

# Taming the Beast: Designing effective online discussions

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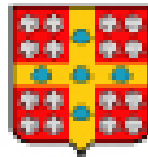


Social Sciences and Humanities  
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Collaborative learning supported by  
online asynchronous communication  
in university-based courses



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**Part 1** →

Online discussions:  
Benefits, challenges & solutions



**Part 2** →

Group work:  
Preparation of preliminary designs



**Part 3** →

Individual group presentations  
of preliminary designs

**Part 4** →

Open discussion:  
Questions, comments.

# Benefits

- Race, gender, accent or status not visible
- Constructing & negotiating meaning
- Opportunities for critical thinking
- Higher levels of abstract cognitive processing
- More careful, formal and reflective responses
- Presence of a real audience for communicating
- Increased motivation to participate and to write

# Benefits

- Freedom from temporal and spatial constraints
- Shift in locus of control to learner
- Less domination by the teacher
- No requirement for turn taking
- Discussants contribute at their own pace
- Time to reflect on comments
- Equalizing effect for slow and shy responders
- More interaction and flexibility in communication
- Lack of physical presence shelters against "status signalling" and "social games"

# Challenges

- Monologues & lack of interaction
- Domination
- Low rates of participation & lurkers
- Playing the grade game: forced interactions
- Repetition
- Over-posting
- Stream of consciousness posting
- Overemphasis on description without analysis
- Unsupported claims & over-generalization
- Feelings of exclusion
- Lack of responses to messages

# Challenges

- Empty postings: *Thanks!*
- Digressions: *By the way...*
- Flaming: *That's a stupid argument!*
- Politeness: *I agree!*
- Lack of visual and aural cues: *Did you mean..?*
- Procrastination in responding: *Sorry to be late...*
- Grammar & spelling: *I now hwat u mean*
- Teacher domination
- Misuse of subject line and threads
- Information overload

# Challenges in moderating

- Reply vs. reply privately
- “Great posting! Thanks! I agree!”
- Praise
- Groups and size
- Flaming
- Politeness
- Monologues
- Sustaining momentum

# Taming the beast

**GOALS**

**GUIDELINES**

**GRADES**

# Goals

**What is the  
intent or purpose  
of the discussion?**

# Goals

- What is your goal for the discussion?
- What is its purpose?
- What do you want to achieve by having a discussion?
- What are your outcomes?



Critical thinking

Problem solving

Knowledge building

Reflection

Argumentation



Collaboration

Community

Social presence

Interactivity

Teacher presence

# E.g. Critical thinking?

- What is problem solving?
- How is it different from critical thinking ?
- What types of discussion behaviours does it reflect  
? What are examples of these behaviours ?
- What types of activities/prompts or questions are needed to promote it ?

## Problem Resolution

Process	Indicator	Example
<b>Identifying Solutions</b>	Proposing solutions	<i>I feel teachers need to use French more if they expect their students to use it.</i>
	Hypothesising about Solutions	<i>I believe that if a teacher were to make mistakes and correct them in front of a class, it would ease the students' minds about making mistakes themselves and enable them to correct themselves.</i>
<b>Evaluating Solutions</b>	Agreeing with solutions proposed by others	<i>I agree strongly with participant 6's views. Especially for Immersion students.</i>
	Weighing & comparing alternative Solutions	<i>I sincerely believe that using the target language 100% of the time creates a stagnant environment for learning. On the other hand, too much use of English would only serve to 'baby' students.</i>
	Critiquing solutions	<i>While I agree somewhat with participant 3, I think some students at lower levels may become too frustrated when trying to learn the language when a teacher uses only French.</i>
	Rejecting solutions judged unworkable	<i>I don't think it is right to start the year off with a solid plan of attack.</i>
<b>Acting on Solutions</b>	Planning to act	<i>Personally, I have decided to speak English the first day of classes.</i>
	Reaching conclusions, or an understanding of the problem	<i>The methods which all of these sources have suggested prove that language use in the classroom is a major problem, but is also easily mended with use of the proper tools, and creativity.</i>

# Guidelines

- Length of postings
- Number of postings
- Time of postings
- Social postings
- Folders and topics
- Locking of modules
- Use of reply vs. reply privately
- Postings as attachments
- Subject line & snippets

# Grading

- Quantity versus quality
- Time
- Guidelines
- Role of claims
- New insights, alternative perspectives
- Articulation, grammar ,spelling
- Interaction
- Tone & attitude
- Weekly, monthly or at end of course
- Role of student in grading

# Grading claims

**Empirical  
support**

**Logical  
argument**

**Anecdotal  
evidence**

# Additional resources

## Book:

Collison, G., Elbaum, B., Haavind, S., & Tinker, R. (2000). *Facilitating online learning: Effective strategies for moderators*. Madison, WI: Atwood Publishing.

## Online bibliography:

Murphy, E. (2005). *Online synchronous discussion in teaching and learning: A bibliography*. Available:  
<http://www.ucs.mun.ca/~emurphy/biblio.htm>

# Resources for grading

Murphy, E. & Jerome, T. (2005). Assessing students' contributions to online asynchronous discussions in university-level courses. *The e-Journal of Instructional Science and Technology (e-JIST)*, 8(1). Available: [http://www.usq.edu.au/electpub/e-jist/docs/vol8\\_no1/commentary/stu\\_contrib\\_ansynch.htm](http://www.usq.edu.au/electpub/e-jist/docs/vol8_no1/commentary/stu_contrib_ansynch.htm)


Murphy, E. & Loveless, J. (2005). Students' self analysis of contributions to online asynchronous discussions. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 21(2), 155-172. Available: <http://www.ascilite.org.au/ajet/ajet21/murphy.html>




*Thanks*

*MERCI*


## Part 2: Your designs



Decide on your goal or purpose for the discussion. e.g. critical thinking



Decide how you will operationalise the construct. e.g. prompts, questions



Decide on parameters or guidelines:  
e.g. length & number of postings etc.

Decide on grading.

