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Evaluating Discussion Forums for Undergraduate and Graduate Students

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The discussion forum is an essential part of online courses. It's where students interact, reflect, exchange ideas, and expand their knowledge base. The quality of the discussion forum depends on the ability to develop a sense of community, the clarity of the discussion questions, and the use of a grading rubric that includes standards of performance.

Sense of community

Cobb (2011) found that relationships, comfort, and community are important factors in undergraduate student success. She recommends establishing forums for student introductions, instructor involvement in the forums, and acknowledging students' points of view.

Mayne and Wu (2011) found that the following strategies increase student satisfaction with an online course and positively influence perceptions regarding social presence and group interaction: personal emails and biographical and personal information from the instructor, an introduction with specific course instructions, an inclusive syllabus with student and instructor expectations clearly outlined, assignment rubrics, links to helpful tutorials or resources, and an informal place for students to chat.

Another way to promote community is to provide a question-and-answer forum. This facilitates student exchange of information that does not require instructor input, enabling students to mentor one another.

Small group sizes (with no more than 10 students per discussion forum group) also can promote social presence and community. According to Schellens and Valcke (2006), small discussion groups have higher levels of knowledge construction than larger groups do. They also found that students want specific discussion forum guidelines and want the forums to be graded to enhance the level of responsibility.

Clarity of discussion questions

To be meaningful, discussion questions need to be correlated with the course readings and learning outcomes for each module. Students are more likely to understand learning outcomes that are directly connected with an assignment (forum, quiz, or paper).

Most discussion questions focus on the basic levels of thinking of Bloom's Taxonomy to evaluate students' understanding of the content in each module and their ability to explain ideas or concepts. Some questions may direct students toward higher levels of thinking, requiring them either to apply the information from the module to a workplace situation or to compare and contrast particular issues (analyzing). To promote higher levels of thinking, ask students to critique one another's posts (evaluating) and direct them to pose a question related to the topic of discussion (creating) to further stimulate discussion in the forum (Overbaugh and Schultz, n.d.).

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In undergraduate courses, have students respond to the initial prompt and include rationale and references. Then have them reply to fellow students with substantial constructive feedback (remembering and understanding). Encourage students to respectfully consider the opinions of others, agree or disagree with those opinions, and provide rationale based on references or workplace experience (applying, analyzing). After all the students have posted and replied, post a closing post for the forum that acknowledges students' points of view, addresses any areas that need further clarification, and adds new content to augment understanding of the topic of discussion.

Hold graduate students to the same criteria as undergraduate students, but also have them include questions with their posts to further stimulate discussion. This leads to a higher level of thinking. Also consider requiring graduate students to handle their posts that include questions as individual forums. Have them take on the role of instructor, replying to other students and posting summaries for their forums (evaluating). The instructor would then read all the posts, including questions and summaries, and post a closing message as described above for undergraduate students.

Grading rubric with standards of performance

Use analytic grading rubrics for online discussions. Analytic grading rubrics have two major components: levels of performance and a set of criteria. Levels of performance can include terms such as exemplary, proficient, basic, or below expectations or can include numbers. Points can be attached to the levels of performance and distributed based on the total number of points allowed for a post in the discussion forum. Criteria depend on the learning outcomes for the course, but may include the following:

- Demonstration of an understanding of the topic of discussion through critical thinking, higher-order thinking, and uniqueness of contribution
- Community building through collaboration and connection with other students
- Proper netiquette and mechanics of writing
- Timeliness and participation with posts/replies

See my analytic discussion forum grading rubric for undergraduate students [here](#) and my graduate rubrics [here](#).

Hold undergraduate and graduate students to the same standard in regard to netiquette, including language, spelling, and grammar, but modify the type and number of required references to suit the educational level. For example, undergraduate students may be required to include

supporting references from their reading assignments, but Truemper (2004) suggested that the expectation for graduate students should be to include references from research journals.

The number of replies may need to be adjusted to suit the size of each discussion group. Typically, eight to 10 in a group is sufficient for a discussion that demonstrates interaction, reflection, exchange of ideas, and expansion of the knowledge base related to the topic of discussion. The number of points assigned to a discussion forum will also depend on the amount of responsibility assumed by the students. If students are required both to include a question to further stimulate discussion and to facilitate their forums by providing a summary, then additional points may be assigned to the discussion forum grading rubric. Last, the timeliness of the posts and replies can be negotiated with students, as many adult learners have busy schedules.

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