

What Are Three Proven Ways to Manage My Online Discussion Board and Actively Engage Students?

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General Best Practices and Interactions Tracker Worksheet

Best Practices –

In any course, the **Discussion Board** represents an incredibly important encounter point for students and faculty. At its best, the forum is an engaging and active space where students are offering their views on key course concepts and testing those views with rigorous responses to their peers. It also offers faculty the opportunity to encourage deeper levels of critical thinking through robust commentary that can sometimes develop into a sustained dialogue – in the specific forum, and throughout the class!

It goes without saying that your comments on the Discussion Board are crucial to student success. As such, here are a few things to keep in mind:

- The Discussion Board is a public forum, visible to all students. You'll want to avoid talking about specific aspects of an individual student's grade. Remember, this isn't a private conversation!
- With that in mind, make sure to write unique and specific comments for all students. Obviously, you'll be dealing with some of the same issues from post to post but using cut & paste templates in a public forum will send the wrong message to your students.
- Always start your comment by greeting the student – a simple “Hi *Student*,” does wonders to set the proper, personal tone. While you're at it, please sign off all of your comments in a personal way – again, a simple “-Prof. *Name*” can really accomplish a lot! Feel free to customize as fits your own tone and style.
- Work to engage the student in a critical manner, asking questions to push them to a deeper consideration of the subject matter at hand while acknowledging instances of sharp thinking. Your commentary here is similar to what you might employ in a traditional face-to-face guided lecture and is meant to encourage the student toward a more complete understanding of the core concepts.
- Consider linking to relevant information or additional resources – articles and PDFs, audio and video files (including material you might specifically record for this use!).
- Specific requirements for instructor activity on the Discussion Board are likely set by your institution. These guidelines are meant only to complement those.

Interaction Tracker –

Many instructors approach their discussion board workflow in the wrong way. They set out chasing their institutional or departmental requirements without giving thought to their own intentions, their own hopes for workflow in the class week, and without reflecting on the student experience. As a result, many instructors perceive the discussion board as a never-ending struggle. They feel they have to log in and check every time they're online.

It's important to set goals to manage your workflow. You may have a requirement for a minimum number of students that need to be responded to in each discussion forum. And you may have other instructional goals as well. For example, you may want to ensure that each student gets a personal response on the discussion board every week, or at least every other week. And a given class week might have one discussion board, or it might have two or more. Keeping those considerations in mind, and using your class enrollment number as a baseline, come up with a target for how many students you need to respond to on a given day in order to meet requirements. Hit that number and you know you'll stay on track! And, as you reflect on student experience on the discussion board, think of ideas to increase your visibility and engagement. For example, space out your work on the discussion board so that you are actively posting on three or four days in the class week, instead of all at once. Also, set aside some time on the final day of a class week to sweep back through the discussion board and respond back to any students who responded to your initial comments!

This example supposes that you have set a goal of replying in the forum on four separate days throughout the class week. The first days you hope to respond might be early in the week – right after the discussion forum opens. The final day you hope to respond should be the last day the forum is open – which gives you the opportunity for a final sweep to see if any students have responded to your previous comments! Here, the instructor responded to Student A on Day 1. The instructor responded to Student B on Day 2, and again on Day 4. It's a very simple way to visualize your workflow and set expectations. Keeping this chart handy from week to week allows you to ensure that all students are getting the right attention on the discussion board – not just those that respond first!

Discussion Topic: _____

<i>Students</i>	<i>Day 1</i>	<i>Day 2</i>	<i>Day 3</i>	<i>Day 4</i>
A, Student	X			
B, Student		X		X
C, Student			X	X

Expand this tracker to match your class enrollment and any parameters you need or want to have as part of your practice, and then use it track your interactions from week to week and ensure that you are interacting in a robust and consistent manner.