Key Questions for Designing Online Discussions

1. **What should students gain through participation in the discussion?**

Start by establishing your learning objectives for the online discussion and identifying how they relate to the course goals. Communicate these objectives and their relation to the course to the students to motivate them to participate and monitor their own progress. Remember to consider how you will determine if the discussion is successful and students are learning.

**Example Goals:**
- Expose student misconceptions and questions
- Situate abstract tasks into authentic context
- Identify key-concepts in a reading or practice close reading
- Extend or apply issues developed in the course
- Prepare for an in-class discussion; e.g., students can reflect on the readings, answer simple questions, solve simple problems, review concepts, or compare experiences

2. **How will you start the online discussion?**

Introduce the discussion with a prompt that lets the students understand your expectations, their role in the discussion and the basis for the discussion (e.g., readings, in-class discussion, lecture material, personal opinion, new resources).

**Tips for Designing the Discussion Prompt:**
- Welcome all voices to the forum to create an inclusive sense of community and foster the development of trust and respect in the community members.
- 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.
- Encourage reflection and self-monitoring; e.g., ask students to create summaries.
- Invoke disciplinary thought and practice to provide an authentic experience for students.
- Establish ground rules; e.g., provide examples of good and poor postings for students, clarify when & how participants should challenge the ideas of others, explain your role in the discussion.

**Example Prompt**:
- Each student will contribute to the weekly class blog, posting an approximately 500-word response to the week’s readings. There are a number of ways to approach these open-ended posts: consider the reading in relation to its historical or theoretical context; write about an aspect of the day’s reading that you don’t understand, or something that jars you; formulate an insightful question or two about the reading and then attempt to answer your own questions; or respond to another student’s post, building upon it, disagreeing with it, or re-thinking it. In any case, strive for thoughtfulness and nuance. To ensure that everyone has a chance to read the blog before class, post your response by midnight the evening before class.

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1 Adapted from *Engaging Students in Discussion Online* by the University of Washington (Teaching & Learning Bulletin, Vol 6(2), 2002). http://www.washington.edu/teaching/files/2012/12/OnlineDiscussion.pdf

3. **How will you facilitate the online discussion?**

The instructor’s presence online emphasizes the value of the discussion, and helps students to retain interest in the discussion and clarity of its purpose. Therefore, consider periodically responding to individual postings or main themes in the discussion.

**Tips for Sustaining Online Discussions:**
- Encourage risk-taking in the exchange of ideas because the exploration of understandings and misunderstandings is fundamental to the construction of new knowledge.
- Encourage students to draw on their unique backgrounds and support multiple perspectives because the exploration of different viewpoints fosters critique, insight and understanding.
- Anticipate responses so that you can plan targeted follow-up questions or responses.

**Tips for the Process of Online Facilitation:**
- 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.
- Use probing responses rather than authoritative statements to lead the discussion in productive directions and avoid evaluative posts to encourage student ideas and the process of exploration.
- Tie student ideas together and revisit past contributions to incorporate them in new discussions.
- Asking students to clarify or elaborate on their ideas, encourage them to react to and build on the comments of others, and add new ideas or directions to the conversation.
- Connect ideas discussed online to the rest of the course, e.g., answer questions raised online during class, connect topics from the online discussion to in-class discussions, etc.

**Example Responses to Students’ Posts:**
- “What additional evidence is there to support your thinking about X?”
- “What assumptions are we making about X? How would our interpretation be different with an alternate set of assumptions?”
- “What don’t we know about X, and how might that help us consider this issue another way?”
- “Can you articulate your point another way or provide an example to clarify it?”
- “How else might you interpret X?”

4. **Will you assess the discussion?**

Identify how the discussion board is connected to the course grade, if you will grade student posts, and how the discussions might prepare students for other graded course assignments & assessments.

**Tips for Assessing Online Discussion Boards:**
- Establish clear criteria for posts; e.g., share models or a rubric with the students.
- Provide feedback on student posts; e.g., highlight good examples in class or online.
- Collect student feedback; e.g., survey students to find out how the discussion is contributing to their learning.

**Example Rubric for Discussion Posts***:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The posting(s) integrates multiple viewpoints and weaves both class readings and other participants’ postings into their discussion of the subject. It integrates examples with explanations or analysis and demonstrates awareness of its own limitations or implications.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The posting(s) builds upon the ideas of another participant or two, and digs deeper into the question(s) posed by the instructor. It is mostly description or summary, without consideration of alternative perspectives, and few connections are made between ideas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>A single posting that does not interact with or incorporate the ideas of other participants’ comments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>A simple &quot;me too&quot; comment that neither expands the conversation nor demonstrates any degree of reflection by the student.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>No comment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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***From WPI’s Academic Technology Center, ‘Improving the Use of Discussion Boards’: