Design and facilitate online discussions for

community building and knowledge co-construction

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Discussion forum is one of the most commonly used tools to support online interaction. While online discussions hold huge potential for learning, it is also one of the most challenging issues confronting online instructors. Two of the most frequently asked questions by online instructors, including myself, are: (1) how to get students to participate in the discussion; and (2) how to prevent the discussion from remaining at the superficial level?

Reflecting on my several years of online teaching and research experiences, and based on learning theories, in this article I will share a few strategies for online discussion design and facilitation. The goal is to shed some light on how to build an online learning community where students are actively engaged in meaningful discussions to construct new knowledge collaboratively.

Online discussion <u>design</u> strategies

Ask discussion questions that provoke higher-level thinking. If you ask questions that require students to recall factual information, idea exchange is unlikely to occur because there is nothing to be "discussed". However, if you ask "why" and "how" questions, it is more

likely that students will engage in higher level idea exchanges. Use Bloom's revised taxonomy (Anderson, et al., 2001) as a guide as you design discussion questions.

Use a variety of discussion formats. If you teach a large size class, you might want to use small group discussions to help you manage the dynamics of the discussions. You can assign each group member a different role and have them rotate the roles throughout the course. You can also use student-led discussions, giving students the opportunity to take responsibility of their own learning. It is critical to model how to lead online discussions before you ask students to do so.

Design a variety of discussion activities. Don't restrict yourself to assigning readings/viewings and asking students to answer a few questions based on the materials. While reading/watching and responding is a great way to assess students' understanding, time after time students might feel bored. To keep them continuously engaged, you can introduce a variety of discussion activities whenever appropriate, e.g., the "six thinking hat" (http://www.debonogroup.com/six_thinking_hats.php), debate, role play, peer review and feedback for assignment submissions in discussion forums, and so on.

Use a variety of discussion tools. Besides discussion forums, there are many third-party web tools to host online discussions. Some examples include Voicethread for threaded or private discussions around multimedia, and Vialogues for time-stamped discussions around videos. Such tools might provide a more flexible way for discussions.

Online discussion <u>facilitation </u>strategies: the "B-D-A" framework

The "B-D-A" framework is a well-known model in reading comprehension instruction (Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2016). Based on this model, it is critical for instructors to scaffold students' reading experience using appropriate strategies before students start reading, during the reading process, and after reading. This framework can be adapted to online discussion facilitation.

__Before discussion__

- *Communicate high expectations early on and reinforce throughout the course.* If you expect students to active contribute to the discussions in meaningful ways, make this expectation explicitly clear at the beginning of the course, and remind students throughout the course. Additionally, remember that expectations are two-way. You should also make it clear to students what they can expect from you (e.g., how soon will you grade their discussions, how many times will you log in to the learning management system to answer their questions.)

- *Provide examples of high and low quality discussion posts.* The high quality examples clarify what you are looking for in students' discussions. The low quality examples let students know what is not acceptable.

- *Start with online community building.* Spend some time during the first week to start building a community of online learners (Wenger, 1998). You can have students introduce themselves or participate in icebreaker activities.

__During discussion__

- *Handle strong online discussion behaviors early on.* This might include students posting their discussions early, sharing resources, making a strong connection with the assigned readings, citing research to support their statement, and making a constructive comment on a peer's discussion post. When you notice such behaviors, give them public compliment. Your positive reinforcement not only encourages them to keep up the great work but also sets up a role model for the class to follow.

- *Encourage students to provide constructive feedback to peers.* Explain to students that constructive feedback (e.g., asking their peer a question or suggesting a solution to an issue raised by a peer) helps extend peers' thinking. Make it clear that empty responses such as "I agree" and "I like it" are not acceptable. Challenge students to overcome cultural politeness (Zheng & Spires, 2011).

- *Encourage students to reply to peers' comments.* If a student asks a question in his/her reply to a peer's discussion post but it never gets answered, the conversation will stop.

Eventually the student might be discouraged to ask questions. Let students know that it is valuable to reply to peers' question/comment. When they do so, show them your appreciation for helping keep the conversation going. When you notice a student who never reply to a peer's question/comment, remind them privately.

- *Participate in the discussions with students.* In the online environment, students easily feel isolated from the instructor. By participating in the online discussions such as replying to students' discussion posts or asking them a question, you will improve your teaching presence (Garrison, et al., 2010).

  Sometimes it might be unrealistic for you to reply to all students' discussion posts, especially if you teach a large size class. In this case, you can reply to a different sub-group of students in each forum. Alternative, if you teach a blended course, you can review all discussions to pick the top five most important questions/issues raised by students and address them in the classroom.

After discussion
- *Summarize and synthesize* the discussion to bring all pieces together.
- *Provide specific and personalized feedback to students.* Feedback is critical for learning. Feedback needs to be specific and personalized in order to be meaningful. When grading students' discussions, you can leave a comment, pointing out what they have done well and how they can improve the next time.

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