

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

Presented by:

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**Editor's Note:**

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We've all been there, plunging once again into the infinite scroll of a discussion board, feeling flat and disconnected, trying simply to get through the responses, running on autopilot. But the discussion board can be a truly powerful area of the classroom, one where you can encourage and engage with your students, while rekindling your own love of learning and for the content you're teaching.

Hi. I'm Dr. Nathan Pritts. And in this 20-Minute Mentor, we'll consider three proven ways to manage your online discussion board and actively engage students.

The discussion board is one of the key areas in any online classroom, where truly active learning can take place. But it can be a struggle for students and teachers alike to connect, both in terms of logistical day to day tasks, and in terms of higher levels of engagement.

So, how can we break past burnout and make the discussion board of place students are eager to go, a place where instructors can forge a community of learners and share rich layers of course content? Now, a slight caveat to this. Remember that your own individual institution might have requirements for the discussion board that you have to follow. And these can often seem like impractical hoops to jump through.

And the infinite scroll of the classroom chain can lead to a numbing fatigue. It's not a formula to bring out your best work. But there is a way to apply what we're going to talk about today to whatever the requirements are that you might be dealing with. So, with a little bit of mindfulness, we'll be able to see our way to managing the discussion board in a way that is more effective and more powerful.

It's important to remember that this mass pileup of duties and responsibilities on the discussion board is something confronted by students and teachers alike. Your students are probably approaching the discussion board in whatever way that you model for them.

There is that struggle to connect. There's such a buildup of tasks and requirements that it's really difficult to dig into the content matter and engage not only personally with the classmates or, for you as the instructor, with your students, but difficult to really dig deeper into the content that you're trying to present.

There's a really shallow layer of engagement that can happen there. And when that happens, it's difficult to push students toward that engagement, not only with the class environment, but with the content that we really need to see on the discussion board.

But this is about trying to take control, to break past that burnout, and make the discussion board a place where students want to go, because they can feel that connection, not only to the classroom and their classmates, but to the community of

learners that you're creating, as well as to the course content that you're presenting them with.

So, I want to talk about three proven ways that you can take charge of the discussion forum, really assert your control as the instructor, and make it work for you, rather than feeling as if you're being run ragged by a series of requirements that don't really resonate with you and your job of trying to get the content across.

Those three ways are asking you, as the instructor, to model the engagement that you expect from your students. It also gives you an opportunity to foster this sense of community and it gives you a chance to share expertise, beyond whatever instructional content you might already piling into your classroom. Whether it's lectures or videos, instructor guidance documents, this will give you an additional place to share your expertise.

So, how do we do these three things? Let's delve a little bit deeper into each of these and give some examples, so that you can operationalize this in your classroom.

The first, modeling engagement, seems relatively straightforward. If you're on the discussion board, your students will see you there and they'll respond to that. They'll be able to understand that you are communicating that it's an important area and that they will also do the same thing.

But it's important, I think, to pull back a little bit from just your own generalized sense of what might be the most effective way to engage. Think about the deadlines in the class. When do students have to post on the discussion board? What are those markers?

Are they particular days or is there a particular cadence? You should be mirroring that yourself. If a student needs to be on the discussion board at least twice in a class week, then you should also be on there at least twice, probably much more.

If students are going to be responding to the initial prompt on, let's say, Thursday nights, then you'll want to make sure that you're zipping through not only on Thursdays, but also on Fridays, to respond to students and to show them that the effort that they just put in matters, that you're there, that you see it, and that you're responding to it.

This is all about how you assess the workflow. I'm talking about the workflow for students. When do they have to post on the discussion forum? When do they have to reply to their peers? Are there any institutional requirements for the number of times number of days that they're on the forum?

But you also need to assess your own workflow as well. When are you likely to be able to commit to sitting there for 30 minutes, 45 minutes, 60 minutes, and reading through discussion board posts and responding to them? When do you have to submit grades for student work on the discussion board? All of these are things that you take into consideration as you try to assess the workflow on the discussion board.

And then, the next step of modeling engagement is just determining a schedule. It seems as if a lot of times in the online forum, or the online modality, we sort of deal with problems as they arise. We think of it as a very reactive and responsive presence that we fulfill in the online modality. But I think we can take charge of that. I think we can take control of that. I think that we can set a schedule for ourselves that we'll stick to and we'll follow.

So, let's take a little bit of a look at a sample schedule. And I'll walk you through one that kind of works for me and I'll explain how I came up with this.

Now, in this model, students have to post an initial reply on the discussion board. And they also have to reply to a set number of peers. Now, I use this tracker to make sure that I've replied to every student on the discussion board that I want to.

So, for a given week, let's say that I want to make a target of replying to six different students. On day one, that's the day that the initial post is due. I can go in there and I can see who I want to respond to. I'll respond to Student A, but Student B hasn't posted yet. And I'm not going to respond to Student C on day one.

On day two, I'm going to log back in, I'm going to take a look. And Student A, I've already responded to. I know that. I don't have to worry about that. Student B, I can reply to them. And then, on day three, I log in and I can respond to Student C. That way, I've tracked, across a number of days, days 1 through 3 I've been active, the students can see that I've been active, and I've replied to different students throughout.

I always make sure to go back through on the last day of the class week. Let's assume that all student responses are due on a particular day. Here, I'm calling it day 4, but maybe it makes more sense to call it day 7. Students have to have everything in by the end of this day.

I'll go through the discussion board again on that day, knowing that if any students have replied to me, to my responses to them, this is my chance to catch those and respond to them. So, we can see that modeling engagement is as much about understanding the student workflow as it is about understanding your own workflow and then creating a schedule that you can stick to, which will demonstrate to the students your presence and activity in the discussion board and will ensure that you're able to create those conversations with your students and respond to them. So, there's no open loops just hanging out there. If they've written back to you, you've been able to write to them.

The second stage of this is fostering community. This is a way of imagining your work on the discussion board as much more than just simply interacting with the individual course learning outcomes for the week, but realizing that you're dealing with a classroom of people and you want to forge connections there within that. When you do that, when you get students to bite buy into not only the community of learners, but also your place in it, they're going to be more motivated to participate and more motivated to succeed.

There are three different ways we can consider how to foster community on the discussion board. One of those is to address and expand on what students are talking about in their discussion responses. It's very easy to look at their response, look at the prompt, and then just simply measure whether or not they've succeeded and to reply to them in that way. Good job.

We see this all the time with our students replying to other students. They just simply say, good job. I enjoyed your post. Well, it's important to scrutinize. Is that what you're doing as well, as the instructor? Are you sometimes just simply letting them know that they did a good job?

I think it's important to address what they've posted, acknowledging it in some way, maybe even restating it and connecting it back to the prompt, but then expanding on that knowledge. So, even if they've done an excellent job of responding to the individual prompt, there's always something more that you can push a student to consider or to think about.

Addressing and expanding allows you to construct discussion board responses that aren't simply acknowledgements, but really truly push the content forward. And I think when you do that, it shows the other students, who are reading, as well as the student you're directly responding to, it shows them the breadth of the content and how those different things can connect through a broad range of ideas. It'll feel more like an actual interchange, not just a bunch of blips on a screen.

It's also important to identify and forge these connections. If Student A writes about a particular topic and you see that Student C is writing about something very similar, you could call that out. Identify to Student C that Student A talked about something similar.

And then, forge those connections. You can directly ask Student C if they've taken a look at Student A's post. What do they think about it? Obviously, you can get a lot more nuanced and complex. But for the purposes of this, I think it's just important to realize that you can connect students on the discussion board.

Don't assume that every student is reading the post of every other student. If there is some life experience or relationship to the content that you're seeing is similar, you may simply be able to call that out and kind of weave that together and create that connection, at least between those two students. And I think other students will see that as well. They'll see that there is a connection being forged.

The last aspect, I think, to fostering a sense of community in the classroom is to question your students, to push them towards new levels of thinking, and to direct them to particular areas. You can explicitly reference the fact that you're part of this community of learners and ask questions of everybody who might be reading this individual response.

Just because you're asking a question doesn't mean that the student didn't answer the prompt fully or properly, but it gives them something else to think about, related to the content, maybe not essential. But it helps them to understand that this isn't just simply a binary, yes or no, right or wrong environment.

This is a place where we get to discuss and consider different aspects of the course content. And discussing it really means that we're considering it from a variety of different angles and pushing ourselves. So, as you respond on the discussion board, in an attempt to foster community, make sure that you're addressing students. Of course, you're addressing them directly.

You're giving them your name and their name. You're saying, "hello, Nate" when you begin your response and you're signing off with "Dr. Pritts" at the end of your response to let them know that you've crafted this uniquely for them, but you're expanding on the content as well.

You're also creating those connections in the classroom or fostering those connections in the classroom, by explicitly identifying them and calling them out in your responses. And finally, you're questioning your students, pushing them deeper and further into the course content, to have a real true back and forth conversation discussion about it.

The last area I want to talk about is the idea of sharing your expertise on the discussion board. I know, from my perspective, a lot of times when I'm reading discussion responses from students, my response to them is already formulating as I read. I know that I need to redirect something that they've said, if it's been slightly inaccurate or incomplete. I know I need to encourage them to dig deeper, as we just talked about, on particular concepts.

And I think that, at a lot of times, we have our responses almost already written before we start typing. And what that means is that it's been purely responsive. And again, I want us to reconceptualize the discussion board as a place where we can actually do some teaching, where there can be active learning taking place. Again, it's not a binary. It's not just a simple back and forth. But it is literally providing food for thought and putting our own stamp on it as well.

If our responses to our students have been almost fully programmed as a result of what they've written and our own sense of the content, well, then, we don't have a lot left over for us to put our own personal stamp on it as instructors. And that's why I think sharing our expertise on the discussion board is really important.

So, many of us, I think, have it in our minds that what we're going to do in an online class is share our expertise through lectures, through videos, through live conferences with our students. But the discussion board provides us an opportunity to do that as well.

So, one of the ways we're going to do that is by encouraging our students to dig deeper into the course content. I know that there is a particular learning outcome or objective in the prompt that the student is responding to. And you want to honor that.

But I think it's also important to simply just talk past it, to give the students something else to think about. Even if they haven't quite grasped the content or the outcome that is foundational to the particular prompt that you're discussing, I think it's still important to give them something else to think about, to push past that particular hurdle and show them something else that's related to course content. Giving them an opportunity to dig deeper allows those students that are mastering the course content to expand their knowledge.

We're not creating barriers. We're not showing them additional information that they might not be able to grasp or want to engage with. We're just letting them know that there is a larger world out there and that they can engage with it, if they want to.

And I think one of the key ways to do that is by using a lot of enriched media and our discussion responses. Again, it can feel very easy to just start typing on the discussion board and not really think about that we could reach over to our own bookshelves, our own store of knowledge, the wealth of information that we're able to locate and find on the internet.

And by putting this content in a discussion response, I think it's a very subtle way of, again, signaling to a student that they can dig deeper if they want to. A hyperlinked quote, or a quick video, or a little bit of audio, I think these are the kinds of things that a student who is overwhelmed might just simply skim over and that's fine. We want them to focus on what they need to be able to focus on.

But students who are able to understand a little bit beyond the prompt that's in front of them, I think, will be encouraged by the fact that you're giving them additional content, additional information. They might not have time for it. I understand that. But I think by putting it in a discussion response, it sort of encourages the student to engage with it, if they have the time or inclination. The important thing, though, is that you put it there. It's another opportunity for you to share your own expertise in the classroom.

Another important aspect to this though is to broaden out beyond the course content. These are students that you're dealing with. These are online learners. This may be an entirely new modality for them. Or this might be something that they're really used to. They might be new to coming back to school. Or they might be already in their 50th class. Let's hope not their 50th.

So, I think it's important to realize that you're dealing with a student learner who is, yes, currently in your class, but has taken a variety of other classes, has a variety of other experiences. And I think the discussion board is a great place where we can push past content and start to really acknowledge the knowledge, skills, and abilities that students

have developed through the course of their lives, the course of the other classes they've taken on their way to their major or their eventual career choice.

Using the discussion board to respond to course learning outcomes is pretty intuitive, makes a lot of sense when you're sitting there typing and engaging with the individual prompt, taking that moment to pull out of the individual context that you're in in that particular class and think a little bit about study skills or about success strategies or about different ways we can learn about possible career choices.

I think a lot of times, a discussion board prompt, when interpreted a little broadly, can give us that chance to have that conversation and help to push students toward a more complete understanding of their entire schooling, not just the class, but where that class fits in. And it gives you a chance to engage with them. And we know that that engagement can lead to a deeper feeling of participatory buy-in and success in the classroom.

Those are three ways to make the online discussion forum work for you, to work better, to be more effective as an instructor, but also to ensure that the location itself is more effective in accomplishing the goals for your students in the classroom.

It doesn't need to be a purely draining and operational environment. The discussion board, I think, encourages that almost in students and in teachers. You look at it. It looks like a spreadsheet where you just need to check off a bunch of boxes. But by creating a plan, you'll organize your workflow and you'll be able to hone and focus your mental attention.

Through connecting to the community of learners in your class, you'll create deeper buy-in, which leads to engagement. When you use your replies to increase the instructional content of the class using multimedia, you'll transform the board into a more dynamic space.

Thanks so much for watching this 20-Minute Mentor. I'm Dr. Nathan Pritts. I hope that you have learned some tips, some techniques, some strategies that are going to help you in your work on the discussion board, to make sure that what you're doing is the most effective thing you could be doing for yourself and to help you reach your students.

Please take the survey: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/online-class-discussions-3ways>