

Teaching with Discussions Online

If you've designed a course that involves frequent in-class discussions, you most likely have class meetings with a great deal of interaction with and among students. It can be daunting to think about how to replicate that experience online, but it can be done.

Consider what you have students do in your face-to-face class

First, consider how you use student discussions in your face-to-face classes. Ask yourself these questions:

- Do students primarily engage in small-group or whole-class discussions?
- What do you want students to learn from discussions? Do you want them to hear and consider different perspectives? Compare their thinking to others? Develop a deeper understanding of the content by using course concepts and articulating their thinking?

Depending on your goals, you may structure and facilitate discussions in different ways.

After you have identified who drives discussions in your class, whether students work in small groups or as a whole class, and what your goals for discussion are, you are ready to plan for moving these discussions online. Below, we provide two discussion formats that can help you meet your learning goals using Blackboard Discussions.

Structure your discussions for an online environment

While we often think of class discussions as requiring face-to-face or real-time interaction, there are ways to structure discussions that don't require students to all be "in class" at the same time. The examples below demonstrate structures that can allow students to engage in productive, meaningful discussions without having to meet in real time. You can choose a structure based on the goal of your discussions.

Discussions that introduce students to multiple perspectives or require them to compare their thinking to others

1. Decide whether students will have discussion in small groups or as a whole class. Using small groups requires you to do some organization on the front end by putting students in groups, but having a discussion forum that includes posts from an entire class can become overwhelming, both for you and for your students.
2. Create a clear description of what students will be asked to do in the discussion and what purpose the discussion will serve. In face-to-face classes, we often give students this context verbally; it's important to make sure that students still get this information in an online class.
3. Have students respond to a question or prompt that will raise disagreement or debate among students. If you want different ways of thinking to emerge during a discussion, it's important to make sure that you pose a question that requires them to do more than simply regurgitate information. Require students not only to respond to the question or prompt but also to explain their reasoning. Structure the activity so that students must first post an individual response. The Discussions tool in Blackboard works well for this kind of interaction. (See the Strategies section below for more information about this option.)

4. A day or two later, have students return to the discussion and carefully read what their classmates have posted. Then have them choose one of their peer's posts that presents a new or different perspective from their own and respond to it. You might require students to do one of the following:
 - Respond to a post that extends or completes their initial thinking in a new way. Students might reply to that post by pointing out the ways in which their classmate's answer uses course principles in a different way than they had originally understood them.
 - Respond to a post that contradicts their thinking. Students should use course principles to either defend their position in relation to this post or to change their position in relation to his post.
 - Respond to two posts that seem to present different perspectives and use course principles to try and reconcile these perspectives.

Discussions that develop deeper understanding of course content

1. Decide whether students will have discussion in small groups or as a whole class. Using small groups requires you to do some organization on the front end by putting students in groups, but having a discussion forum that includes posts from an entire class can become overwhelming, both for you and for your students.
2. Create a clear description of what students will be asked to do in the discussion and what purpose the discussion will serve. In face-to-face classes, we often give students this context verbally; it's important to make sure that students still get this information in an online class.
 1. Have students respond to a question or prompt that requires them to use a concept from the course to analyze a situation, solve a problem, evaluate a solution, etc. If you want students to think in new ways about the content during a discussion, it's important to make sure that you give them a prompt that requires them to do more than simply recall that content. Require students not only to respond to the question or prompt but also to explain their reasoning. Structure the activity so that students must first post an individual response. The Discussions tool in Blackboard works well for this kind of interaction. (See the Strategies section below for more information about this option.)
 3. A day or two later, have students return to the discussion and carefully read what their classmates have posted. Then have them choose one or two of their peer's posts that presents a different use of the concept. You might require students to do one of the following:
 - Respond to a post that extends or completes their initial thinking in a new way. Students might reply to that post by pointing out the ways in which their classmate's answer presents a clearer, more thorough, or more accurate understanding of the course content.
 - Respond to a post that contradicts their thinking. Students should use course principles to either defend their position in relation to this post or to change their position in relation to his post.
 - Respond to two posts that seem to present different perspectives and use course principles to try and reconcile these perspectives.

Strategies to make the most of online discussions

- **Place students in groups to ensure richer interaction.** Students tend to interact more productively online when they work with a permanent, small group of students. This recreates the intimacy of the classroom. Groups of 5-7 are ideal.
- **Use “Post first” format to ensure multiple perspectives.** If you are using the Discussions tool in Blackboard, you can ensure that students post their original ideas first so they aren’t swayed by others’ thinking and change their answers. When you set up a discussion forum in Blackboard, be sure to select “Participants must create a thread in order to view other threads in this forum.” This means that students can only see others’ responses after they’ve posted their own.
- **Make instructions to students clear.** Take the time upfront to describe the structure and length of the response you want and require students to use course principles in their responses. We often give these kinds of instructions verbally in a face-to-face class, but when we teach online we need to provide them in writing. For example, you might write instructions like this: “Before you post to this discussion, you need to complete the assigned reading. After you have read carefully, it’s time to respond. In a two-paragraph response, present your analysis of the short scenario described below using a key concept [you may identify the concept here] from the reading. Be sure to use details from the readings and sure to articulate the key concept in your own words.” The detail you provide in the prompt will ensure that students do the kind of work you expect.
- **Structure student-to-student responses.** Be sure to tell students precisely how you want them to respond to one another in the online discussion. Without this direction, students will often revert to friendly but unproductive responses. Focus students’ feedback on particular perspectives (require them to find something they disagree about) or principles from the course that you want them to wrestle with in their discussions. Again, give them a sense of how long this response should be and what structure it should have (for example, one paragraph with two specific examples).
- **Require students to reflect on how their thinking is changing.** Students’ learning increases when we require them to look back over a discussion or a series of discussions and analyze their own learning. After they have engaged in discussions, require students to articulate how their thinking has changed in a short analytic reflection that can be shared with you.
- **Respond to students’ work.** When we ask students to engage in discussions online, they don’t see our reactions to that work. We are no longer giving students immediate feedback as their thinking emerges or redirecting the discussion in real time. While your response is important, it is not feasible to give feedback to every single post in a forum. Instead, you can read through a discussion and post a written, auditory, or video summary response that captures the areas where students made some important progress and where students struggled. You don’t need to refer to individual students here, but rather point to ideas that emerged in the discussion.
- **Pace student work.** Unlike a face-to-face classroom, you can’t ask students to complete their work in a discussions at one sitting. Have students post responses to an discussion prompt one day and then come back to that prompt and respond to classmates’ posts a

day or two later. On a third day, they may sum up their ideas and how they've developed.

Helpful tools

When you've identified the kinds of discussions you want students to do and the level of interaction you want them to have (with others or with the course materials individually), you can find Blackboard tools that help you the most. Here is a short guide:

- You can facilitate discussions in Blackboard using [Discussions](#) or [VoiceThread](#).
- The [Groups](#) tool allows you to put students in small groups.
- The [Journals](#) tool allows you to create a space for students to reflect on how their thinking is changing.

Challenges you may face—and how to respond

- **You may be faced with more student writing than you're used to seeing.** Students need to feel that you are reading their work, so be sure to look over discussions and respond with feedback that shows you have read and analyzed their thinking. This doesn't mean responding to individual posts on discussion boards: it's more important that you demonstrate to students that you have read and diagnosed their thinking. Share with them what the trends were across discussion boards and highlight a few really insightful posts or responses.
- **You may worry that you need to grade in order to motivate participation in online discussions.** It is helpful to provide a simple point system that communicates to students the value of discussions for their learning but also as a place to experiment and take risks. If the stakes are too high, students will work for right answers and not explore their thinking or the thinking of their peers (which is the whole point of discussions). If the prompts you've created have two or three parts, simply look for those parts and assign points if the components are there. When your prompt is specific enough, it will require the complexity of thinking that you want students to aim for.

Get support

- As you consider your options for teaching with lectures online, we encourage you to get support by [consulting with ITLAL](#). We look forward to working with you.
- If you need detailed help with features in Blackboard or VoiceThread, email askIT@albany.edu or submit a [Help Request](#).