Alternative Formats for Quality & Engaging Online Discussions

Q&A discussion boards – those marked by probing instructor questions and student responses – are common to the online learning experience. While this discussion format is intended to foster different types of engagement, many faculty are often disappointed with the quality of student responses, degree of reflection, and caliber of interactions that take place. In addition, students criticize the burnout that accompanies this discussion format, which adversely impacts their motivation and participation levels. This gap between expectations and outcomes has real implications for online courses; discussions become less meaningful and these discussion boards inevitably become an unwelcomed "task." Below are three alternative discussion formats to consider to harness the collaborative power of online courses:

- **"Chain linked" discussion boards.** This first alternative is a twist on the traditional, Q&A discussion board. In contrast to a forum marked by individual student threads, this format utilizes a single thread with the instructor facilitating discussion by reflecting on a topic and posing a probing question. The first student to respond offers their own reflection, answers the instructor's question, and poses an additional question. The second, third, and fourth students follow this same format until the discussion is exhausted and the final student (or the instructor) provides a summary. This format combats repetitive responses and provides incentives for early student participation. To work properly, instructors and students should avoid yes/no or factual-based questions in favor of those that encourage critical thought in a collaborative setting.

- **"Role-based" discussion boards.** This second alternative relies on different student roles as a means of facilitating discussion. One example is the "starter-responder-wrapper" model, which tasks some students with initiating discussion, others with replying to critical questions or themes, and the remaining students synthesizing key discussion points. Another option is to incorporate practical simulations that require students to don the "hat" of a key stakeholder in the confines of a discussion thread. A final option is to utilize discussion forums for debates by grouping students into different, yet competing groups. Role-based discussion boards require clear, concise instructions as well as a netiquette policy that firmly establishes proper codes of conduct.

- **"Jigsaw" discussion boards.** This third alternative breaks content into smaller parts, or components, with individual groupings tackling a specific subset of a broader "puzzle." Online jigsaws can assume various forms, such as group-based case studies or problem-based learning exercises. Some structure is necessary to ensure proper group dynamics, and it is recommended that jigsaws be paired with other learning activities, such as

group presentations, Wikis, or shared documents, to increase knowledge acquisition and application in a collaborative setting.

Resources

Carleton College. (n.d.). Student roles. LINK: https://serc.carleton.edu/introgeo/cooperative/roles.html.

Reese A. (2013). Are you bored with discussion boards? Collaborative strategies in blended and online courses. LINK: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A9nXm8g4oQg

Trufant, L. (2003). Move over Socrates: Online discussion is here. Educause. LINK: https://library.educause.edu/resources/2003/1/move-over-socrates-online-discussion-is-here

For more information or to discuss how you might incorporate these ideas into your courses, contact the Reinert Center at cttl@slu.edu.