Cultivating Discussions Online

Collaborative learning communities are created when participants actively engaging with one another in acquiring knowledge. When the activities in such communities are fundamentally connected to course learning goals and structured for continuous intellectual engagement, they provide opportunities for deeper processing of course material and elaboration of the students’ existing knowledge structures. Cultivating productive discussions is critical to the learning process. This effective discussion is created through the careful and thoughtful design of questions and responses to foster student voice.

Designing a Learner-Centered Online Community:

Tips for Strategically Designing Prompts:
- Design questions directly related to your course learning goals and emphasize important concepts.
- Anticipate responses so that you can plan targeted follow-up questions or responses.
- Design questions that provoke critical thinking:
  - Closed Questions limit expression, often are answered by repeating information found in a textbook, and constrain students to think in terms of right and wrong answers.
  - Open Questions allow for expression, multiple answers or solutions and for the exploration of the unknown.
- Design prompts to encourage reflection and self-monitoring.
**Tips for Cultivating Online Discussions:**

- Welcome all voices to the forum to create an inclusive sense of community and connection. Fostering the development of trust and respect in the community members, encourages risk-taking in the exchange of ideas and the appreciation for the multiple perspectives and backgrounds brought to the forum.
- Communicate learning goals of activities and their relation to the course. When students understand the purpose of the activity, they are more engaged in the interactions.
- Pause for student self-discovery and peer interaction. Don’t always jump in with the “right” answer as this can shut down student conversation and exploration.
- Encourage discussions that invoke disciplinary thought and practice and are relevant to the learning goals.
- Use probing responses rather than authoritative statements to lead the discussion in productive directions.
- Avoid evaluative posts. Encourage and re-affirm student ideas and the process of exploration. Tie student ideas together to deepen learning.
- Keep discussions flowing by adding new ideas or conversational directions.

**Further Reading:**

- Teaching Tips “Leading Discussions” from the Sheridan Center: http://brown.edu/Administration/Sheridan_Center/teaching/teaching_tips.html
- “Improving the Use of Discussion Boards” from WPI’s Academic Technology Center, http://www.wpi.edu/Academics/ATC/Collaboratory/Idea/boards.html
- “Online Writing” from Vanderbilt University’s Center for Teaching, http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/teaching-guides/technology/online-writing/