DIGITAL PEDAGOGY SERIES: “ONLINE DISCUSSIONS”

SIX TIPS FOR ONLINE DISCUSSIONS

1. Provide structure
   Discussion forums, especially in very large classes, can sometimes become confusing or even a little chaotic. Creating a simple yet clear and logical forum structure before class begins will make them more usable and, consequently, more conducive to sustained conversations. Consider organizing forums by unit, topic, or some other sensible measure.

2. Set clear expectations and policies in advance
   You can help set the stage for civil and respectful discussions by creating clear expectations for student behavior. Establish some basic rules of forum etiquette and incorporate them into your syllabus or course guidelines. Explain the consequences of uncivil, antisocial, or hostile behavior.

3. Remain consistently active and visible
   When instructors and teaching staff participate frequently in online discussions, the quality of student participation often improves dramatically. Taking part in the conversation demonstrates how much you value it; it also helps to model engagement with the ideas of others. Try to check in regularly, even if you only have time to post one or two very brief responses.

4. Respond quickly
   Students often use discussion forums to pose questions or report problems, and waiting days for a response can be frustrating. While other students often try to help their classmates, nothing beats a direct response from the instructor or teaching assistant. If you post a prompt or create a new forum thread, be sure to respond to the discussions that ensue. Instructor-initiated discussions will quickly die out if you don’t remain involved.

5. Moderate with a light touch but intervene when necessary
   Discussion forums constitute a vital social and intellectual community. Most of the time this community is self-regulating, but on occasion something goes wrong. Be prepared to intervene quickly if antisocial behavior threatens to derail productive conversations, but try to keep such interventions narrowly focused. Deleting an entire thread because of a single inappropriate comment is an extreme response that will do more harm than good.

6. Allow yourself to let go
   Discussion forums provide students with spaces that are, in many ways, their own. They inhabit and actively shape them through their participation, and you can’t control everything that takes place there. Instead of seeing this as a disadvantage, consider online discussions a flexible, open environment where you and your students can meet on a more equal footing.