

## **Designing and Managing Effective Activities and Discussions during Synchronous Online Class Meetings**

Instructors who have success with face-to-face discussions and activities can often engage students with loosely structured prompts, such as “What did you feel was the most interesting part of the reading?” or “Get into groups and decide how you would respond to this problem.” In a synchronous online discussion, these kinds of loosely structured prompts, combined with the sense of distance students experience in a remote learning environment, frequently result in discussions falling flat or students struggling to organize a group response during activities. If we want students to interact in a synchronous online class meeting, we need to provide more structure to guide that interaction. In this short guide you will find the following: steps to design effective structured synchronous discussions and activities, a brief discussion of the advantages for using a structured approach to synchronous discussions and activities, examples of effective discussion and activity prompts in a variety of disciplines, and links to detailed instructions on how to use facilitative Zoom tools.

### **Steps for a structured synchronous discussion—students work individually and then share responses in whole-class discussion**

1. *Give students a challenging prompt or question that requires them to make a focused decision.* Short cases, scenarios describing real-world situations, or conceptual problems can work very well here because you can ask students to use what they are learning in the course. You do not want to use questions that simply require students to recall or look up information. The prompt should require students to choose from a limited set of options, all or most of which are within the realm of possibility. Sometimes, questions might have a right answer, and other times, there may be “better” answers. (See the examples below.)
2. *Ask students to respond to the question or prompt on their own, and ask them to commit to an answer by writing it down.* You might also ask them to write a one-sentence explanation of why they chose their answer using the concepts they have been learning in class or reading about. This step is very important because you are ensuring that all students engage in the thinking you want to see. Let students know that they will be asked to share and justify their choices.
3. *Ask all students to share their responses to the prompt at the same time.* You can do this with or without technology. Here are some examples of how you can have students report out their answers:
  - Have them post their responses in the Zoom Chat.
  - Have them write their answers on a piece of paper and hold it up in front of their video camera so everyone can see it. This works best if you and your students have Zoom set to Gallery View where everyone’s video is on the same screen.
  - If you have become very comfortable with the technology, you can have them respond to a Poll you have created in Zoom.
4. *Note the patterns of responses you see and articulate this for students.* Now you are ready to call on students and ask them to share their thinking about each of the options. For example, you might say, “This is an interesting set of responses. It looks like C was a fairly popular choice, but several of you also chose A and B. Ariana, I see that you chose A. Can you tell us why you thought that was the best option? What ideas from the reading helped you make your decision?” You will want to call on several students that represent a range of responses.

5. *Provide closure for the discussion.* After you have heard explanations for all the answer choices, offer a recap that helps students trace the trajectory of the discussion, and then offer additional insight about which responses were more on target than others. You may, at this point, want to offer some additional concepts that might shape their thinking in a focused, 10-minute mini-lecture.

### **Steps for a structured synchronous discussion—students work individually, share in small groups, and share group responses in whole-class discussion**

1. *Give students a challenging prompt or question that requires them to make a focused decision.* Short cases, scenarios describing real-world situations, or conceptual problems can work very well here because you can ask students to use what they are learning in the course. You do not want to use questions that are simply matters of recall or that students can simply look up answers to. The prompt should require students to choose from a limited set of options, all or most of which are within the realm of possibility. Sometimes, questions might have a right answer, and other times, there may be “better” answers. (See the examples below.)
2. *Ask students to respond to the question or prompt on their own, and ask them to commit to an answer by writing it down.* You might also ask them to write a one-sentence explanation of why they chose the answer they did using the concepts they have been learning in class or reading about. This step is very important because you are ensuring that all students engage in the thinking you want to see. Let students know that they will be asked to share and justify their choices. If you want to make sure that students really commit to their individual answers, you can ask them to share those in a private Zoom Chat with you.  
Alternately, if you have become very comfortable with the technology, you can have present your question or prompt to students as a Poll you have created in Zoom; students’ individual responses to the Poll question require them to consider the question and commit to an answer.
3. *Give students instructions to work together in small groups.* After students have made their individual choices, tell them that they will be placed into small groups. They will share their individual choices with their group, and then each group will be asked to come to agreement on what their group answer will be. Make sure you clearly explain that their task is to share and explain their individual answers and then to work together to come to a single answer that they will share and defend when they come back to the whole-class meeting. Tell them to also decide who will represent their group when the class comes back together after working in groups.
4. *Put students into small groups using Breakout Rooms in Zoom.* Zoom allows you to create Breakout Rooms and randomly assign students, or you can assign students to those rooms if you want to choose which students work together. You can briefly enter each Breakout Room while students are meeting to make sure they are on track.
5. *Bring students out of Breakout Rooms.* When you bring students out of Breakout Rooms, have a representative from the team share their choice using the Chat function of Zoom (for a large class with 4 or more groups) or by calling on groups (for a smaller class with 2 or 3 groups).
6. *Note the patterns of responses you see and articulate this for students.* Now you are ready to call on the groups and ask them to share their thinking about each of the options. For example, you might say, “This is an interesting set of responses. It looks like C was a fairly popular choice, but several of you also chose A and B. Ariana, I see that your group chose A. Can you tell us why your group thought that was the best option? What ideas from the reading helped you make your

decision? Were there any important disagreements as you were trying to come to consensus?” Make sure to ask all groups to share their rationales and highlight important differences in thinking or disagreements that surfaced.

7. *Provide closure for the discussion.* After you have heard explanations for all the answer choices, offer a recap that helps students trace the trajectory of the discussion, and then offer additional insight about which responses were more on target than others. You may, at this point, want to offer some additional concepts that might shape their thinking in a focused, 10-minute mini-lecture.

### **The advantages of structured activities and discussions**

While we might think that structured activities and discussions would constrain interaction, in fact the opposite is the case—they actually have several key benefits for instructors and students, especially in online settings.

- ***All students can participate.*** Face-to-face discussions often begin with an instructor posing a question, and student volunteers respond. While this can create what feels like a lively back-and-forth between some students and the instructor, typically only a few students really engage in these discussions. A more focused, structured discussion prompt can help ensure that all students know how to enter into the discussion, and it can also help the instructor feel comfortable calling on students rather than waiting for volunteers. When we require all students to individually commit to an answer in Zoom Chat or Poll, we guarantee greater participation when students share answers with the whole class or in smaller groups.
- ***The discussion has clear parameters.*** When we pose open-ended questions, we may find it difficult to manage the discussion that follows because it can be hard to predict how students will construe the questions and how they will respond, since they may come up with answers we had never anticipated. Open-ended questions can be unproductively difficult for students, too, because they must generate ideas; students spend a great deal of mental energy coming up with an answer, rather than coming up with reasoning for that answer. A more focused, structured discussion or activity prompt gives students a limited number of options to choose from, allows us to determine where the discussion will begin, and productively focuses discussion on the factors and issues we want students to work with.
- ***You learn how students are thinking.*** When we ask focused, challenging questions in this format, we create an opportunity for students to articulate and explain their thinking because they can put their energy into justifying a choice instead of generating an answer. This means that our discussion is less about “right” or “wrong” answers and more about how students are (or aren’t) making sense of what they are learning. This provides us with valuable information that can guide our teaching decisions. When we spend time asking students about and then analyzing their thinking, they also realize that the point of discussion and activities is to examine their own reasoning. This can change the way they prepare for class and engage in our courses.

### **Examples of Effective Online Activity and Discussion prompts**

- *From a social work class:* Read this scenario, which describes a problem a family is facing and three possible ways their social worker could respond to this problem. Write down your answer and

a one-sentence explanation of why you think this is the best choice the social worker could make. I'll give you one minute to make your decision and then ask you to be share your choice and be prepared to defend it.

- *From a literature class:* In the story you read for homework, you may have noticed that the author often compares the main character to a bird, either directly (“she felt as free as a bird”, p. 17) or more indirectly (“she believed she was ready to spread her wings”, p. 21). What does this comparison tell us about the character? Choose from the three explanations below. Write down your answer. Be prepared to share your choice and defend it.
- *From a math class:* Below is a partially-solved algebraic equation and four possible next steps you could take to finish solving the problem. Based on what we have been learning about equations, decide which is the correct next step. Write down your answer. Be prepared to share and defend your choice.
- *From a chemistry class:* Analyze the following four student descriptions of the relationship between CFCs and ozone. Based on your understandings of the readings you did for this week, which is the best? Write down your answer. Be prepared to share and defend your choice. (Prompt found [here](#).)

### **How to find detailed instructions about Zoom tools that facilitate effective activities and discussions**

You can find tutorials about using Breakout Rooms [here](#); if you plan to use this feature, it would be a good idea to do a practice run with some colleagues before doing it with students.

You can find tutorials about using Polls [here](#); again, it's a good idea to do a practice run with colleagues before using Polls with students.

You can find information about Chat [here](#); this is not a complex feature of Zoom, but it doesn't hurt to practice giving instructions on how to use it with colleagues before you ask students to use it.