



# Promoting Active and Productive Online Discussions

J. Dickinson, CTL, Anthropology

# Introductions



- Name, dept.
- Online classes you teach/will teach
- What brought you here today and what is your goal for today?

# Agenda for Today



- clarifying your learning goals for online discussion
- choosing the right online tool to meet those goals
- writing discussion assignments and prompts that promote good discussion
- strategies for assessing student contributions to discussions

Goal: Leave with usable ideas and prompts for improving discussion in your online class(es)

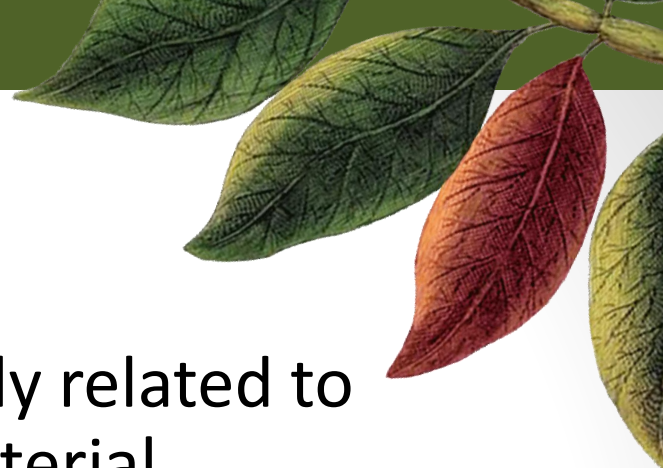


# Clarifying your goals

# Why have online discussion?



# Have a mix of goals



- Some goals for discussion are closely related to assessing students' grasp of the material
- Other goals are related to students' ability to apply concepts, build models, complete projects etc.
- Still other goals relate to building community, and developing skills related to collaboration, communication, or critical engagement with others

# Why do goals matter?



...because your end goals will shape how you structure, manage and assess the quality and productivity of discussion in your course.



The right tool for the job...



# Common discussion tools:



- Discussion board
- Facebook group
- Slack
- Blogs (Blogger; Wordpress)
- Wikis (may be used for discussion, or to gather examples or work that promotes discussion)
- Other ideas?

# Forum set up



- Do you want students to post before seeing other students' posts?
- Do you want to ask the main questions, or have students responsible for posing questions?
- Do you want students to be able to “subscribe” to threads?
- Do you want groups to have their own (group) discussion boards?



# Promoting good online discussions: structures and prompts

(The hard part)

# Define “Active” and “Productive”



- What are signs that active discussion is occurring in your online class?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- What are signs that productive discussion are occurring in your class?

# Define “Active” and “Productive”



- What are signs that active discussion is occurring in your online class?
  - Quantity of posts
  - Long threads
  - Responses to responses within threads
- What are signs that productive discussion is occurring in your class?
  - Students indicate that they have altered their thinking
  - Discussions move beyond repeating what individuals wrote in their assignments; students feel comfortable sharing important but personal or controversial views
  - There is evidence that students are using critical thinking in their discussions
  - There is evidence that other pedagogical goals (e.g. collaboration; building community) are being met

# Before you assign, think grading



- Be as clear as possible about how different types of discussion posts contribute to students' grades and how they will be assessed.
- Many students appreciate guidelines like minimum post length, description of “substantive” contributions, and feedback on how to improve their contributions.
- A rubric can help students (and you) understand what you are looking for.

# “The Basics”

- *Be a presence* on the discussion board (but not an dominating one)
- *Use prompts* on the discussion board; open-ended questions with many possible “correct” answers are best
- *Require students to respond* to a certain number of classmate posts with substantive comments
- *Allow students to leverage personal experience* BUT hold them accountable for relating it to course materials
- *Scaffold discussion* with individual assignments or preparation tasks, e.g. have students do a response to a reading or find information, then share or summarize and discuss that on the discussion board





# 4 Tips for enhancing discussion



# Tip #1: Have a warmup



- Devote one thread or forum in a unit to a warmup question or exercise
- If possible, have students offer examples, and maybe even give an example yourself.
- Use this to get students thinking about the topic and engaged. If your class is content-heavy, try giving them a real-world example to speculate on, puzzle over and discuss. The “answer” to the puzzle can be returned to when they have learned enough content to “solve” it. Help them connect to the content as more than just something to memorize

Forum	Description
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Introductions</b>	Introduce yourself and say a few words about what you bring to this class and what you'd like to get out of it!
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>1A: Conversation starter – What's cultural about alcohol?</b>	In this discussion area, please post your ideas on how a chemical compound like alcohol becomes woven into the fabric of culture and takes on a cultural life of its own.
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>1B: Alcohol and human prehistory</b>	Why do you think alcoholic beverages are so common in human history and prehistory?
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>1C: Post your sources! Discuss your papers!</b>	Post at least one source you found on alcohol and human origins, or the archaeology of alcohol. Then on Friday, post something on what you learned doing this week's assignment.
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>2A: Conversation Starter – What's a 'social ritual'?</b>	In this forum, we'll discuss different ways that alcohol can be involved in social occasions, and in the rituals that sometimes accompany them.
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>2B: Rituals, alcohol and social cohesion</b>	How do rituals promote social cohesion and social order? How can alcohol be part of that? In this forum, we will be discussing the readings on Xhosa ritual beer drinking and Georgian toastmasters and how ritual shapes the social meaning of normative drinking in these cultures.
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>2C: Alcohol and social order</b>	In this forum, we will be discussing cultural understandings of drinking and social order – from class and ethnic differences to expectations based on age, region or other factors, we will consider how rituals reinforce culturally important social divisions and rankings.
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>3A: Conversation starter – Drinking locales</b>	Where are some common places people drink where you are from? Are there places where drinking is not allowed, or simply does not happen very often?
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>3B: Alcohol, Social Practices and Identity</b>	In this forum, let's discuss the everyday practices, the things we do, that culturally mark the ways alcohol is part of culture.
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>3C: Relating readings to reality</b>	At its ethnographic best, Anthropology is a very down to earth field. What did you take away from this week's readings that you can relate to "real life" contexts of alcohol use here, or abroad?
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>4A: Conversation Starter – What is a drinking story?</b>	"Drinking story" can mean a great many things...

## Tip #2: Give them something to work with



- Provide examples, elicit examples, have students post examples in a blog
- Give them tasks that require them to have done the reading – e.g. posting a quote or summarizing an example from the reading
- Divide them into groups with related but not identical tasks – have them work in a group, then have everyone post about and discuss the group work in a full-class forum

# Get an idea...

Think about your own course.

What kind of puzzle, question, example or task would serve as a good warmup for one of your modules?

**Write down ideas for 5 minutes.** Then put a “star” next to the one or two “best” ideas.



## Tip #3: Follow up



- Be a model of the kind of questioning and thinking you want to see in your students
- Summarize, fill gaps, bring in other aspects of the course
- If everyone has posted one “dead end” example and the discussion has not gone where you want it to, “re-prompt” by summarizing and pushing them to do more – find a pattern in their answers, think of something that wasn’t covered etc.



## Forum: 3A: Conversation starter – Drinking locales

Organize Forum Threads on this page and apply settings to several or all threads. Threads are listed in a tabular format. The Threads can be sorted by clicking the column title or the caret at the top of each column. [More Help](#)

Create Thread Search Display ▾

Thread Actions ▾ Collect Delete

<input type="checkbox"/>		Date ▾	Thread	Author	Status	Unread Posts	Total Posts
<input type="checkbox"/>		7/16/13 3:03 PM	<a href="#">Transgressive sites for drinking</a> ▾	Anonymous	Published	0	1
<input type="checkbox"/>		7/11/13 11:19 PM	<a href="#">Sites for Drinking</a>	Anonymous	Published	0	1

Thread Actions ▾ Collect Delete



Anonymous

1 year ago

## Transgressive sites for drinking

You all did a good job posting lists of places you can and can't drink and giving good culturally based reasons for these. One way we can test your analyses (e.g. formal vs. informal, or places where activities take place that are considered incompatible with drinking, like at a driving school, for example) is to try to come up with some TRULY transgressive places to drink. My favorite that students have noted over the years is drinking in the shower while you are getting ready to go out. This is transgressive for many reasons in our culture, including that it is "secretive" drinking instead of social drinking, that it is drinking in a place where food and drink are not normally consumed and might be considered unsanitary, and that it seems to be incompatible with what you are trying to accomplish...

So, can you come up with other very "wrong" places that people might drink? Why do you think these drinking spaces are so transgressive?

[Reply](#) [Quote](#) [Edit](#) [Delete](#)

## Tip #4 Find your style



- Some faculty are very involved in discussions, while others hang back as observers
- Remember that you do have a role as a facilitator, just as you would in the classroom – even if you have a “hands off” style that allows students autonomy, they need to know that you are present
- Take opportunities to model critical thinking by asking questions and providing frameworks to push their analyses further



# Remember, good prompts:



- Are open-ended
- Can not be answered definitively by any one person
- Prompt discussion because people are interested in finding out what others have to say and responding to them
- Scaffold or provide support/structure to help students “get to” the level of analysis or creative thinking you are aiming for

## Now get an idea...

Think of a specific unit or activity in a class you have taught or will be teaching. Choose:

- A warmup activity
- An assignment using course materials
- OR an assignment focused on other students' work.

Write down several ideas for the type of activity you chose.



# Write a prompt



Look at your list and choose the one you feel most able to write right now.

Do a quick draft of a prompt. Take 5 minutes, then share with a neighbor or the group.

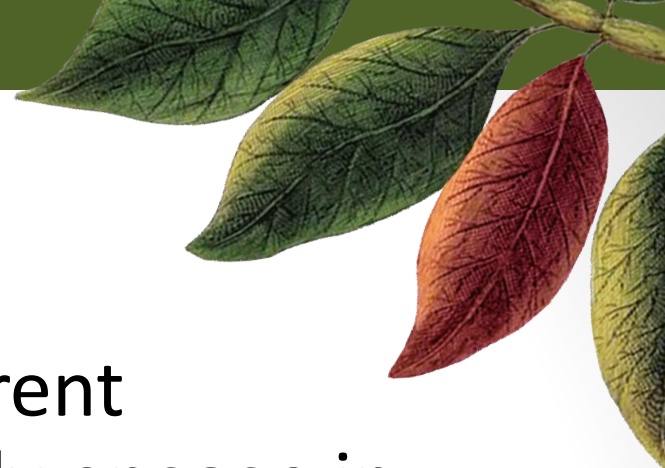


# Assessing Discussion

# Incentivize participation

There may be one or more different incentives for students to actively engage in discussion in an online class:

- Make discussion “interesting”
- Make discussion “worthwhile”
- Make discussion worth a significant portion of students’ grade (usually 10% or more)



# Assessment options



It is best to assess both quality and quantity of discussion postings.

You may want to separate “required” discussion assignments from “free discussion of related topics/themes” or “discussion of examples”

Having a mix of both in your class can help keep things lively, just like having a mix of different kinds of discussion activities and themes in a face to face class keeps students engaged.

# “Scoring” Discussion Postings



Ask: What KIND of posts are you grading?

- Consider separating the grades for “prepared posts” and “participation posts”
- “Prepared posts” function as assignments where students prepare responses, solutions, examples or present ideas
- “Participation” posts are more like in-class discussion and involve responding to other students or instructor prompts that don’t require a structured, prepared answer

# Grading Different Kinds of Posts



- Prepared posts
  - Have clearly stated guidelines, like an assignment
  - Involve providing structured responses to the question or prompt
  - Are usually longer than participation posts, sometimes with more than one “part”
  - Usually require demonstrated understanding and/or application of course materials, and can be graded based on that level of understanding
- Participation posts
  - React to, or motivate reactions from fellow students
  - Should be graded on interactivity and ability to prompt discussion with contributions
  - Demonstrate engagement with class topics, materials and fellow students, but are usually not graded on the “correctness” of the student’s contributions or answers



# Online Participation Rubric?



- <http://www.uwgb.edu/catl/files/workshops/business/samplerubrics.pdf>
- [https://topr.online.ucf.edu/index.php/Discussion\\_Rubrics](https://topr.online.ucf.edu/index.php/Discussion_Rubrics)
- <https://onlinelearning.rutgers.edu/faq/grading-threaded-discussions-model>

# Denise Lowe, U. Central Florida

## Online Discussion Board Rubric

Contributions	Description	Points Assigned
Provocative	Response goes beyond simply answering the prompt; attempts to stimulate further thought & discussion	20
Substantial	Response provides most of the content required by the prompt, but does not require further analysis of the subject	15
Superficial	Response provides obvious information without further analysis of the concept; lacks depth of knowledge or reasoning	10
Incorrect	Response does not accurately address the prompt; rambling and/or without consistency	5
None	No response provided to the prompt within the associated timeframe	0