BEST PRACTICES FOR DESIGNING AND ASSESSING ONLINE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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Overview of Today’s Workshop

- Designing discussion questions that encourage students to critically evaluate course materials and topics
- Fostering and environment that supports active and meaningful discussion among class members
- Communicating clear expectations to students regarding online discussion
- Creating rubrics to assess discussion participation and provide clear feedback to the students
General Ideas for Writing Discussion Questions

- The better the question, the better the response and interaction
- Especially in undergraduate classes, it is helpful to create very clear questions
- Make specific reference to theories, diagrams, authors, page numbers, or life experiences that you want students to refer to or use in their responses
- Ask open-ended questions, rather than closed ended questions that generate one or two word responses (or the same answer from all students)
- It can help to provide more than one actual question in the main discussion question
- Ask students to give reasons for their answers or to support them with class materials and/or outside resources
- Ask questions that are relevant to the students
Discussion Questions & Student Performance

• Allowing students to draw on their own opinions and experiences is correlated with higher pass rates and lower drop rates for online courses (UMUC Institute for Research and Assessment)
Designing Discussion Questions

• Questions should be clearly tied to course topics and learning outcomes
• Be sure keep discussion within a reasonable timeframe so students are interacting in a timely basis
• Provide navigation instructions
• Don’t be afraid to ask students to read websites on current events, watch podcasts or youtube clips, etc. that are related to your course as part of discussion
• Ask questions that relate to different levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives http://ww2.odu.edu/educ/roverbau/Bloom/blooms_taxonomy.htm
Types of Discussion Questions
(Based on Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives)

Through discussion questions, you can ask students to:

• Recall facts or knowledge

EXAMPLE:

For the purpose of this discussion question, please describe the ethical guideline for research that you feel is the MOST important to follow. Why did you select that particular guideline?

• Words that can be used in these questions include: discuss, define, identify, list, select, recall, tell, repeat, label

(NOTE: These correlate to Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives)
Types of Discussion Questions (Based on Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives)

Through discussion questions, you can ask students to:

• Demonstrate comprehension of facts/knowledge (tell in their own words)

EXAMPLE:

This discussion question will refer to the scenario described on pages x – xx of your textbook. In your own words, what was the author’s main argument for why _______ occurred? How did the author explain ___________ about the scenario?

• Words that can be used in these questions include: describe in your own words, restate, explain, interpret, rephrase,
Types of Discussion Questions
(Based on Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives)

Through discussion questions, you can ask students to:

• Apply facts/knowledge to a situation or problem (solve a problem for a given situation)

EXAMPLE:

Your boss has asked you to design an employee safety training program that utilizes role-playing activities. Please create and share one type of role-play activity that could be used in a safety training program.

• Words that can be used in these questions include: apply, model, calculate, produce, show, demonstrate, support, estimate, illustrate, make, show, teach, make, create
Types of Discussion Questions
(Based on Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives)

Through discussion questions, you can ask students to:

• Analyze course materials information (break information into parts and identify relationships)

EXAMPLE:

*Piaget and Vygotsky both created theories of how children learn. What is the same about their theories? What is different about their theories?*

• Words that can be used in these questions include: analyze, distinguish, associate, categorize, compare, order, defend, differentiate, summarize, discriminate take apart
Types of Discussion Questions
(Based on Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives)

Through discussion questions, you can ask students to:

• Synthesize facts/knowledge (bring concepts together and rearrange into creative and new ideas)

EXAMPLE:

In chapter x, you were presented with two different perspectives on Gun Control. First, find the common ground between the two perspectives. Second, expand on these perspectives by discussing a new framework for understanding issues surrounding gun control.

• Words that can be used in these questions include: add to, generate, alter, hypothesize, design, modify, discover, predict, extend, reconstruct, reorganize, simplify
Types of Discussion Questions (Based on Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives)

Through discussion questions, you can ask students to:

• Evaluate facts/knowledge (make a value judgment that is supported by fact or reasoning)

EXAMPLE:

Important Expert _____ provided the following explanation of X phenomenon. What is your assessment of Important Expert’s explanation? Is it the best explanation of the phenomenon? What are the strengths of the explanation? What are the weaknesses?

• Words that can be used in these questions include: argue, appraise, assess, conclude, criticize, decide, judge, rate, validate
Types of Discussion Questions
(Based on Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives)

Through discussion questions, you can ask students to:

• Relate personal experiences to class materials

EXAMPLE:

There are several effective ways to “on-board” or familiarize new employees with their new position. Think about your past work experiences. Which of your previous jobs did the best job with on-boarding? What did they do that was especially positive and/or effective?

• Words that can be used in these questions include: discuss, define, summarize, identify, list, select, recall, etc.
Types of Discussion Questions
(Based on Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives)

Through discussion questions, you can ask students to:

• Discuss their attitudes or feelings about class materials

EXAMPLE:

Our parenting textbook takes the stance that spanking is not an effective form of child guidance/discipline. Please share your opinion/attitude towards spanking. Is it always wrong? Or could it be effective? Why do you feel that way?

• Words that can be used in these questions include: discuss, reflect, explain, share, etc.
Fostering Active and Meaningful Discussion

- Require participation and provide appropriate course credit for online discussion
- Establish ground rules for “netiquette”
- Discuss interesting things by using fun examples, current events, or letting students generate some of the discussion questions
Fostering Active and Meaningful Discussion

- Ask students to incorporate their personal/professional experiences into the response
- Ask for opinions that are supported with class materials
- Provide timely and appropriate feedback
Co-Construction of Knowledge (Fostering Critical Thinking)

• Post consistent comments that demonstrate and foster critical thinking.
  • Instructor posts should contain unique information and questions for further student consideration.

• Encourage students to respond to each other’s questions with insightful comments.
  • Instructor should respond to main and participation posts helping develop the discussion. Further, instructor feedback should encourage student participation.

• Provide additional information or request further information on student’s posts.
  • Instructor should build on student comments to enrich the discussion.

• Consistently apply new course vocabulary in the discussion posts.

• Thread weekly material together by discussing how earlier topics apply to the current topic.
Types of Interaction in Online Discussion

- Student to Student
- Student to Professor
- Professor to Student
Encouraging Student to Student Interaction

- Interaction in both traditional and online classrooms is necessary for successful learning (Bates, 2000; Roblyner and Wiencke, 2003)

- Student interactions with each other help develop a sense of a learning group or cohort, which positively impacts their learning experience

- You may need to require and grant course credit for a certain number of responses to classmates for each discussion question

- Consider banning emoticons, text message-like abbreviations, and jargon that are not commonly understood by the entire class (not to mention the faculty)

- Model different types of appropriate responses:
  - **Positive comments:** “I really liked your statement that _____”, “What a creative approach to_____”, I hadn’t thought about _____. Thanks for pointing it out”, “You comments helped my understand _______ better”, etc.
  - **“Devil’s Advocate” comments:** “I approached this from a different point of view. What do you think about _____”, or “I guess I saw this from a different perspective. Would if change you mind if _____ happened?”
Encouraging Student to Student Interaction continued

• Consider including a graded first week “Introductions Conference” where students (1) introduce themselves and (2) respond to at least ____ of their classmates to get discussion going. It is good to model an acceptable introduction by posting your own introduction in this discussion area.

• Model the type of interactions you would like to have with one another. This can be especially helpful in the first few weeks of the semester when the classroom culture is being established.

• It is also helpful to model an appropriate response to main discussion questions the first week so that students are more confident with this type of assignment (especially if they are new to online learning)
Encouraging Student to Professor Interaction

• Establishing overall rapport will help students feel more comfortable interacting with faculty in online discussion

• The following activities help establish rapport:
  • Inviting students to use your first name (great for grad classes and non-traditional students)
  • Having an “Introductions” discussion area the first week and responding to ALL students within 24-48 hours of their original posting
  • Especially during the first few weeks, provide a high frequency of responses to students in the discussion boards
  • Posting multiple ways to contact you: email, IM, class “Cybercafe” for questions, etc.
Initiating Professor to Student Interactions

• If you include a “Introductions” discussion area, you should participate in it by
  • Posting your own intro (perhaps with a picture) to model this first class discussion interaction
  • Greet all of your students personally (preferably within 24-48 hours of their posted Introduction)

• Create a non-graded class Q & A area and monitor it daily

• Be active in your class discussion! Respond to multiple students each week and make sure over the course of several weeks your respond to everyone.

• Respond to both your “early posters” and “last minute posters”
Communicating Clear Expectations to Students

Discussion board expectations and requirements should be clearly displayed in the course syllabus, classroom and can be included in a Welcome Email to the class.

Discussion Board Expectations Can Include:

- General word count expectations.
- Clarify if citations are expected.
- Clarify the number of posts required per thread per week.
- Clarify due dates for main and participation posts.
- Discussion grading rubric.
Modeling Discussion for the Students

• Post example main discussion responses during Week One and possibly Week Two.
• Exceed the student discussion board requirements.
• Consider typing discussion responses in Word and pasting into the discussion board.
Advantages of Rubrics

• Clear communication of quantitative and qualitative feedback.

• Consistency in grading.

• Communicate discussion board expectations.

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<tr>
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<th>Unacceptable</th>
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<td><strong>Frequency</strong></td>
<td>Points: 0 (0%) Participates not at all Feedback:</td>
<td>Points: 1 (5.56%) Participates 1-2 times on the same day Feedback:</td>
<td>Points: 2 (11.11%) Participates 3-4 times but postings not distributed throughout week Feedback:</td>
<td>Points: 3 (16.67%) Participates 4-5 times throughout the week Feedback:</td>
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<td><strong>Initial Assignment Posting</strong></td>
<td>Points: 0 (0%) Posts no assignment Feedback:</td>
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Creating A Rubric to Assess Participation in Online Discussion

• Many faculty members require two distinct types of participation in online classes:
  • Responses to discussion questions
  • Replies to classmates and/or the instructor
Assessing Main Discussion Question Responses

✓ Thoroughly addresses the main discussion questions.

✓ Reference to course material.

✓ Presents a unique perspective.

✓ Asks a question for further discussion.

✓ Tone/grammar/spelling.
Assessing Responses to Classmates

✓ Posts ___ number of substantive participation responses to classmates.

✓ Introduces something new to the discussion.

✓ Asks a question for further discussion.

✓ Tone/spelling/grammar
# Sample Rubric

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