



Mastering Online Discussion Board Facilitation

Resource Guide

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Best Practices: Overview

Introduction

Discussion boards, or threaded discussions, are one of the most commonly used tools in online teaching. Discussion forums provide the ability for asynchronous discussion to occur over a period of time. The ability to learn asynchronously is one of the primary benefits of online learning. Students are able to reflect upon their ideas before sharing them with the class, leading to more reflective responses and in-depth learning.

This guide has been designed to provide some practical suggestions to assist you in making the most of this versatile tool. A number of topics have been addressed, including: facilitation tips, content area suggestions, time management strategies and much more.

Benefits of Using Online Discussion Boards

- * Builds class community by promoting discussion on course topics
- * Allows time for in-depth reflection- students have more time to reflect, research & compose their thoughts before participating in the discussion
- * Facilitates learning by allowing students to view & to respond to the work of others
- * Develops thinking & writing skills
- * Allows guest experts to participate in the course by posting information & responding to questions

Resources

- *The Tools for Successful Online Teaching*, Lisa Dawley, 2007
- *Essential Elements: Prepare, Design, and Teach Your Online Course*, Bonnie Elbaum, Cynthia McIntyre, Alese Smith, 2002
- *Teaching Online: A Practical Guide*, Susan Ko, Steve Rossen, 2001
- *Facilitating Online Learning: Effective Strategies for Moderators*, George Collison, Bonnie Elbaum, Sarah Haavind, Robert Tinker, 2000
- *Keys to Developing Successful Online Discussion*
<http://www.uwsa.edu/ttt/raleigh.htm>
- *Online Teaching and Classroom Change: The Trans-Classroom Teacher in the Age of the Internet*
<http://innovateonline.info/index.php?view=article&id=446>

Best Practices: Purpose

Discussion Boards with a Purpose

Discussion Board activities can serve a variety of purposes and can be used to meet a wide range of instructional objectives. **Instructional Discussion Boards** should be used to meet specific course objectives and should be aligned with course content. Well-designed discussion board activities can be used to encourage the following:

- **Demonstration of Knowledge of Key Concepts -** Using the discussion board to discuss key concepts allows students to learn from one another and share ideas. When students submit an assignment directly to a teacher, this sharing of ideas is lost.
- **Community Building** - One of the primary reasons for using discussion boards is to build a community of learners. This tool allows students to become part of a vibrant learning community, rather than an just an independent learner completing & submitting assignments with no real peer interaction.
- **Reflection** - Reflective activities require students to share a synthesis of the learning experience, or to describe how a situation or experience has personal value to them. These kinds of activities should allow for honest and open responses.
- **Consensus Building** - Consensus building activities require students to work together to create a product or to come to an agreement on some topic.
- **Critical Thinking** - through the use of higher order questioning techniques and activities, the discussion board can be used to encourage critical thinking skills.
- **Student Leadership:** the effective use of discussion forums can encourage student leadership by giving them a voice in the classroom. Students can be given the opportunity to

Resources:

- *The Nature and Purpose of Online Conversations: A Brief Synthesis of Current Research*
<http://carbon.cudenver.edu/~lsherry/pubs/dialogue.htm>
- *Using Online Discussions to Enhance Face-to-Face Instruction*
<http://www.sandiego.edu/soetech/onlinediscussions/>
- *Defining the Purpose of Your Community*
www.fullcirc.com/community/communitypurpose.htm
- *Tips & Strategies: Facilitating Online Discussions*
<http://members.shaw.ca/mdde615/howcommunicate.htm>

Icebreakers/Introductory Activities

Icebreakers are a good example of **Social Discussion Boards**. They provide students with an opportunity to get to know one another and to interact in an Informal way. They should be fun and non-threatening and require participants to find something in common with others in the group.

- * **Personal Introductions** - ask each student to introduce themselves on the discussion board at the beginning of the term. Respond to each student & encourage the class to respond to one another's introductions.
- * **Portrait** - students create a portrait of themselves in any medium, digitize the portrait and share it on the discussion board.
- * **Interviews** - have pairs of students interview each other on a given topic and post the interview results in the discussion board.

More Information on Icebreakers

http://www.ion.uillinois.edu/resources/pointersclickers/2002_01/index.asp

Best Practices: Netiquette

Encouraging Courteous Discussion

Netiquette is the term used for etiquette on the Internet. This term extends to email, chat, discussion boards, and live sessions. As an online teacher, it is important to educate yourself and your students about using good manners on the Internet. Just as in a classroom setting, teachers must define rules on the first day of class and enforce them throughout the school year.

It's a Democracy, Right?

Consider involving your students when creating rules for online communication. Ask students to conduct an online search on this topic and then post 5 - 7 rules on the Discussion Board explaining why the class should adhere to these rules when communicating online. Ask them to explain their choices and tell why it is important to have these kinds of guidelines. Use this student input when creating the list of rules your class will follow.

Resources:

- *Net Etiquette*
<http://www.albion.com/netiquette>
- *Learn the Net Netiquette*
www.learnthenet.com/english/html/09netiq.htm
- *NetLingo*
<http://www.netlingo.com>
- Webopedia online dictionary and search engine
<http://www.webopedia.com>
- E-mail, Online Chat, & Text Messaging Acronyms
<http://www.sharpened.net/glossary/acronyms.php>

The Use of Appropriate Writing Styles

Don't assume that students automatically know how to communicate appropriately in an online environment. While they may be accustomed to participating in social forums, the guidelines for an educational setting can be quite different. Establish guidelines for the level of formality you require. If one of your goals is to encourage good writing skills, it is important for students to follow acceptable writing conventions in regards to spelling, grammar & punctuation.

Tips for Electronic Discussion (Discussion Boards)

<http://tlt.its.psu.edu/suggestions/etips/examples.htm#Tips>

<http://www.siue.edu/~dknowlt/DiscussContributes.htm>

Best Practices: Facilitation

Encourage Critical Thinking

The effective use of the Discussion Board goes far beyond simply asking students to respond to textbook readings. There are many ways it can be used to foster critical thinking skills.

Asking good questions is an a great place to start. Davis (1993) provides a comprehensive list of questions types designed to jump start discussion. Consider using some of these to generate discussion in your classes:

- **Exploratory:** probe facts & basic knowledge
- **Challenge:** interrogate assumptions, conclusions or interpretations
- **Relational:** ask for comparisons of themes, ideas, or issues
- **Diagnostic:** probe motives or causes
- **Action:** call for a conclusion or action
- **Cause & Effect:** ask for causal relationships between ideas, actions or events
- **Extension:** expand the discussion
- **Hypothetical:** pose a change in the facts or issues
- **Priority:** seek to identify the most important issues
- **Summary:** elicit synthesis

Adapted from *Carnegie Mellon: design & teach a course: Discussions*

<http://www.cmu.edu/teaching/designteach/teach/instructionalstrategies/discussions.html>

Questions to Consider When Planning Discussion Board Activities

- How do the ideas & information to be discussed fit into the course as a whole?
- What skills, knowledge, perspectives, or sensibilities do you want students to walk away from the discussion with?
- How will you make sure your students meet those objectives?

Adapted from *Carnegie Mellon: design & teach a course: Discussions*

<http://www.cmu.edu/teaching/designteach/teach/instructionalstrategies/discussions.html>

Resources:

- *Crafting Questions for Online Discussions* - aligns questioning strategies with Bloom's Taxonomy
http://tlt.its.psu.edu/suggestions/online_questions/index.html
- *For the Best Answers, Ask Tough Questions*
<http://www.joycevalenza.com/questions.html>
- *Instructional Strategies for Online Courses*
<http://www.ion.uillinois.edu/resources/tutorials/pedagogy/instructionalstrategies.asp>

Strategies to Facilitate Online Discussions

- * Give students clear expectations about online discussion requirements, deadlines, and grading procedures.
- * Assess the quality as well as the quantity of the students' online posts. Using rubrics will allow students to have a clear guideline of your expectations for quality of their posts.
- * Provide a schedule for students of upcoming discussion board deadlines. Give as much notice as possible.
- * Provide structure for students to post to threads. A good structure lessens the frustration of what to write.
- * Make yourself visible in the discussion. Students will be more likely to engage in the discussion if they see you as being a part of it.
- * Do not allow domination of the discussion. If students are dominating the discussion, privately ask them to slow down a little.

Best Practices: Facilitation

When designing discussion board activities for your students, consider ways that you can encourage critical thinking skills. From lower level activities designed to assess students' knowledge of a particular topic, to higher level activities that require students to think critically, they all have their place in the online classroom. The table below offers some suggestions for using discussion board activities across the spectrum

Discussion Board Activities Aligned to Bloom's Taxonomy

Learning Objective Outcome	Discussion Forum Activities
Knowledge: defines; describes; enumerates; identifies; labels; lists; matches; names; reads; records; reproduces; selects; states; views	Using a jigsaw (http://jigsaw.org) technique, students work in small groups to locate & compile a list of web resources on a given topic area. These resources are then shared on the discussion board with the remainder of the class.
Comprehension: classifies; cites; converts; describes; discusses; estimates; explains; generalizes; gives examples,	The teacher poses a question asking students to estimate the number of hours most kids watch TV per week. After providing their estimations, students are then asked to locate data to verify their estimation.
Application: assesses; charts; collects; computes; determines; develops; establishes; implements; informs; predicts; provides; relates; solves; teaches; uses.	Working in pairs, students design a customized online lesson for each other on a topic of their choice related to the course content. These are posted for feedback before the student proceeds with the instruction.
Analysis: breaks down; correlates; diagrams; focuses; illustrates; infers; outlines; points out; prioritizes; separates; subdivides.	Students view or listen to recordings of political speeches (www.c-spanclassroom.org) & write a comparison of points of discussion. The comparison is posted and a discussion of political candidates ensues.
Synthesis: adapts; categorizes; collaborates; compiles; designs; formulates; integrates; models; modifies; reconstructs.	Provide students the opportunity to create their own special interest group via the discussion board forum. The student is then in charge of moderating their forum.
Evaluation: appraises; compares & contrasts; concludes; criticizes; critiques; defends; interprets; judges; justifies; Reframes.	Students are assigned to comment on an issue using the persona of a fictional character (role play). Examples of characters: Dr. Spock, Timothy Leary, Maria Montessori, etc. Comments are posted on discussion boards. Class members respond to each other maintaining their assigned persona.

Adapted from *The Tools for Successful Online Teaching* by Lisa Dawley, 2007

Additional Resources:

The following websites offer additional information on using Bloom's Taxonomy to develop learning activities for your students. In addition to offering descriptive verbs, they also include sample skills, activities & links to related resources.

- *Kinetic Connections: Blooms' Taxonomy in Action* <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/bloom0405-1>
- *Bloom's Taxonomy & Related Skills:* <http://www.coun.uvic.ca/learning/exams/blooms-taxonomy.html>
- *Critical & Creative Thinking - Bloom's Taxonomy:* <http://eduscapes.com/tap/topic69.htm>

Best Practices: Assessment

Assessing Discussion Board Activities

Assessing discussion board activities can take many forms. Regardless of the type of assessment strategy or tool that you use, there are some key points to remember:

- Assessment must be matched to learning outcomes
- Assessment must be aligned with instruction.
- Students must be given clear guidelines regarding how their work will be assessed.

There are times when using a simple system such as awarding points for participation is appropriate. At other times, you may give whole class feedback incorporating individual student posts. However, there are also times when a more detailed assessment may be desired. Below is a list of assessment tools to consider. All could be adapted for use on the discussion board.

Sample Assessment Tools

- One Minute Papers
- Graphic Organizers
- Concept Maps
- Checklists/Rubrics
- Reflective Journals

Assessment Resources

- * *Kathy Schrock: Assessment & Rubrics Collection*
<http://school.discoveryeducation.com/schrockguide/assess.html>
- * *Sample Rubrics*
<http://www.uwstout.edu/soe/profdev/rubrics.shtml>
- * *Student Assessment*
<http://vudat.msu.edu/assessment>

APA Online

Assessment CyberGuide for Learning Goals & Outcomes

This site contains a comprehensive list of assessment strategies, including pros and cons of each, as well as recommendations for their use. Many of these tools could be adapted for use with discussion board activities.

http://www.apa.org/ed/eval_strategies.html

Who is Responsible for Student Assessment?

Teacher Assessment - teacher assessment is probably the most commonly used assessment. Any of the tools listed on this page can be used by teachers to assess their students. However, there are many advantages to using self-assessment and peer assessment tools as well.

Self Assessment - encourages students to think about their own learning and to reflect upon areas of strengths and weaknesses.

- *Sample Self-Assessment Checklist*
<http://www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/docs/policy/studeval/questass.pdf>
- *Sample Self-Evaluation Prompts*
<http://www.evergreen.edu/washcenter/resources/acl/e3.html>

Peer Assessment - actively involves students in the assessment process and encourages critical thinking skills. Students often respond more positively to feedback from their peers.

- *Assessing Learning: Peer & Self Assessment*
<http://www.nclrc.org/essentials/assessing/peereval.htm>

Strategies: General

With a little planning & adaptation for online learning, all of the instructional strategies listed below are suitable discussion board activities:

Ask Experts - Inviting an expert to field questions on your discussion board is a great activity. Consider inviting a local historian, meteorologist, dentist, veterinarian or any expert related to your field of study to participate. However, if you can't find someone to personally fill that role, allow your students to use one of the many "expert sites" to get answers to their questions and then they can post them on the class discussion board.

- *Pitsco: Ask an Expert*
<http://www.askanexpert.com>
- *Ask an Expert Sources*
http://www.cln.org/int_expert.html

Debates - Debates encourage students to think critically and to organize their thoughts in a clear, cohesive & convincing manner. Discussion boards provide opportunities for online instructors to use this engaging strategy with their students.

- *Debates in the Classroom*
www.education-world.com/a_curr/strategy/strategy012.shtml

Polling - Introduce the science of polling to your students & then ask them to create/conduct their own poll or survey. Follow-up activities can include discussing the results on the discussion board, creating a graph or chart to show results, or summarizing results in an article.

- *The Gallup Organization*
<http://www.gallup.com>
- *The Roper Center of Public Opinion Research*
<http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu>

Role Play - Role play encourages students to look at an issue from the viewpoint of another. Assign roles based on course objectives and allow students to respond to questions on the discussion board by answering them as their "character" would.

- *Role Playing Exercises*- nice collection of resources from a geosciences view; can be adapted for other areas.
<http://serc.carleton.edu/introgeo/roleplaying>

Small Groups

Many of the small group activities & projects that can be accomplished in a face-to-face classroom can be adapted for use in an online environment. Most high school students enjoy working in groups and like the social aspect that accompanies working together. For more information on a variety of topics related to small groups, including: strategies, grouping, assessment, & links to additional resources, visit:

Managing Groups

<http://tep.uoregon.edu/technology/blackboard/docs/groups.pdf>

Take it to the Next level

Consider allowing students to participate in a collaborative project where they will share information with students in other learning communities.

www.k12science.org/collabprojs.html

http://www.epals.com/projects/book_club

Suggestions for Using Small Groups in an Online Environment

- Use *Google Tools* to encourage file sharing and collaboration among group members:
<http://www.google.com/educators/index.html>
<http://www.educationworld.com/awards/2007/r0207-23.shtml>

Sample Small Group Activities

- *Literature Circles*
http://www.stemnet.nf.ca/CITE/lang_lit_circles.htm
<http://www.litcircles.org>
http://www.education-world.com/a_curr/curr259.shtml
- *Newspapers* - students can work together to create a newspaper/newsletter highlighting a topic currently under study.
- *Collaborative Writing & revision with Google Docs*
<http://www.google.com/educators/weeklyreader.html>

Strategies: General

Peer Review - the use of peer review on the discussion board serves a variety of purposes. It allows students to learn from one another as they view each other's work. It can also encourage quality by making student work public and providing practice adhering to assessment guidelines when providing feedback to others. Peer review can be used to assess writing assignments, as well as student produced products.

- *Everybody's a Critic* - provides guidelines & sample feedback for students to follow.
<http://www.tnellen.com/cybereng/peer.html>
- *How Do You Make Peer Review Work?* - geared for using peer review in a writing course, this web site provides also provides suggestions that could be adapted for other subject areas.
http://mendota.english.wisc.edu/~WAC/page.jsp?id=29&c_type=category&c_id=21

What's in the News?

Focusing on **Current Events** is a great way to use discussion boards. Students can read or listen to news stories about current topics and discuss their views on the discussion boards. In addition, they can practice their writing skills by creating their own articles and editorials.

- *Why Teach Current Events?*
http://www.educationworld.com/a_curr/curr084.shtml
- *100 Ways to Use a Newspaper*
www.fredericksburg.com/nie/content/LessonPlans/100.htm
- *New York Times Learning Network*
<http://www.nytimes.com/learning>
- *NewsHour Extra – News for Students*
<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra>
- *CNN Student News*
<http://www.cnn.com/studentnews>
- *Ask a Reporter*
http://www.nytimes.com/learning/students/ask_reporters

Take a Field Trip

Virtual Field Trips are a wonderful way to get discussion flowing. Locate an interesting place for your students to travel to, and once they return, have them describe their experiences on the discussion board. Provide guidelines for their exploration and discussion.

- *Virtual Field Trips: Why, Where & How-To*
<http://www.internet4classrooms.com/vft.htm>
- *Google Lit Trips*
<http://www.googlelittrips.org>
- *Science Explorations*
<http://teacher.scholastic.com/activities/explorations/>
- *Smithsonian - NMAH Online Exhibitions*
<http://americanhistory.si.edu/exhibitions/>

Online Video

Video is a powerful educational tool and can easily be used to generate discussion among your students. Check out tips for planning a lesson using video & then explore online video resources for use with students:

www.ciconline.org/learningwithcable

- *Cable in the Classroom - Online Video*
<http://www.ciconline.org/video>
- *NOVA Online Video*
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/programs>
- *American Field Guide*
<http://www.pbs.org/americanfieldguide/index.html>
- *Nature*
<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/nature/video.html>

Strategies: Content Areas

Content Area Strategies

All of the following activities can be completed by students and then shared on a discussion board.

Language Arts:

- Use Inspiration or word processing software to create a family tree of the Greek or Roman Gods.
- Provide students with a list of commonly used idioms. Ask them to research the meanings online and then use as many as they can in a one page short story.
- Ask students to choose a prominent person to research and then to use the information they find to create a resume for that person. Details for this project & other biographical activities can be found at <http://www.aetv.com/class/biography/index.html>

Social Studies:

- **Time Capsule:** Provide students with a year and a location (Ancient Egypt, 2200 B.C) and ask them to create a time capsule & list items that they would include in it and tell why they selected those items.
- **A Day in the Life:** Using sites like *This Day in History* & *InfoPlease: Year by Year*, ask students to research life during a specific year and compose a "Day in the Life" from a teenage point of view.
www.history.com/this-day-in-history.do
www.infoplease.com/yearbyyear.html
- **A Different Outcome:** Ask students to research key Civil War battles and list 3 things that could have changed the outcome. For example, list 3 things that might have changed the outcome of the Battle of Bull Run.

Math:

- **Real Life Math:** use activities from "real life" math sites to help prepare students for living on their own.
<http://themint.org>
<http://score.kings.k12.ca.us/real.world.html>

Science:

- **WebQuests:** Allow students to participate in a WebQuest focusing on science objectives. Make necessary adaptations so students can share their work on the discussion board.
<http://webquest.org/search/index.php>
- **Marine Science Expeditions:** Allow students to participate in a virtual expedition and discuss their experiences on the discussion board, or use one of the many lesson plans or marine science resources to encourage active participation & discussion of this interesting topic.
<http://www.marine-ed.org/bridge/expedition.html>
<http://www.marine-ed.org/bridge>

The Arts:

- **PBS Teachers: The Arts:** Use the *PBS Teachers* searchable database to find resources & activities on a wide variety of topics including art, dance, music, visual arts, photography and much more.
<http://www.pbs.org/teachers/arts>
- **Art Critics:** Ask students to visit an online museum exhibit and use the guidelines below to write a critique for a work of art. Students can post and respond to one another's critiques on the discussion board.
<http://www.metmuseum.org/home.asp>
<http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/content/3338>

Interdisciplinary:

- **PBS Teachers: Thematic Teaching:** Use the thematic teaching archives to search for activities & resources across the curriculum. Many of them can be adapted for use in a variety of subject areas.
<http://www.pbs.org/teachers/thismonth/archives.html>
- **Adventures of CyberBee:** This site includes a number of resources and activities that can be used across the curriculum. Recent topics include: 2008 Elections, African American Experiences, & the Library of Congress. Click on **Curriculum Ideas** for many more ideas & resources.
<http://www.cyberbee.com>

Management Tips: Time Management



Time Management

There is no question that using Discussion Boards to enhance your instruction can be a time consuming venture. However, there are a few things you can do to manage your time and make the use of this instructional tool, as well as all communication tools, more efficient.

Establish a Plan for Communication

- * Create a list of communication tasks that need to be addressed in your course: replying to emails, reading & responding to discussion board posts, telephone conferences, etc.
- * Assign an amount of time to each task.
- * Inform students of your availability - how often you will be participating on the discussion boards, when to expect a response to email, etc.
- * Balance private email & public discussion by setting guidelines about the types of communications that are appropriate for each avenue of communication.
- * Maintain a nurturing pace of responding so that students are aware of your presence and active participation in the course.

While there are some time management tips related directly to discussion boards, there are also generic organizational teaching tips that can apply to use with discussion boards. Consider using both.

Organizational Tip

Create a "Discussion Board Ideas" **folder** in My Favorites, so online resources can be quickly added and organized for easy reference later.

Additional Resources:

As online learning becomes more prevalent, the number of articles and websites related to this topic increases. Online instructors can often learn from strategies that have been successful for their peers. The following resources address time management strategies for online instructors:

- *Online Learning.net: It's About Time!*
https://www.prep2teach.com/InstructorCommunity/tips_aug2000.html?s=526.807019838.0424122241
- *Time Saving Strategies & Tips for Instructors Using Online Discussion Forums*
<http://www.tact.fse.ulaval.ca/ang/html/timesaver.html>
- *Generating & Facilitating Engaging & Effective Online Discussion*
<http://tep.uoregon.edu/technology/blackboard/docs/discussionboard.pdf>

Email Newsletters

E-newsletters can be great sources of inspiration. Sign-up for newsletters that contain teaching tips and resources related to your subject area. When you see an idea or resource you can use, add it to your discussion board folder.

- *PBS Teachers Newsletter*
<http://www.pbs.org/teachers/newsletter>
- *Exploratorium Newsletter*
<http://www.exploratorium.edu/educate/newsletter.html>
- *Web English Teacher Newsletter*
<http://www.webenglishteacher.com/newsletter.html>
- *National Geographic Newsletters*
http://newsletters.nationalgeographic.com/p/National%20Geographic%20Society/NG_Registration_Page

Management Tips: Student Engagement

Discussion Boards need engaged participants in order to be successful, but how do you encourage that?

Get Them Involved!

- * Design activities that are interesting & motivating. These types of activities are much more likely to encourage active participation.
- * Allow students to suggest discussion topics.
- * Create discussion boards for small group use to encourage discussion among group members.
- * Email students who are not participating as they should and offer assistance, if needed.

Additional Suggestions:

- Before beginning a new unit, ask students to complete and post a **KWL** on the discussion board to assess background knowledge and to find out what types of things students would like to learn. At the end of the unit, they can write about what they learned.
www.eduplace.com/graphicorganizer/pdf/kwl.pdf
- Use **Brainstorming** to generate problem solving skills
<http://olc.spsd.sk.ca/DE/PD/instr/strats/brainstorming/index.html>
- Consider using some of these **Active Learning Strategies**:
<http://trc.ucdavis.edu/trc/ta/tatips/activelearning.pdf>
- Explore ideas for using Active Learning in an Online environment:
http://www.acu.edu/cte/activelearning/classroom_main.htm
- Incorporate the *Comic Creator* into your lesson:
http://www.readwritethink.org/student_mat/student_material.asp?id=21

Additional Resources

- * *Generating & Facilitating Engaging & Effective Online Discussions*
<http://tep.uoregon.edu/technology/blackboard/docs/discussionboard.pdf>
- * *Eight Ways to get Students More Involved in Online Conferences*
http://resources.blackboard.com/scholar/general/pages/ictraining/Eight_Ways_Engage_Conferences.pdf

Encourage Collaboration

Discussions should encourage interaction between students rather than individual responses from the teacher. Structure lessons to facilitate student interaction.

- Ask students for their opinions
- Encourage peer feedback
- Use critical thinking questioning strategies
- Establish a minimum posting requirement to require student participation. Encourage students to respond to each other, in addition to responding to the main prompt.
- Assure students that you are reading every post, but don't respond to each one. Instead, establish the expectation that students are the central focus of the discussion boards.

Consider This

Consider conducting your own informal survey using an online survey tool such as *Survey Monkey* to ask students what kind of activities they like. You may be surprised. The survey results could then be considered as you work to create interesting activities to motivate & engage your students.

<http://www.surveymonkey.com>

Management Tips: Common Pitfalls

Discussion Board Pitfalls

While Discussion Boards are a great tool for building community and providing a means for students to share their ideas with the group, there are some common problems and pitfalls:

- Students may misunderstand directions or may be unsure of what is expected of them.
- Student comments can become off track or go in a direction that is not supported in the lesson.
- Students may stall or put off participating in the discussion board until the last minute.
- Students may not feel a sense of connection with their classmates.
- Students may react in an inappropriate way by flaming other students or making disinterested or disrespectful comments to their peers or in response to assignments.

Tips for Avoiding Common Discussion Board Pitfalls

- * Structure online discussion board activities carefully - provide clear guidelines for posting material, how often to comment, length of comment, what information to include in the comments. Ask students to respond using specifics from their textbook readings or other sources.
- * Encourage students to contact you if they don't understand the assignment or are having technical difficulties.
- * Demonstrate ways to support arguments, cite textbook references/online resources to support a point of view in your own postings.
- * Establish guidelines for giving students credit for discussion board participation - give points for posting regularly, responding to classmates' posts, staying on topic and responding in a thoughtful manner.
- * Use small group activities to help build community and establish peer communication and connection.
- * Encourage students to interact informally. Create discussion threads or areas for personal introductions and social interaction.
- * Establish clear Netiquette guidelines and acceptable behavior policies at the very beginning. Monitor discussion boards regularly to ensure no inappropriate behavior is occurring. Contact students privately regarding inappropriate behavior and be prepared to ban individual students from posting on discussion boards if necessary.

Resources:

The Tools for Successful Online Teaching, Lisa Dawley, 2007

Wikiversity: Facilitating Online: http://en.wikiversity.org/wiki/Facilitating_Online

Appendix: Communication Plan

COMMUNICATION PLAN

The Communication Plan is useful tool to help you organize the multiple communications you encounter in your online classes. It is a fairly simple set of prescribed routine tasks you should complete once you log in to your course with the inclusion of contingency plans for common issues in discussion forums.

PART 1: ROUTINE TASKS *(add additional tasks as needed)*

Check content area discussion forums for new posts

Respond by gathering 3 or 4 student comments and do one or all of the following:

- Develop a question to shift the view.
- Generate a deeper understanding of the content being discussed.
- Develop a theme which will provide a new frame of reference.
- Highlight tensions in the dialogue.
- Model effective feedback to promote peer responses (include questions).

Check social discussion threads (include your personal introduction below)

Check private discussion forums and emails (attach student communication guide)

PART 2: CRITICAL THINKING PROMPTORS

Develop a series of questions that will encourage your students to reach higher levels of thinking within the context of your own class.

PART 3: MANAGEMENT ISSUES AND STRATEGIES (CONTINGENCY PLAN)

Sample issues include:

- Inactivity (group)
- Inactivity (individual)
- Dominant student
- Digressions
- Misconceptions
- Inappropriate Communications (flaming)