



Eight Ways to Get Students More Engaged in Online Conferencing

A Blackboard Learning Services Tip Sheet

Introduction

Dr. William Klemm from Texas A&M University recommends following these eight guidelines to create a strong collaborative learning environment in your course discussion board. These methods increase both the quality and quantity of student participation.

1. Require Participation

Don't let it be optional. Set aside a portion of the grade allocation for participation in the online discussions. Tell the students that they must post x-number of items each week or for each topic. Critics will say that this approach does nothing to ensure quality of input. But it at least gets the students engaged, and hopefully, once they get caught up in the activity, they will strive to improve the relevance and quality of their work, because now they are on display. No longer can they hide. For many students, it is more embarrassing to make public postings that have no value. As another incentive for quality work, the teacher should grade on quality of the postings. That is highly subjective, but no more so than grading term papers or essays.

2. Form Learning Teams

The advantages of so-called cooperative or collaborative learning are abundantly documented. Collaborative learning can occur just as well via computer conferencing. Moreover, asynchronous conferencing overcomes the schedule-coordination problems that plague typical face-to-face learning teams. The advantage for promoting online interaction is that learning teams should bond and thus make each student in the group want to do his or her share. Helping students learn how to acquire team spirit is important in and of itself, but it also provides students with powerful incentive to become more engaged in online conference activity.

3. Make the Activity Interesting

If it is a discussion topic, make it one that students have a reason to get engaged in. Appeal to their life experiences, vested interests, and ambitions. It might even be a good idea to let the students create some of the topics, especially if you provide an overall academic framework to guide them where you want them to go. If it is a group-created paper or project, let the students pick the subject within the bounds of the academic objectives. Surely, you want more than just "discussion" of student opinions (Item 6).

4. Don't Settle for Just Opinions

Everybody has opinions. They are like knee jerk reflexes, occurring with little thought once they have been formed. Thus, it is not surprising that many classroom discussion groups online are dominated by opinion messages, rather than rigorous analysis and creative thought. Teachers should insist that opinions alone are not sufficient. They must be supported with data and rational discourse and even re-examined in light of what others in the group are thinking.

5. Structure the Activity

Give students guideposts to help them think of things to say that are academically meaningful. Choice of topics has a great deal of influence here. Topics should be organized around an academic theme that serves course objectives. Topics should not be so open-ended that students digress. You can go further by creating activities that are best performed in a structured way. For example, debates can be structured by requiring students to post a position, to which others respond with pro or con supporting arguments, followed by critique of the arguments. Brainstorming can be structured by having students first generate a list of alternatives; re-think the list by creating new ordering, structure, or relationships, systematically evaluating each item to produce a "short list" of viable alternatives; and then reaching consensus decision on the best choices, followed by prioritization.

6. Require a Deliverable

To extend structuring to its logical conclusion, you should require students to do something besides just express ideas and opinions. They should produce a deliverable from the conference. This kind of activity capitalizes on all the advantages of constructivist theory, which holds that students learn best when they have to integrate, synthesize and apply information by creating a deliverable piece of work. Such a deliverable can include idea generation and analysis, decisions, plans and designs, proposals, case studies, problem solution, research projects, term papers or reports, portfolios or role -playing.

7. Know What You're Looking For and Involve Yourself

Irrespective of the specific learning activity, the teacher should know what quality work is and should intervene as the work is being developed to steer students in the right direction. When the teacher participates in a conference, providing extensive critique, feedback, and encouragement, students cannot help but become more involved.

8. Use Peer Grading

Tell students at the beginning of the conference that at the end of the activity they will be asked to rate each other on the value of each person's contribution. This can be a powerful incentive for students to do quality work in the conference. However, most of the students that I encounter do not like to grade each other. This is especially a problem if they have bonded as a result of operating in a learning team. In that case, they may want to give everybody an A, even when some students made distinctly greater contributions to the conference. Problems also arise by having them rank each other, because they might think that rank 1 gets an A, rank 2 gets a B, and the lower ranked students will get a failing grade. One possible solution is to have students grade the contributions of another group, which also gives them added learning experiences. Another possibility is to structure the ratings so that they don't translate directly into A, B, C, etc. The teacher might say, for example, that everyone will get an A, B, or C for the peer helping portion of the final grade, depending on the peer helping ratings. The ratings might be in the form of "superior, good, fair, poor," or some equivalent. Another possibility is to have each student name the one student in the group who helped them the most. Students who are named more than once might get bonus points added to the final grade. A similar approach could be used with a ranking scheme. Students with the best rank get the most bonus points on the final grade.

Conclusion

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