

Embedding Assessment into Course Discussion Postings

Virtual students cannot attend class via what has come to be called "seat time." Instead, to be present, they must contribute to the discussions. Thus online discussion becomes the core vehicle for learning online. Specifically, asynchronous, threaded discussions that allow users to sort by a default, outline-based format, by student and by date at a minimum. Such platforms allow participants to reply directly to each other's comments, building thinking together over time. Web-based, asynchronous dialogue invites exploratory, inquiry-based pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning.

Constructivism Online

Such interactive engaging and learning can take some getting used to for students and instructors alike. Those who might have come to class with their bodies but less so with their minds now must do enough of the assigned activities to figure out what to post in asynchronous dialogue with their peers. It takes getting used to for instructors as well. Posting a list of six questions for discussion in one "seed" or "starter" thread can cause severe cases of eyes-glazing-over in student readers. Additionally, if many students choose different questions to address with their comments, before too long a dialogue has turned into a cacaphony. Instructors are most likely to learn students' authentic reactions and thoughts about a reading or activity if they ask a vague question or two like, "What were you thinking while you were doing this activity?" or "What did you note in the margins as you read?"

Following a few initial responses, such postings as "I agree" or "I disagree" don't contribute very much. Fellow students will welcome agreement and even challenges and questions about their comments if those who reply to them are sure to explain what is agreed or disagreed with and why, along with the vote of confidence or disagreement.

To learn collaboratively, rather than "compete" for a grade is new for many and so in online courses, even learning how to learn becomes part of the coursework. What participants discover is that you don't have to wait until you have finished a thought to contribute a comment to a growing dialogue. Your "half-baked" ideas will spark further thinking for your collaborating peers and they will help you hone and build your thinking if you let them. So posting initial thoughts and questions early to see what others do with those becomes a useful learning strategy in an environment of *social knowledge construction*. Returning to assigned discussions later each week to offer your next generation thinking before the class moves on to new challenges deepens understanding.

Requiring Postings

We have found it makes sense to require a minimum of two postings to a discussion. Invite participants to either engage directly with the opening questions or post replies to the postings of their peers, deepening the dialogue for all. We don't have quizzes or comprehension-based tests in such courses. Instead, each time students post, they reveal the level of attention they have given to the assignment and the growing bank of thinking offered in the discussions. If they have struggled to understand the material, they will ask questions for others to work through with them collaboratively. If they have resonated

with the assignment, they will share initial insights for others to build on or add to later in the week.

Each required participant posting can be assessed using the following criteria:

Value	Characterization of Response
0	No response.
Baseline Comment	Single entries with no interaction with other participants' postings evident. Also, rambling, lengthy posts that show no signs of having been re-read and refined before posting will also receive only partial credit. Show respect for your readers and cut your rambling writing to just a few finished paragraphs for each entry.
Generative Comment	The response builds on the ideas of another one or two participants and digs deeper into assignment questions or issues.
Collaborative Comment	The response integrates multiple views and/or shows value as a seed for reflection by other participants' responses in its thread. Alternatively, the response contributes language, a metaphor or a study tool that serves to deepen the dialogue.

Generally, five or six postings are required weekly, based on the activities assigned. At least one of these postings per week, or a total of twelve across the semester must be on the "collaborative level" to achieve full credit for postings, or an "A" in the course.