

Facilitating Discussions across Time and Space: Identifying Characteristics of Asynchronous Online Discussions

Classroom discussions and asynchronous online discussions differ in patterns of participation and degree of critical thinking exhibited. In classroom discussions, the instructor is often speaking more than anyone else and only a subset of students contribute to the conversation spontaneously. However, in online discussions, student contributions dominate the discussion and include nearly everyone.

In the classroom discussion, the instructor often validates or corrects the student; in the online discussion, the instructor might ask probing questions to focus the student on a misconception or point to another student's perspective as a way of guiding the student toward self-correction. This approach also allows the conversation to continue and potentially move in a different direction. Providing corrective responses in the online discussion tends to shut the conversation down. Of course, there will be times when correction is needed, but in most cases, guidance from you and comments of peers will lead them to where they need to be in their thinking. However, students in asynchronous online discussions tend to respond to students directly and sometimes even serve as tutors to one another. Instructors tend to be more peripheral in the conversation and usually serve more of a facilitative role than an evaluative one.

Since the online discussion takes place asynchronously, students can take time to reflect on peer comments and to plan more thoughtful and analytical responses in return. It is therefore necessary to plan for conversations to take at least 5 days, but allotting up to 10 days can be even better for encouraging deep exploration of content, challenging previously held ideas, reflecting on the perspectives of others, and refining learning.

Some instructors use the online discussion as a space for learning and others use it for assessment of learning. As a space for learning, taking risks and asking questions about confusing aspects of the content are encouraged. The focus is on the process of learning, noting a lack of understanding, seeking assistance, finding new content to share, summarizing information, integrating ideas, and so forth. As a space for assessment, demonstrating understanding of the content is focal. The focus is on attainment of the objectives for the module and showing proficiency.

As an instructor, it is important for you to be sure how you want to use the forum so that you grade it accordingly. Criteria for a learning forum will include more focus on process than content, whereas grading criteria for a forum set up to assess learning would focus primarily or entirely on content.