the appropriate person.*
    - 3.1.3 Courtyard Cafe forum
      *a place for social postings, and/or off-topic postings. Coffee is good.*
  - 3.2 Course Activity Forums
    *Typically you'll have discussion forums that correspond to specific activities in your syllabus. In an instructor-led, cohort-based course, it's common to have individual learning forums become available according to the schedule laid out in your syllabus. One discussion activity per week is typical.*
- **4 Tip 4: Classic 1-week online discussion activity structure: initial posting/2 response postings**
  - 4.1 **Sunday**: Discussion forum opens with discussion questions or problem. Students must complete an initial posting on the topic. In Moodle, you can arrange it so that postings from other students are not visible until student first completes their own posting (called "Q&A" forum).
  - 4.2 **Tuesday**: Initial posting due.
  - 4.3 **Wednesday**: Students post substantive responses to two (2) of their classmates' postings.
  - 4.4 **Friday**: responses due. Owner of the original posting responds to questions or assertions as needed.
  - 4.5 **Friday**: instructor posts comments, requests for additional info, questions, etc. Option: Owner of original posting provides a summary of how comments have changed their thinking on the topic, expanded their awareness, etc.
- **5 Tip 5: Develop an rubric that lays out expectations, but is easy to apply. Include # postings, required replies, deadlines. Example rubric follows:**
  - 5.1 5 points
    - 5.1.1 initial posting during first half of the discussion activity, so that others in class have time to respond
    - 5.1.2 all parts of the question answered
    - 5.1.3 posting is clear and understandable
    - 5.1.4 posting includes reasoning and evidence
    - 5.1.5 posting includes reference to a recommended reading
    - 5.1.6 posting includes personal reference (opinion, reaction, experience, etc)
  - 5.2 3 points
    - 5.2.1 all parts of the question answered
    - 5.2.2 posting is clear and understandable
    - 5.2.3 some reasoning or evidence given
    - 5.2.4 lacks reference to external reading or lacks personal reference
    - 5.2.5 posted during last half of the discussion activity, limiting the time available for a response
  - 5.3 1 point
    - 5.3.1 posting not well developed
    - 5.3.2 reading and personal references missing
  - 5.4 0 points
    - 5.4.1 question not answered during the time scheduled for the discussion activity
- **6 Tip 6: Develop some guidelines for posting, general "rules of engagement". This is a general extension to the grading rubric, applies to all postings. Example ideas for guidelines follow:**

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  - 6.1 `Value added: good postings introduce new information, new perspectives, new ideas. Please avoid "me too/i agree" postings.`
  - 6.2 `Good postings have their own (new) subject line: the new subject should reflect your "value added". Please avoid "re: " subjects.`
  - 6.3 `Good postings often incorporate the ideas posted by others, with proper attribution.`
  - 6.4 `Good postings often examine the author's own assumptions and beliefs, and/or relate to the author's own experience.`
  - 6.5 `Good postings are always professional and polite in tone. No flaming.`
  - 6.6 `Good postings address all parts of the question, and are posted on time to allow for replies.`
- **7 Tip 7: Provide explicit instructions for each discussion activity**
  - 7.1 describe the rationale or purpose of the activity. What will we be investigating? Why is this question or topic important? Link out to longer explanations or external websites if needed.
  - 7.2 describe the steps or stages for the activity. Specify the due dates/times for each phase. Sample steps:
    - 7.2.1 `visit and read the assigned link(s) or media`
    - 7.2.2 `respond with several organized, succinct paragraphs`
    - 7.2.3 `put the question at the top of your response so that people know what you're responding to`
    - 7.2.4 `respond to the answer of at least 2 classmates`
    - 7.2.5 `bear in mind the general posting guidelines and the discussion rubric`
    - 7.2.6 `you may want to compose your responses offline where you can more easily develop an outline, and save before posting.`
- **8 Tip 8: Teach your students how to participate in an online discussion.**
  - *training your students to participate in an online discussion takes time. It helps to attend to social aspects (helping people feel comfortable, connected) as well as academic aspects. Start with social activities, work up to more substantive activities as the course progresses.*
  - 8.1 use icebreaker activities at the start of the course to help people feel more comfortable with the tools and fellow students in the course.
  - 8.2 move on to activities that work with student's current knowledge and experience
  - 8.3 move to more substantive questions, required readings/media
  - 8.4 consider having students take some responsibility for moderating their own thread, asking followup questions, bringing in new resources, etc.
- **9 Tip 9: practice "guide on the side". Work hard at keeping moderators from becoming the locus of discussion.**
  - *Good practice for courses of any size, but especially important for large courses. The intention of an online discussion activity is NOT to supply students with a way to "find out what the instructor thinks," , but rather to pursue their own lines of inquiry, construct their own understanding of a topic. Instructor interventions that "supply the right answer" typically serve to shut down further discussion.*
  - 9.1 Consider structuring activities so that students respond to other student postings.
  - 9.2 Consider waiting until near the end of the activity before the moderator jumps in with their own comments.
  - 9.3 Typical moderator interventions include:
    - 9.3.1 request for clarification
    - 9.3.2 request for elaboration on an interesting, relevant point
    - 9.3.3 asking about assumptions, or considerations of different viewpoints
    - 9.3.4 "priming the pump" to get discussion going with "musing" sorts of postings. "I wonder..."
    - 9.3.5 drawing out students who haven't participated (via email)
- **10 Tip 10: connect online discussion to F2F lectures (if applicable)**
  - *consider presenting short summaries of some of the more insightful, relevant discussions during lecture*
- **11 Tip 11: In large enrollment courses, use online discussion activities to break down the large into smaller.**
  - 11.1 if sections meet f2f, sections are logical units for discussion groups
  - 11.2 typical large group discussion is 4-12 students. The larger the group, the more difficult it is to manage the postings and for students to make connections with each other. No more than 20-30 recommended.
  - 11.3 "private" discussion boards make useful work areas for smaller group (4-5 students) collaboration on projects.
  - 11.4 consider peer critique on drafts, etc. Give the critics something specific to look for/comment on.
  - 11.5 provide discussion boards to enable small groups to collaborate and turn in a single homework assignment.
  - 11.6 provide multiple discussion topics, allow students to pick which discussion to join (fewer students in each topic)
  - 11.7 divide students into groups: students who pose questions, students who respond to questions, students who summarize and comment on discussions.
  - 11.8 alternate discussions among groups of students (1/2 students participate each week, taking turns)
  - 11.9 for courses that are short on staff, activities that are a little more "mechanical", and that can be graded on a completion basis may be more appropriate.
  - 11.10 In LAS, we've experimented with having advanced undergraduate interns help facilitate discussions and monitor group work discussion boards.
- **12 Tip 12: Provide resources (readings, websites, media, etc) for discussion activities. Keep the focus on the issues/topics, rather than the search for information. It's good to give students a choice in materials (protects you from linkrot, accommodates student interests and abilities).**
  - 12.1 when the instructor provides the resources, the information has been vetted and is reliable
  - 12.2 providing resources keeps the focus on the issues/topics, rather than on the search for information
  - 12.3 providing multiple web sites/readings/media can provide students with some flexibility and choice, and can help insure against linkrot (URL moved/not found) or website outages.
- **13 Tip 13: Consider using a variety of online discussion activities. Choose discussion types that fit the goals for your course. Activities that provide students with a choice can provide students with a way to make the course more relevant to their own interests, goals.**
  - 13.1 reflective posting
    - *write a reflective posting. Typical topics: asking students to write about their goals/interests in the course, or a summary of what the student thinks has been the most important or relevant points, or to relate the topics in the course to their own circumstances, job, studies, etc.*
  - 13.2 jigsaw posting
    - *students investigate multiple perspectives/aspects of an issue, bring back to the group as a whole. For example, instructor may develop 20 questions on a topic, and assign students to specific questions. Instructor should provide a few resources for each question. It's also possible to assign multiple students to the same question, and ask them to work together.*

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13.1  reflective posting

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- 13.3  critique posting

  *students create an artifact (a powerpoint, an outline, an analysis, a diagram, etc) and fellow students provide constructive feedback to make suggestions for improvement.*

- 13.4  pre/post lecture questions

  *in conjunction with a guest speaker (delivered f2f or via synchronous online videoconferencing), students can post questions in advance which could help inform the content of the guest lecture, or post followup questions for the guest speaker afterwards. In large courses, the function of the moderators might be to distill postings down to a smaller, more manageable set of questions.*

- 13.5  problem set postings

  *in some math/science/engineering disciplines, problem sets are common. General discussion space for problem sets, or individual discussion spaces for each problem make it possible for students to help each other.*

- 13.6  role play

  *students post in the voice/from the perspective of someone else, and post responses in that voice. The summary/wrapup might ask participants to look for extensions/elaborations to the perspectives presented, consider what perspectives might be missing, or identify common ground/differences.*

- 13.7  discussion jobs

  *In addressing a discussion topic, some students are assigned discussion jobs, like "idea generator", "skeptic", "wrapper", or "moderator".*

- 13.8  student-contributed readings

  *students can take turns posting websites, news articles, or articles from the library that pertain to the topics of the course.*

- 13.9  connect to informants

  *students connect to informants (perhaps students in other countries, in industry, in the field, etc) in order to gain information to be used in a report, presentation, web site, etc.*

- **14  Tip 14: Ask about course discussions (online or f2f) in your informal mid-semester feedback, or use a poll/survey to get quick informal feedback.**

  - 14.1  What is going well with the online discussions? What could be improved? Are the discussions helping you (insert course goal here...)

- **15  Tip 15: Positive aspects of online discussion compared to f2f discussion**

  - 15.1  students have time for longer, more thoughtful responses. Of course, you have to set those expectations and provide the time.
  - 15.2  easier to link to internet resources to provide web-based information or evidence
  - 15.3  every student has an equal chance to contribute, participate. Not limited by class time.
  - 15.4  some students may feel more comfortable expressing themselves in a written form (shyness in class, second language difficulties)

- **16  Tip 16: You can do things with "discussion forums" other than discuss**

  - 16.1  informal assessment: students post "muddiest point", you summarize and perhaps re-teach or post additional resources
  - 16.2  group collaboration: a place for students to leave messages, trade files, work on group projects
  - 16.3  make announcements

- Current version of this document is online at: http://www.jimwitte.com/workshops/11-10-2010-online-discussion