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Threaded Discussions: They're Not Just for Controversial or Ambiguous Issues

Instructors use threaded discussions to engage students, create community, and encourage exploration of open-ended questions that address the important issues of a discipline. But are threaded discussions appropriate for all online courses, even skills-based courses that don't seem to have controversial or ambiguous issues to explore? Rebecca Arbisi, chair of the business department at State Fair Community College in Missouri, says they are, and she uses threaded discussions in all of her online courses, including skills-based courses on database management and microcomputer applications.

"I try to make [threaded discussions] really relevant to current events or with students' personal lives. I think that's important because when I can get them to bring in information that's relevant to them, they remember it better and it's more interesting to the rest of the class. Discussion is a big part of all of my classes. I stress to the faculty [in the online course introduction to teaching online] that discussion is the heart and soul of any online class because there are so many things it provides. If you don't

have [discussion] in the course, it could be considered more like a correspondence class because there's not the interaction, and interaction is so important to creating that community of learners, to getting the students comfortable with expressing their thoughts," Arbisi says.

Coming up with discussion questions in skills-based courses is perhaps more difficult than in other courses. The trick is to ask questions that get students engaged while remaining relevant to the course content. "I have found that if I'm creative I can come up with things that are not only relevant but that help students see the importance of why they are learning the skill," Arbisi says.

Expectations

Arbisi will typically have two discussion forums per week in her skills-based courses (compared to four per week in her other courses). She begins her online courses by establishing participation expectations. Each student is required to post one initial posting on each forum and at least one response to

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TIPS FROM THE PROS

Four Ways to Improve Discussion Forums

Rebecca Arbisi, chair of the business department at State Fair Community College in Missouri, offers the following tips for improving the quality of threaded discussions:

- **Model good communication.** If students do not meet your expectations for proper grammar, capitalization, etc., email the individual student privately to express those concerns.
- **Although proper grammar is important, do not overemphasize it to the point that you intimidate students and make them reluctant to post.** "If you're teaching an English class, and grammar is part of the course, [you need to emphasize good writing], but in most classes, you need to focus on what students are saying, not on how they say it. Don't expect that just because these are Web students that they will have wonderful English skills," Arbisi says. Sometimes when a student writes poorly in an online forum, the other students in

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Nine Tips for Creating a Hybrid Course

Most instructors supplement their face-to-face courses with some online materials such as online syllabi, handouts, PowerPoint slides, and course-related Web links. All of these can add to the learning experience, but they are merely a start to making full use of the learning potential of the online environment in either a hybrid or totally online course. Although there is no standard definition of a hybrid course, one characteristic that makes a course a hybrid is the use of the Web for interaction rather than merely as a means of posting materials, says LaTonya Motley, instructional technology specialist at El Camino Community College in California.

Motley, who teaches faculty and staff how to develop online content for hybrid courses, says that one of the biggest challenges of developing a hybrid course is deciding which materials and activities to deliver online and which to deliver face to face. "It's something that each instructor must decide for him- or herself, working with an instructional designer or someone on campus who can help them think about the consequences of putting something online," Motley says.

Motley offers the following advice for creating a hybrid course:

- Consider how much time you have to create the online portion of the course, including how long it will take for you to learn how.
- Consider the students' needs and skills. Will working online be an obstacle for some students?
- Use a course management system if possible. A course management system has the tools to make the online content interactive. If your institution does not have a user license for a course management

system, consider one of the several free, open-source course management systems that are currently available.

- Reuse materials. Creating online materials can be time consuming. In addition to reusing content-related materials, whenever possible, reuse messages or announcements.
- Manage your time. Teaching a hybrid course means you will be online more than you normally would. Plan accordingly.
- Provide an in-class orientation to the online portion of the course. This is a luxury that is often not available to instructors teaching totally online courses. Still, you should provide in the syllabus all the information students will need to know about working online.
- Use class time for lectures. This can help reduce the time it takes to develop online materials, because posting lectures online is often the most difficult and time-consuming aspect of creating hybrid courses, Motley says.
- Encourage online interaction. The online portion of the course can be an extension of what occurs in the classroom. Students can work in groups to build on the interaction begun in the classroom. Motley recommends tying interaction to grades.
- Remember that just because students are working in two environments and are free from some time constraints does not mean that students should be expected to do twice the amount of work as in a comparable face-to-face class.

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Subdivided Courses Help Students Learn in Small Increments

Many online learners do not have large, uninterrupted blocks of time to dedicate to their coursework, which is why Robin Smith, senior WebCT certified trainer and Web-based learning coordinator in the Office of Educational Development at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences, recommends that instructors subdivide their courses into manageable segments so that students can complete small learning activities in their spare moments.

“When teaching online, we are no longer dealing with students who are surrounded by other students who are thinking about the same thing at the same time in a protected, one-hour environment dedicated to a subject. Now students are surrounded by all these interruptions that don’t have anything to do with [the course]. We all have lots of things competing for our attention. If we provide students with short segments that can be reinforced quickly, then the students know they can go online, grasp something from a 10- or 15-minute segment and move on so that they can fit learning into their everyday lives,” Smith says.

Smith recommends a model that features a passive-learning segment (perhaps a brief narrated PowerPoint presentation) followed by a related active-learning exercise that reinforces the concept, such as a self test, review questions, or short quiz. By offering a small standalone chunk of learning in this manner, students become accustomed to the pattern of alternating passive and active learning and are likely to log in more frequently because they don’t need to commit a substantial amount of time in a single session. Students

can process this concept while they are going about other activities of their day and later come back for another learning concept. And, Smith says, when students log in more frequently, they are also more likely to participate in threaded discussions, which helps build the learning community.

Part of establishing the design pattern is informing students how long it will take them to complete each chunk of the course, which can be important for students with busy schedules. Noting the time of the narration to the side of each presentation is easy to do and very helpful for the students. Smith says, “You understand the importance of this if you’ve ever been “held hostage” by a video presentation or a tutorial you expected to be able to complete in 30 minutes and 40-45 minutes later you were still not finished!”

Also, when designing a course, remember that it may take students more time to complete a chunk than the actual time of the presentation because they may pause a presentation to take notes or replay a certain section. In one of her colleague’s courses, it takes student three times longer to complete a chunk than is listed on the presentation, so it would help students to let them know that the time each of them will need to complete the chunk may be significantly more than the presentation time would indicate.

By recording the audio individually for each slide, students are able to review the presentations as often as needed and even skip slides that address concepts they are familiar with as their studying progresses.

“Sometimes when we record narration we suddenly become more formal and less natural about the

ebb and flow of a normal lecture, this chunking helps return those natural breaks to the presentations. I think the easiest thing to do is have the presentation and then come back and create those transitions because sometimes it’s difficult for people to envision the chunks,” Smith says.

In helping instructors identify these chunks as natural places to break, Smith asks them to consider the transitions they automatically insert into their face-to-face lectures, such as when one asks students questions or explains a point and announces that the class will now move on to the next point.

The way in which an instructor subdivides his or her lecture depends on the content. If it’s a history lecture, it can be subdivided chronologically or by event. A

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Suggestions for chunking:

- Find the natural break points in presentations and create transition slides.
- Create an active-learning activity based on the concept introduced in the each chunk.
- Indicate the amount of time it will take for students to go through each chunk.
- Record narration per individual slide to enable students to skip or review individual slides

Benefits of chunking include:

- Students log in more frequently.
- It helps establish a pattern to the course.
- Allows students to find the time to fit the learning into their busy schedules.
- The course is easier to update.

(Not) Making it Hard(er) to Learn, Part 1

By Patti Shank, PhD, CPT

Learning online can be frustrating. Online tools and technologies have a learning curve. It's easy to feel lost and disconnected. Answers to questions are typically delayed. Because the online learning experience is, by its nature, somewhat frustrating, we need to take as much *unnecessary frustration* out of the experience as we can. Why? Because this kind of frustration often leads to reduced satisfaction and learning, and increased attrition. These less-than-optimal outcomes aren't in anyone's best interest.

In this and the next few articles, I will discuss common but unnecessary frustrations for online learners—and how they can be reduced or eliminated.

Typical sources of unnecessary frustration

Steve Krug, in his excellent Web usability primer, *Don't Make Me Think*, describes typical website frustrations and explains that it's not "rocket surgery" to make them less frustrating. Folks who sell online (such as Amazon.com and SmartBargains.com, my two favorite online shopping sites) clearly recognize the importance of usability because usability directly impacts sales. Frustrated folks simply don't stick around long enough to buy. Too hard to use? One or two clicks and they can land on another site that is easier to use.

But what about online learners? They typically don't have the luxury of immediately going elsewhere, and unnecessary frustration is very hard to deal with while also trying to learn and fulfill course requirements.

Along with usability problems, extraneous cognitive load, unneces-

sary mental effort needed to deal with the learning environment, can cause unnecessary frustrations for online learners. When the mental effort needed for dealing with unnecessary frustration rises, the amount left for learning tasks is reduced.

For example, imagine reading online course content about stratified random sampling (a statistical sampling method). The content contains links to other pages with graphical representations of the topics being covered. Needing to flip back and forth between graphic and text explanations requires much more mental effort than if the graphics and corresponding explanation are placed together.

Here's the bottom line: If learners can't easily find what they need, what they need isn't available (even though you know where it is). If learners are frustrated and cannot easily use and learn from the course materials, the materials are ineffective or worse.

Follow the clues

How do we know if learners are unnecessarily frustrated? There are two typical clues: Complaints about difficulty accessing or using the course materials and lack of engagement or effort (for example, limited log-ins, few discussion postings, late or inadequately completed assignments). Complaints often help uncover unnecessary frustrations. Lack of engagement or effort can be caused by myriad 'outside' issues (such as family or work problems) but they can also indicate learners who have shut down from frustration.

The first semester I was an online instructor, one learner waited three weeks into the semester to ask me how to find the *course dis-*

cussions I kept referring to. Huh? I could have written this off as a bizarre occurrence but thankfully I didn't because I received a similar email the week before. With the learner on the phone, I followed what she was looking at and realized that the link to course discussions might not be obvious to new online learners because I referred to them as course discussions throughout the course content but the course management system referred to them as *discussion forums*. That was enough to trip up some new online learners. I changed the content so the term used was the same.

The first step to reducing unnecessary frustrations is to be open to the fact that they are likely to be there. The table on page 5 describes some general ways to address and prevent them.

Your turn

Find someone who hasn't seen your online course and ask them to do typical course tasks on your course website (for example, print the syllabus, determine what assignments are due in the first week, post a bio in the discussion forum) while you watch but without your help. Ask them to think out loud so you know what they are thinking and why they are doing what they are doing. See where they are confused and how many steps it takes to get it right. If you can keep yourself from helping them, you'll learn a lot about what may be unnecessarily frustrating.

When learners can't find what they need or are confused about where to go and what to do, we are inadvertently making it harder for them to learn. That's a situation

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Clue

Complaints about difficulty accessing or using the course materials

Things to do...

- Clearly explain how learners should get started and make this information easy to use (a checklist is good) and easily noticed.
- Make commonly used items (like the syllabus and assignment directions and rubrics) very easy to locate.
- Obtain a student account to see what learners see (I always set one of these up for this purpose).
- Develop and use a consistent course structure so once learners learn how to use one online course, they know how to use others, even though the content may be different.
- If learners are reporting problems, ask them for specific details (so you can troubleshoot).
- Connect learners to campus technical support, as needed. (Following-up with the learner is a good idea.)
- Make changes to the materials to address common concerns and use announcements or broadcast emails to make learners aware of these changes.
- Keep an ongoing list of changes that need to be made in the future so these problems don't reoccur.

Clue

Lack of engagement or effort

Things to do...

- Design a low stress, fun initial activity to help learners learn the tools and feel connected. (I like course scavenger hunts for this purpose.)
- Quickly contact individual learners who don't appear to be engaged by phone (best) or email.
- Check in with individual learners periodically to solicit feedback about what is going well/less well and why. (Learners regularly tell me how valuable this is.)

that needs to be remedied if we want learners to be successful.

Next month I'll discuss some methods for helping learners who are new to online learning gain the confidence and skills needed to persist in online courses.

Resources

Krug, S. (2006). *Don't make me think: A common sense approach to web usability*, 2nd Edition. Berkeley, CA: New Riders Press

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and instructional technologist, writer and author, who builds and helps others build good online and blended courses and facilitate learning. She can be reached through her website: www.learningpeaks.com. @

lecture in an English course might be divided according to parts of speech.

In addition, when a presentation needs to be updated, an instructor will be more likely to make changes to a brief presentation than having to redo a longer one, Smith says.

When dividing courses into chunks it's important that students

are reminded about how each chunk relates to the overall course goals. Smith accomplishes this by including transition slides at the beginning and end of each chunk that explain where the previous chunk left off and what the current chunk will cover.

Not all students learn best in short sessions. For those who prefer to take in longer presentations, Smith recommends that instructors

either provide their presentations in two formats, one consisting of small chunks and one that includes the entire presentation in one file. If creating two formats is too much work, you can remind students that they can view several presentations sequentially in one session.

Contact Robin Smith at SmithRobinM@uams.edu. @

Your First Posting to Students: So Important!

By Errol Craig Sull

It is so true: you do only get one chance to make a first impression. That is especially important in teaching online, as you can only get students excited about and involved in your course through bits and bytes—much more of a challenge than when you are live in a classroom! Thus, each item you post—email, discussion message, announcement, team note, etc.—must be created with much thought, and perhaps none of these is more important than the first post to your class.

Your class is signing onto your course with excitement, anxiety, lethargy, fear, anticipation, and eagerness mixed throughout its students. In writing your first post, these emotions—and the various personalities to whom they belong—must be taken into account, while never losing sight of the overriding tone this first “taste” of you must have: you are the instructor, they are the students. It is a delicate creation, this first post, but once you know how, it can be pivotal in getting your class off in the right direction. Here’s how:

- **Consider your audience.** While you are writing the post, you need an idea of the audience make-up so that the first post’s tone, approach, and information meet, in general, their overall experience. So: is it a freshman group that probably has many members who are new to an online course, or an upper-level body that no doubt has “veteran onliners”? Are they in their late teens/early 20s or 30s, 40s, and beyond? Is this a required course or an elective? Is this their first course in the subject area or

have they probably taken others? The more you know about your class, the more specific can you make this first post.

- **Your first few lines should be inviting, warm, caring.** Here’s where you can erase the divide of only a computer between you and the class—by letting the students immediately feel you are glad to be teaching the course and that they are taking your course, that you are sincerely interested in their learning and improvement, and that you are there to help whenever they need you. This sets a most positive tone and allows for a sense of humanity to come through the monitor—so important in getting and keeping students both engaged and motivated in the course.
- **Be sure to include the “uglies.”** These include both the “musts” and your expectations of the course, and are crucial to post at the beginning of the course so the students cannot say they weren’t informed of this or that. Additionally, the students need to know they must take the course seriously, there are major repercussions if they don’t, and just because the course does not meet in a brick-and-mortar classroom doesn’t mean they can simply come and go when they choose, as they choose. This is your “I’m the boss” section of the post. (TIP: Be sure to have this first post somewhere else in the course as well—depending on the platform you use, post it under Document Sharing, Lessons, Resources, etc. By doing this, you immediately give your first post a greater sense of authority than if it only remains as a first post.)
- **Welcome and encourage your students’ suggestions and**

involvement. The more ownership students have in your course, the easier it is to teach your course, because the students will want to be involved. One way to help this along is by letting students know—in your first post—that their suggestions (for course material, to improve the course, etc.) are always welcome and that as much as they look forward to learning from you, you also look forward to learning from them. This part of your post also humanizes you more, again a very important ingredient in keeping students involved in the course.

- **Address why the course is important beyond a grade or degree requirement.** It makes no difference what your subject is: by explaining to students the subject’s importance to them beyond the “I must take this course” mindset, you are, yet again, offering a reason for their ownership of the course and thus bringing about more involvement on the students’ part. (Suggestion: throughout the course, back up this point by posting various items that show the course’s relevance far past simply being X number of weeks for a grade.)
- **Offer tips on how to do well in the course.** These tips can come from your past experience in teaching the course; items you look for in assignment submissions; insight on what their overall contributions in discussions, teamwork, chat, and other such areas should be; what they shouldn’t do. These and other like items help improve the overall quality of each student’s

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class involvement *and* contribute to your humanization and I'm-really-interested-in-helping-you image.

- **Choose your words carefully.** Don't be haphazard in your first post's word choice, for your words can humanize or demonize you, make you appear inviting or intimidating, lessen or heighten student apprehension toward an online course, engage or push students away. As a minor example: while you may encourage—perhaps insist on—no contractions (i.e., “I am,” rather than “I’m”) in their assignments, using them in your posts, and especially your first post, lends a softer, more inviting tone.
- **Let students know you are available and that you want them to succeed in the course.** While this should be mentioned at the beginning of your post, it should also be restated at least two more times, including at the end. Again, this shows your sincere involvement in the course and concern for your students.

- **Make use of color, bolding, italics, etc.** When available, the use of color, bolding, italics, etc. can highlight what you deem especially important, give a sense of personality and warmth to your words, and break up the print so it's easier to digest. Also, don't hesitate to use subheads, a word or two in caps to introduce a section, and sentence fragments to emphasize.
- **Always end on a positive, upbeat note.** This is the very last part of your first post that students will read, so restate the positives in your opening few lines; use an exclamation point here and there to show excitement; and let them know you are really looking forward to the course, their involvement, and—very important—the students' overall improvement.
- **Before you post, read it one more time.** Proofread and edit, proofread and edit: once you send out your first post you can't recall it, so be sure it says what you meant to say, that it's well written, and that you proofread

it. You do, indeed, only get one chance to make a first impression!

REMEMBER: While computers and automobiles can be recalled to correct mistakes, a first post can't—so create it to last the lifetime of a course.

Please let me hear from you, including sending along suggestions and information for future columns. You can always reach me at errol-craigsull@aol.com. And, as always, with each of my columns I offer a sampling of whatever subject I've discussed; for this column, if you'd like a copy of one of my first posts just send me an e-mail!

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the course will comment about it. “I think peer pressure is a good thing. Sometimes students can say things that have more effect than my telling students over and over to be careful about what you [write],” Arbisi says.

- **Help students understand your role in the discussion forums.** Arbisi often plays devil's advocate in the online forums in her courses. When teaching new online learners or first-year students, she makes it a point to let students know that the views she is expressing are not necessarily her own. Whereas more sophisticated learners are able to pick up on that without her having to explicitly state it, “I think it's important to help students see all different sides of an issue and to help them problem solve and think a little bit more,” Arbisi says.
- **Use color for emphasis. Occasionally,** you will need to get students' attention in the online forum to redirect the discussion or clarify what you expect of students. One way to do this is to use a different color font. @

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a classmate's message. "I consider that their attendance in class. If they don't participate, they build absences," Arbisi says.

If a student does not participate in the discussion forum for an entire week, he or she receives a warning grade, which counts as two absences. Each student is allowed just four absences for the entire semester. Late or insignificant posts result in a single absence. "I encourage them, if they have a problem and have to post late, to go ahead and do that because even though that's counted against their attendance as half absences, it's better to have that than an incomplete. That keeps the discussion flowing. Students are less inclined to post late," Arbisi says.

Arbisi begins the threaded discussions at the start of the course, even before the students begin to delve into the content. The first threaded discussion focuses on netiquette, academic honesty, and the importance of threaded discussions in online courses.

In addition to the content-related forums, Arbisi creates forums for frequently asked questions and socializing. Unlike the content forums, participation in these two other forums is not required.

Forum examples

Arbisi uses forums to get students to discuss the implications of the skills they are learning. In a forum related to word processing, for example, she might ask students the following: does having word-processing skills improve students' writing? Does having word-processing skills make a teacher more effective? "I direct them toward an issue rather than

the software itself. Yes, they're talking about the software, but they're also talking about how it's going to affect them in their lives," Arbisi says.

Arbisi also has students use the discussion forum to explain how to perform a task. "I have found that students like those," she says.

"It's a skills-based class, but they're applying what they're learning to their future professions, and so that seems very interesting to them."

In a unit on creating PowerPoint presentations, Arbisi has students search the Web for guidelines for doing good PowerPoint presentations and then bring these ideas to the forum for discussion. She then has students create a one-slide PowerPoint presentation based on the guidelines and explain why they chose a certain font or color scheme, animation, or narration.

Arbisi might also have students discuss the implications of using tools such as PowerPoint—is it necessary to use presentation software in the classroom? What does it add? Students usually have a lot to say about these questions, Arbisi says.

"Instead of just focusing totally on the software itself, they focus on how they might use it in the classroom. It's a skills-based class, but they're applying what they're learning to their future professions, and so that seems very interesting to them," Arbisi says.

In addition to the skills-based forums, Arbisi uses the forums to

get students to reflect on their own learning and provide feedback to her to improve the course. "Halfway through a course, sometimes I'll ask, 'What's right about this class? What's wrong? What can we do better?' I tell them I am very open to their suggestions."

Arbisi also asks students to share what is helping them succeed in the online course. "Maybe it's the way they organize their work or the way they set up their calendars. It's very helpful to them, and it is something I can use to help myself do better in the class," Arbisi says.

Arbisi also has students reflect on their own participation in the forums. "I have them analyze what they do in the discussion forums as if they were the instructor, so they can see whether they got the point of a forum or got off track. Did I express myself clearly and concisely? They don't know the answers to these questions until they do it as an assignment. It helps them to analyze their own discussion and to be a better mentor to their students when they teach classes online." @

Share Your Ideas

If you have developed an innovative online course or have some online teaching tips you would like to share with the readers of *Online Classroom*, contact Rob Kelly at <robkelly@magnapubs.com>.