Developing a Structured Online Activity or Discussion

Many of the interactions that take place in a face-to-face class happen spontaneously or develop organically. When these interactions take place online, whether in asynchronous or synchronous learning, our guidance needs to be more structured. In asynchronous learning, we aren't in the same place as our students, and they aren't all interacting with us or with each other at the same time. In synchronous learning, we can't easily listen in on conversations nor can we always field questions easily. This means that students need well-structured prompts to guide how and when they will interact with content and respond to each other or to us. To make sure that interactions are productive, use the following five strategies to structure their work.

1. **Structure a prompt with purpose.** Make sure that the work that you give students moves them toward the kind of thinking you want them to be doing in your class. Then make sure they understand why they are doing this work by interacting with each other and what they should learn from the experience.

2. **Structure a prompt that gets all students thinking at a high level.** Give students a clear, meaningful focus for their work. Instead of assigning tasks or discussion prompts that allow them to simply look up something in their readings or recall information, require students to think at higher levels by asking them to analyze, apply, or evaluate. To help them get a toe-hold in a challenging task or discussion, provide parameters for their thinking by asking students to make a choice or decision about a case, scenario, or problem. This ensures that even students who are struggling have a starting point for their thinking. Give students this prompt or question (with more than one reasonable answer) and ask them not only to give their answer but also to explain their thinking and how they used course concepts to arrive at that answer. Finally, make sure that students must respond to the task or prompt individually first, before seeing or hearing others' answers. This ensures that all students interact with the prompt fully. To formalize individual thinking, have students commit to their individual ideas by requiring them to write their ideas down on paper or in a Blackboard Journal or Discussion Board.

3. **Structure productive synchronous conversations.** Give students clear expectations for how you want them to work together, detailing what they should do in breakout rooms for example, or how they should work individually or in small groups before the synchronous class meeting. Students will have good ideas about how they can work together using a variety of platforms (text, facetime, zoom, etc.). Make sure students know that they are responsible for doing individual thinking before they share their ideas with a small group of peers or with the whole class. It is crucial that you collect two or three responses from groups or individuals to help students see the trends in their conversation and find important disagreements. Focus this part of the conversation on uncovering how students are thinking and do not jump directly to revealing the best answer.

4. **Structure productive asynchronous conversations.** Give students clear expectations for an effective discussion board post. Use a prompt that requires an individual response and channels that thinking productively using the structure of a focused decision within defined parameters. Tell students how to prepare for the discussion (should they review text or video, read a case, etc.), which concepts or principles they are to draw on in their post, the length and structure of their post, the deadline for posting, and that they will not be able to see others' posts until

they've posted their ideas. With this guidance, students will know how to focus both their writing and their efforts.

5. **Structure productive asynchronous replies.** Give students clear expectations for replying to other students' post by using a prompt that guides them through an authentic interaction. Structure a disciplinary exchange that focuses students on the thinking you want them to do in the form that it should take. Require students to find a classmate's post that extends or differs from their initial post; guide how students will work with their classmate's post to extend their own initial thinking; again, provide clarity about length, format, and deadline for the response.

Now that you have read and considered these five key strategies, review the following example to see what these strategies look like in action.

Examples of Effective Online Activity and Discussion prompts

<u>Examples of activity or discussion prompts that aim high, ensure individual contributions, and allow all students to participate by providing a path into disciplinary thinking</u>
- "Which of the following three weather events is most likely given this cloud formation? Write your answer down and be ready to defend it. I'll give you a minute to make your decision. Then you will share your responses."
- "Study the painting in this slide and decide how representative it is of the Baroque period based on your readings. Give the painting a score on a scale from 0-10, with 0 meaning definitely not representative and 10 meaning a perfect example of a Baroque painting. Write down your individual score and be ready to explain it using principles from the readings. I'll give you about two minutes to come up with your score. Then your will share your ideas."

<u>Examples of prompts that ensure a productive synchronous conversation</u>
- "Okay, let's hear from Tran. That's interesting. Why did you answer that? Okay, let's hear from someone who had another answer and hear other ways to analyze the cloud formations. I want to understand your thinking process."
- "I can see all of you in Gallery View. So on the count of three I want you to hold up your scores and keep them up. I want to hear from someone with a low score, someone with a midrange score, and someone with a high score. How did you come up with your scores and what ideas were you drawing on to do so?"

<u>Examples of prompts that ensure a productive asynchronous conversation</u>
- "Watch the video twice, and take notes about what you are seeing in relation to the three forces described on pages x-x in your textbook. By Wednesday at 11:59 pm post a two paragraph response in which you explain which of the three forces plays the biggest role in causing the cloud formations you see. In the first paragraph use two details from the video to make your claim. In the second paragraph explain why the force you chose is more of a factor than the other two forces. Provide at least two reasons for your claim. You will not be able to see others' ideas until you post your paragraphs."
- "There are five paintings for you to view in folder x. I want you to choose two to include in a new exhibition of Caravaggio's work at the Tate Gallery in London. The museum wants one highly representative of Baroque features and one that is unusual with regard to the period. Decide which two you will recommend and write a two paragraph recommendation with one paragraph dedicated to each of your two choices. You must have at least two reasons for recommending the painting and use principles from our readings and discussions to justify your choices. Please write formally as if you were actually writing to the museum as an art historian. Post your recommendation by Wednesday at 11:59. You won't see others' work until you post."

<u>Examples of prompts that structure productive asynchronous student replies to initial posts</u>
- "By Friday at 11:59, respond to one classmate's post. Find a post that has a different answer from your own. Create a one paragraph response in which you explain your thinking and persuade your classmate that your answer is better OR create a one paragraph response in which you explain how your thinking has changed because of your classmate's answer and why you were initially confused."

- "By Friday at 11:59, respond to one classmate's post. Find a post that extends or completes your initial thinking in a new way. Create a one paragraph response in which you reply to that post by pointing out the ways in which your classmate's answer presents a clearer, more thorough, or more accurate understanding of the task. Be sure to identify the concepts or principles that they have helped you understand more fully and show how your thinking is now different."
- "By Friday at 11:59, respond to two classmate's posts that present different perspectives. You will post your response under both of their initial posts: use course principles to try and reconcile their different perspectives. Your response should be one paragraph long and should have a central idea either that their ideas are actually compatible or that one of their ideas should be adopted by the other.