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Special Report

Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning Tools: 15 Strategies for Engaging Online Students Using Real-time Chat, Threaded Discussions and Blogs

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ONLINE CL@SSROOM
IDEAS FOR EFFECTIVE ONLINE INSTRUCTION

Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning Tools:
15 Strategies for Engaging Online Students Using Real-time Chat, Threaded Discussions and Blogs

In a traditional face-to-face class, students have many opportunities to interact with their instructor and fellow students. Whether it's an informal chat before or after class, or participating in the classroom discussion, interaction can be an important factor in student success.

Creating similar opportunities for participation and collaboration in an online course is one of the biggest challenges of teaching online. Yet, opportunities for meaningful interaction online are plentiful, provided you design and facilitate your course in the correct manner and with the proper tools.

Asynchronous and synchronous learning tools, such as threaded discussions, instant messaging, and blogs play an important role in humanizing online courses by replicating the classroom experience of information exchange and community building, not just between students and teacher but among the students as well.

This *Faculty Focus* special report features 15 articles from *Online Classroom* newsletter, and will provide you with specific strategies on how to use synchronous and asynchronous learning tools to engage your online students.

Here are just some of the articles you will find in this report:
- A Plan for Effective Discussion Boards
- Using Video Clips to Stimulate Discussion
- Using Individual and Group Instant Messaging to Engage Students
- Nine Strategies for Using IM in Your Online Course
- Four Ways to Improve Discussion Forums

Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning Tools: 15 Strategies for Engaging Online Students Using Real-time Chat, Threaded Discussions and Blogs is loaded with practical advice from educators who've found effective ways to promote learning and build community in their online courses.

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Rob Kelly
Editor
Online Classroom

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2

Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning Tools: 15 Strategies for Engaging Online Students Using Real-time Chat, Threaded Discussions and Blogs
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Table of Contents

Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning Tools: 15 Strategies for Engaging Online Students Using Real-time Chat, Threaded Discussions and Blogs

www.FacultyFocus.com

3

Asynchronous Discussion: The Heart of the Online Course

By Rob Kelly

Asynchronous online discussion plays a key role in humanizing online courses. Asking provocative questions is an important part of getting students to participate in discussions, but the right questions alone are not always enough to create a truly connected class.

"The discussion forum is most closely going to replicate the experience of exchanging information, not just between students and teacher but among the students, as if we were in the classroom. It has to be the heart of the course," says Kyla Heflin, director of extended studies in the College of Education at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs.

To get students to appreciate the significance of the discussion forum, Heflin has a Web page in her courses that explains the grading rubric for discussion and her expectations. An important part of her rubric is having two deadlines for each weeklong discussion. The first deadline, which occurs in the middle of the week, is for students to post their initial responses to the discussion prompt. Then the students have until the second deadline to respond to at least two classmates' initial responses.

"At first, students were very resistant to having two deadlines per week. They felt that taking an online course would give them complete freedom to do the work on their own schedules. I tried that, but the course lost that interactive quality. It's critical to keep people on the same schedule, or else they don't talk to each other," Heflin says.

With just one deadline at the end of a discussion, students tend to cram the discussion into a few hours just before the deadline. This decreases

> "The discussion forum is most closely going to replicate the experience of exchanging information, not just between students and teacher but among the students, as if we were in the classroom."

the likelihood for well-crafted responses and leaves those who posted early waiting a relatively long time to receive feedback.

Requiring students to respond to at least two classmates' initial responses keeps them from getting stuck in their own threads and talking about what they posted.

Heflin actively participates in each discussion and holds herself to the same deadlines in the discussion forum. "I noticed that that has helped students know generally when I will be in the course, and that's important."

To help get a better idea of how well she was communicating in her courses, Heflin sought feedback from her students beyond the standard course evaluations. She learned that her communication was coming across as "tense, concise, and abrupt."

She decided to use emoticons to communicate tone and posted a photo of herself and an introduction (not just an e-mail that gives information about the course, but a message that gives some personal information), and her students were very positive. "These things don't seem like a big deal, but they can change the course. I've gotten so much feedback from students that they like having a face to place with a name and the text that's coming across. It's a very simple thing, but it really works."

Heflin also makes it a point to make students aware of her presence in the course by posting weekly announcements and posting frequently in the discussion forum, "so it isn't just me posting one lecture and never getting back on there. It feels more like a conversation that way." @

4

Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning Tools: 15 Strategies for Engaging Online Students Using Real-time Chat, Threaded Discussions and Blogs
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What Do Students Say about Online Discussion?

By Glenna L. Decker, EdD, and Sarah J. Cox

We know that the literature suggests that online collaboration and discussion are key elements to success for an online course, but what do students think about online discussion? We decided to find out by conducting an anecdotal study to see if what our students (undergraduate and graduate students in a midsize Midwest university) reported matched what the literature suggests.

After years of listening to varied comments from our students, we surveyed two classes at the beginning of a semester. Of 32 surveys sent, 25 were returned. We then held focus groups with an additional 20 graduate students and with 20 undergraduate students. Our topic was their perceptions of course online discussion. We asked such questions as

- "Do you participate in face-to-face class discussions?"
- "How much do you generally read of online discussion?"
- "What motivates you to participate?"
- "What has made for good (and for poor) experiences of online discussion?"

More than 80 percent of graduate and 66 percent of undergraduate students reported generally contributing to face-to-face class discussions. More than 80 percent of the total reported that they had participated in online discussions in previous courses. On average between the two groups, nearly 12 percent reported that they read 100 percent of the online discussion, and approximately 55 percent reported that they typically read 75 percent to 99 percent of online discussion. Just over 24 percent read less than half, while nearly 10 percent chose not to answer.

We were interested in what motivates students to participate. In a pre-class survey, 100 percent expressed that interest in the subject will get them to participate; on average, 78 percent reported that they participate if it is graded. This last number, however, rose to closer to 85 percent in a post-course survey. Few claimed that peer pressure served as a motivator, but comments included the importance of other students also participating. Other comments suggested comfort in the online environment because they have time to think before responding. Of particular interest is how much of the online discussion students read.

Approximately 23 percent of graduate students and no undergraduate students reported reading all of the online discussion; an average between the two groups indicates that approximately 58 percent read between 75 percent and 99 percent. The rest (except for the 9 percent who did not answer) read less than half, with about 8 percent of graduate students reporting reading less than 25 percent.

Equally interesting was looking at their reasons for not participating in online discussion. Responses varied between the anticipation of the online course discussion and the post-course reality. Half of undergraduate and 65 percent of graduate students believed that a lack of interest would keep them from participating, but fewer than 19 percent reported the same at the end. The biggest barrier to participating was time. At the end of the courses, an average of nearly 88 percent reported that lack of time kept them from participating. Half of undergraduate students thought that too much text on the discussion board was a barrier, as did 38 percent of graduates. On average, 12 percent did not complete the preparation work, 10 percent did not participate in non-graded discussion, and 14 percent did not respond.

Summarizing their responses, along with the literature, we determined our own "best practices."

1. Make the topic interesting and relevant. The online discussion must be a topic of interest. Questions that have relevancy to the students, whether in their immediate lives or that they can connect to their future, will elicit higher participation. Take time to inform students why you value discussion and what you hope they gain from it. Identify ahead of time the educational objectives, and inform students how the discussion will add to their understanding of the content (Jenkinson, 1994).

2. Encourage timely participation. Students reported that they preferred when all participated in a timely manner. The instructor can be prescriptive in this, allowing only a few days for initial responses, with follow-

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www.FacultyFocus.com

5

up responses one or two more times throughout the duration of the discussion. Another approach that has been successful with the author's graduate students is to spend the first week of the course having the students themselves define the parameters. As they discuss their own positive and negative experiences in online discussion, the students can then vote on their own expectations, including when and how often they should contribute. With a social contract, they own the criteria and hold each other accountable, allowing the instructor to be less prescriptive.

3. Ask two or three open-ended questions to provide opportunity for ongoing dialogue. Students will contribute more when they learn from the discussion and find the dialogue thoughtful and meaningful. They are more interested when there are a variety of perspectives and opinions. Encourage their opinion, backed up by referencing the literature. Students want somewhere to go with the discussion; they do not want a closed response or to feel forced to reword the same response as others. Be clear that simply agreeing with a colleague is insufficient without explaining what informs their opinion.

4. Encourage clear, concise dialogue. Students shared that time restraints were a barrier to participating and they welcomed succinct, to-the-point responses. Model for students how to write for online dialogue. Short, inverted paragraphs and bullet points are more effective for reading online (Nielsen, 1997).

5. Rotate students or groups. Staying on topic is important to students, and a reminder of this may dissuade ill-prepared students from posting solely for credit. One way to manage this is to rotate students or groups to be the topic facilitators. Students will then hold each other accountable for the relevancy of the contributions to the topic at hand.

6. Create a safe environment. The quickest way to shut down discussion is for someone to feel attacked. Students need (and deserve) to feel safe in class discussion (Doyle, 2005), and this is perhaps more challenging in the online environment, where typed messages are easily misinterpreted. Students report the need for an honest, open, and respectful environment. The instructor has the responsibility of setting this tone from the beginning. Model appropriate responses and challenges through additional questions.

7. Make expectations clear. One challenge with online discussion is that it is not contained within the period of a class meeting. Students look for clear expectations and guidelines, with an identified beginning and ending. Address this with a rubric that clarifies expectations of quality discussion, including how often, when, and how posts must contribute to the ongoing dialogue.

8. Use group discussions. Students reported that they favored group discussion (these groups averaged five participants) and liked having assigned roles. Requiring students to rotate roles such as facilitator, researcher, summarizer, and questioner gave them purpose and eased anxieties. They knew their expectations and enjoyed the dialogue more. The quality and depth of the discussion also improves as the students engage further in higher-order thinking skills.

A final note is to address the instructor's role in the discussion. Be clear with your students about your own participation. Students report that an overly involved instructor will inhibit participation, as students will be waiting to hear the "correct" answer. In addition to the author's own investigation, a study by Rourke & Anderson (2002) concluded that "student-led discussions provide a free and relaxed atmosphere for discussion, which makes students feel uninhibited in asking questions and challenging the statements of others" (p. 4).

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6

Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning Tools: 15 Strategies for Engaging Online Students Using Real-time Chat, Threaded Discussions and Blogs
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Using Video Clips to Stimulate Discussion

By Rob Kelly

If you're looking to improve threaded discussions in your online courses, consider using brief video clips as discussion prompts. When carefully selected and integrated into a course, these clips can lead students to higher-order thinking and appeal to auditory and visual learning styles.

Stacey Williams, distance learning council co-chair and director of distance learning at Naugatuck Valley Community College, uses video clips to prompt discussion and says that her retention rates and student satisfaction have improved as a result. The key is to use these video clips within the context of scaffolding assignments rather than as stand-alone course elements.

Each unit in Williams' courses incorporates the following elements:

• **Learning objectives**—These serve as a guide in selecting appropriate readings, activities, and video clips. To make these objectives clear to students, Williams sends them to students as either weekly email or pop-up announcements. The advantage of using pop-up announcements is that students have to do something with them (either close them or move them out of the way) before proceeding to the course activities, which increases the likelihood that they will read them.

• **Readings**—These include textbook and online readings found in library databases on real companies.

• **PowerPoint**—The PowerPoint slides emphasize the key concepts covered in the readings. "Whatever they didn't get from the readings, the PowerPoint will hopefully bring out for them and make it a little easier to focus on the relevant key points," Williams says.

• **Concept quiz**—After the PowerPoint presentation, Williams has students do practice assignments, typically multiple-choice or true/false quizzes. "They tend to do those practice tests or quizzes a little bit more readily when it's a safe environment, so I keep those as a tool just for them," Williams says.

• **Video clips**—Williams uses brief (up to five-minute) video clips from sources such as corporate websites, textbook publishers, www.merlot.org/, www.youtube.com/, and www.teachertube.com/. "One of the biggest challenges is finding videos to use in a streaming format, but I do like the challenge of going out and finding them," Williams says.

• **Discussion**—After viewing a video clip, students participate in a discussion based on the video.

Williams typically asks students two questions based on the content of the video clip, and they are required to respond with a minimum of two paragraphs and responses to at least two classmates. "This gets the conversation going. It simulates what happens in a classroom, and it does tend to draw out the students who wouldn't necessarily participate in a discussion in person. For me, it becomes a key part of an online course," Williams says.

Each of these unit elements builds on the next. "I give them the foundational information first and then bring in the video to kind of get them to that application point where they can see the things that we talked about or the things that we read about. They can see these concepts being applied by real-world companies," Williams says.

Selecting video clips

Video clips can come from a wide variety of sources. When selecting video clips, consider the following:

• Select video relevant to the course. There is a wealth of video posted online that has potential for use in online courses. However, it's important to select video clips that are directly related to learning objectives and the concepts in the unit, Williams says. "Don't just put up video without context around it. Don't just build an assignment without telling them why they're viewing it. Tie it into the topics that you're trying to cover that week. Don't let that be the only thing. Scaffold it with the lower-order thinking—objectives, readings, PowerPoint—and then start to get into the application part and let that push the students to think about

Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning Tools: 15 Strategies for Engaging Online Students Using Real-time Chat, Threaded Discussions and Blogs
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7

things and apply the concepts and understand them and demonstrate their understanding through how they respond to questions and other students' responses."

• **Check sources.** Textbook publishers are an excellent source of video. To incorporate videos on a course site requires permission from the publisher. If the videos are in DVD format, they will need to be converted to streaming format, which can take a substantial amount of time. Videos from other sources such as YouTube are easily accessed, but remember that YouTube is not the creator of the video, nor is the creator necessarily the person who posted it. "I pretty much stick to educators or corporations because it's easy to verify that a certain professor holds a PhD and does indeed work at a particular institution. I also limit my videos to things that are recognizable to the students and companies that are recognizable," Williams says.

• **Have a contingency plan.** Williams does not currently have access to a streaming server, so she links videos from other sources to her course site. The disadvantage of not hosting the videos is that the creators or hosts of these videos can take them down at any time, which means that it is important to have a contingency plan in case students cannot view a particular video. "I'm always thinking, what if we can't get to a video? Typically I have reviewed several when I make my choice so there are other possibilities out there. I use a variety of sources as well so I'm not just pulling [videos] from YouTube. If YouTube were to go down tomorrow, I have some other resources I can use," Williams says.

Once you have incorporated video clips into your course, it's important to check the links on a regular basis. "You need to check to see if the videos are still there. You need to keep your course fresh, and I think that's a really good practice. Using

video is forcing us to do that," Williams says.

Student reaction

Although she has not yet conducted research on the effects on using video clips to prompt discussion, Williams has gotten positive feedback from students. "They absolutely love them. It's hard to feel a student's passion for a topic when they're not right in front of you, but when I get the conversation going and see a threaded discussion of twenty threads from the first posting, that to me is a measurable outcome. That to me is feedback that these students are really engaging on a collegial level and a scholarly level." **@**

A Plan for Effective Discussion Boards

By Rob Kelly

Meaningful online discussions that promote learning and build community usually do not happen spontaneously. They require planning, good use of questioning techniques, and incentives for student participation.

Before the course begins, the instructor should consider the purpose of each discussion, how it relates to the learning objectives, and how it can

promote deeper thinking, says Elaine Bennington, director of instructional technology, distance education, and adjunct faculty development at Ivy Tech Community College of Indiana.

The first step that Bennington recommends in planning discussion-board use in an online course is to consider how many discussions to include. She recommends at least 12 discussion boards for a 16-week

course, focusing on the most controversial, most difficult, and most important concepts. "People don't even think about that for their on-campus courses. Half the time they prepare a three-hour lecture with no time for questions, and that trend has continued online. But you cannot do that. This is your feedback

Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning Tools: 15 Strategies for Engaging Online Students Using Real-time Chat, Threaded Discussions and Blogs

8

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mechanism. This is your listening opportunity, and you've got to prime the pump with the best questions you can think of," Bennington says.

The first discussion in an online course should serve as a way of introducing students to each other and to the use of the discussion forum, including technical issues and netiquette.

Discussions should not be included in courses arbitrarily, Bennington says. Rather, the instructor should build the discussions around the course's learning objectives.

"[Discussions] have got to bring the concept and objective together in a way that brings out more questions. That to me is very important—to relate those objectives and the concepts under those objectives to the discussion board," Bennington says. "The questions allow the students to complete the learning outcomes. The questions in a discussion board are like essay questions on a test where students can give these ideas and then communicate more creatively. But the question in the discussion board is even more important. It allows students more freedom because it is not a test. It allows students to answer a question in a way that a teacher can know that the student has got it."

Here are two key questions to ask when planning a discussion:
- What do I want students to be able to do?
- In what ways do I want students to understand this material?

Answering these questions can help determine the types of questions to ask, says Laurie Kirkner, Internet technician at Ivy Tech.

A course can include different types of online discussions. In addition to an introduction, discussions can be used for reflection, debate, or exploring case studies, among other things. And as a course progresses, the online discussions can help move students to the higher end of Bloom's Taxonomy of Cognitive Domain (knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation).

Types of questions

The asynchronous nature of the discussion board makes it more important to plan specific questions because it's not as easy as in a face-to-face class to ask a follow-up question when your initial question fails to elicit the level of dialogue you had hoped for. This is not to say that all questions in online discussions need to be scripted. Another important role for the instructor is to participate in these discussions and help students explore relevant but unplanned discussion topics and to get them back on topic when they stray too far.

"Spontaneity can be there, but it is not a justification for not planning the initial discussion," Kirkner says.

Initial questions in an online discussion might ask closed questions, which can help establish a set of principles to build upon. But for the most part, threaded discussions should feature open-ended questions that elicit divergent thinking from the students.

Too often, however, instructors simply ask students to state their independent thinking on a subject and perhaps comment on two classmates' postings. Bennington and Kirkner recommend using the following six Socratic questioning techniques as delineated by Richard Paul (see reference below) to get students involved in discussions that go beyond simply their opinions:

- **Conceptual clarification questions**—questions that get students to think about concepts behind their arguments, for example, Why are you saying that? What exactly does this mean? How does this relate to what we have been talking about? Can you give me an example?
- **Probing assumptions**—questions that get students to think about the beliefs that they base their arguments on, for example, What else could we assume? How did you choose those assumptions? How can you verify or disprove that assumption? What would happen if …?
- **Probing rationale, reasons, and evidence**—questions that get students to think about the support for their arguments, for example, Why is that happening? How do you know this? Can you give me an example? What do you think causes …? On what authority are you basing your argument?
- **Questioning viewpoints and perspectives**—questions that get students to consider other viewpoints, for example, What are some alternate ways of looking at this? Who benefits from this? How are x and y similar?
- **Probe implications and consequences**—questions that get students to think about the what follows from their arguments, for example, Then what would happen? What are the consequences of that assumption?
- **Questions about the question**—questions that turn the question in on itself, for example, What was the point of asking that question? Why do you think I asked this question?

Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning Tools: 15 Strategies for Engaging Online Students Using Real-time Chat, Threaded Discussions and Blogs

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9

Make it count

Bennington and Kirkner recommend grading online discussions according to a rubric that instructors share with students at the outset of the course that considers the quality and quantity of students' postings. "These discussion boards have to be a graded situation so that the students will take them seriously," Bennington says.

There are many online-discussion-grading rubrics out there. The following are links to some examples:

- http://ois.unomaha.edu/amfarm/Courseinfo/discuss.htm
- www.cu-portland.edu/its/WebCT/student_orientation/DB_PDX.htm
- www.cos.edu/view_page.asp?nodeid = 3885&parentid = 3872&moduleid = 1

Reference

Paul, Richard, *Critical Thinking: How to Prepare Students for a Rapidly Changing World*, 1993. @

Four Ways to Improve Discussion Forums

By Rob Kelly

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:

1) **Model good communication.** If students do not meet your expectations for proper grammar, capitalization, etc., email the individual student privately to express those concerns.

2) **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 the course will comment about it. "I think peer pressure is a good thing.

Occasionally, you will need to get students' attention in the online forum to redirect the discussion or clarify what you expect of students.

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.

3) **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.

4) **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. @

Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning Tools: 15 Strategies for Engaging Online Students Using Real-time Chat, Threaded Discussions and Blogs
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10

Nine Strategies for Using IM in Your Online Course

By Rob Kelly

Instant messaging can be an effective online learning tool that can build community and foster collaborative learning. The following are some suggestions from Debby Kilburn, computer science professor at Cero Coso Community College, for making the most of this tool:

1. **Explain how to get set up.** Although many students may have used IM, they probably have not used it for academic purposes. The syllabus should explain how to set up students' IM accounts. Have students use a multiprotocol instant messaging application such as Trillian or Gaim to make communication across different IM systems easier. Remind students to add each other to their buddy lists.

2. **Offer group chats at different days and times.** IM can be used for group chats. In order to keep chats manageable, limit them to eight students per session and offer them at different days and times, so students can find a session that is convenient for them.

3. **Ask for students' undivided attention.** Online learners often balance many responsibilities and can get distracted during synchronous chats. Ask that they focus exclusively on the chat. This will improve the quality of the interaction and help students get the most out of the sessions.

4. **Form study groups.** Group chats are an excellent way for students to make connections with each other. Encourage them to continue their chats in groups or one on one.

> Not everyone can be available for synchronous sessions, but they can still benefit from transcripts of the communication that occurs in these sessions.

5. **IM your students.** Isolation is one of the dangers of online learning. Simple, synchronous messages from the instructor can open up communication and encourage students.

6. **Invite students to IM you.** Because you are on their buddy lists, students will be able to tell when you are online (as long as you have your IM application open). This open line of synchronous communication can be an excellent way of holding online office hours.

7. **Establish realistic expectations.** Increased access to the instructor can foster unrealistic expectations. For example, just because students are able to communicate with you synchronously does not mean that they will get their graded assignments back any sooner. Explain your communication policies clearly in your syllabus.

8. **Don't micromanage.** Like the private conversations that take place among students before and after face-to-face classes, IM can be an informal form of communication that can help students learn and provide social connections that might not otherwise be available in the course.

9. **Keep a chat log.** Not everyone can be available for synchronous sessions, but they can still benefit from transcripts of the communication that occurs in these sessions. @

Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning Tools: 15 Strategies for Engaging Online Students Using Real-time Chat, Threaded Discussions and Blogs
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11

Blogs or Discussion Boards?

By Rob Kelly

Blogs and discussion boards both provide opportunities for interaction in online courses, but there are instances when one is more appropriate than the other, says Matt Crosslin, instructional designer at the University of Texas at Arlington's Center for Distance Education.

Blogs are typically organized in reverse-chronological order and focus on the most recent input, whereas discussion boards focus on the feedback to an initial prompt.

Blog entries are typically longer than discussion board prompts and can include multimedia. These blog entries are excellent places to complement the content in the rest of the course by providing current information on a topic culled from the Web.

"When you've got five, six, or ten paragraphs of initial stuff to comment on versus one question, it does give the students a lot more to base their response on," Crosslin says.

Often the prompt for commenting on blogs is simply a comment button. With discussion boards, since there is usually just a short introduction, the prompts tend to be more specific. "A discussion board can have a broader range of questions, more than just 'what are your comments?'" Crosslin says.

Pros and cons of blogs

As with all tools, there are positive and negative aspects of blogs in an online course.

According to Crosslin, blogs have the following pros:
- Blogs generally have an interface that is intuitive to use.
- Blogs present content in reverse chronological order, which makes it easy to follow.

> Blogs and discussion boards both provide opportunities for interaction in online courses, but there are instances when one is more appropriate than the other.

- Blogs enable instructors to add current content to their courses.
- Blog platforms have tools that enable live chat and the viewing of content by date or topic.

Crosslin cites the following cons:
- Most course management systems do not feature blogs, and so blogs are often hosted by external websites, which brings up the issue of support and ownership.
- One downside of keeping one's course up to date is that there are fewer opportunities to proofread this content before posting it.

Advice for using blogs

Crosslin offers the following advice for those considering using blogs in their online courses:
- Use blogs for a specific pedagogical purpose.
- Don't duplicate content from the main part of the course.
- Provide a rubric to help students know what is expected of them.
- If possible, host the blog within the course management system so you won't have to depend on an external host.

Uses for discussion boards

Discussion boards will continue to have a place in the online classroom, Crosslin says. "Some instructors just want the questions up there and the student responses. That's their focus. I still think there's a great use for discussion boards, especially for feedback forums, to ask questions. If you don't have a news or announcement function, a discussion board can be a great place to put news and announcements, and students can ask questions if they need clarification." @

Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning Tools: 15 Strategies for Engaging Online Students Using Real-time Chat, Threaded Discussions and Blogs
www.FacultyFocus.com

12

5 Suggestions for Equitable Online Facilitation

By Marianne Castano Bishop, Indiana University South Bend

Handling equity and diversity issues sensitively can be a key to retention in online programs. In asynchronous discussion forums, participants usually come from diverse backgrounds, including gender and culture, and the textual cues they post online are usually reflections of their own diversity. Such postings sometimes disclose personal information, whether the authors are consciously doing so or not. These disclosures could impact the interaction online in meaningful ways.

What is usually required to promote this and any other kind of interaction is a sense of safety on the part of participants to express themselves without fear of repercussions. This sense of safety could enhance the learning experience, promote academic performance, and create a learning community in which participants are enriched by each other's ideas and the sharing of individual and common personal experiences. Having online facilitators who are sensitive to diversity issues and skilled in facilitating the exchange of content in discussion forums becomes a critical component that defines the effectiveness and quality of an online course.

Common to any facilitator role is the active promotion of strategies that result in deeper and deepening insights among participants as well as shared inquiry. This is usually manifested in discussion forums and may be enhanced by fostering a safe and prosperous learning community by the facilitator. An effective facilitator is mindful and purposeful about diversity and its accompanying issues, ensuring equity and respect for all.

A goal of equitable online facilitation is the promotion of a safety net and the provision of opportunities to freely express one's ideas, feelings, and experiences in an online discussion forum. The hope is that this will ensure respect for diversity and other important issues as well as promote reflection and better understanding. At the Education Development Center's Gender, Diversities, and Technology Institute, we explored issues regarding equity in online professional development. Based on Dr. Joyce Kaser's publication, "Equity in On-line Professional Development: A Guide to E-learning That Works for Everyone" (2004), I describe briefly the suggestions discussed for facilitating issues of equity in online courses.

1. Monitor the course to make sure that the equity content is accurate and comprehensive. The facilitator is the individual who must be aware of possible stereotypes and biases embedded in the course and who is able to examine and analyze these issues in light of what is being discussed in the course and the forum.

2. Establish early an environment that enables participants to be safe and secure. This could come from the type of professional development or learning the group is participating in as well as the facilitator's style of engagement. The facilitator could provide the ground rules, including the right to ask questions and to respond in ways that are respectful of one another. The facilitator could also take the discussion to a deeper level or move to the exploration of issues with equity implications.

3. Intervene, as necessary, to keep the discussion on track. When participants become disrespectful to each other, demonstrate rude behavior (flaming), or post inaccurate information, the facilitator needs to intervene as quickly as possible. While a telephone call could be an effective course of action, much of the conflict resolution should be done online. Modeling good and effective behavior that fosters equitable interaction is critical.

4. Monitor the level of trust that exists. The facilitator is the agent who promotes the building of trust among participants. At the same time, the facilitator makes sure that any sensitive issue that becomes a point of discussion and exploration within the course is appropriate for the level of trust within the group. When several of the participants post messages and no one dominates the discussion in any significant way, it is possible that participants trust one another to express what's on their minds.

5. Note your own hesitancy about exploring any aspect of equity. The facilitator should ask him/herself what his/her personal biases or fears

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www.FacultyFocus.com

13

might be that may interfere with effective facilitation. These issues may result in the facilitator's avoidance of certain salient topics or discomfort when participants raise points related to those topics. In such an instance, the facilitator could raise his/her reservations to the group, making this a learning opportunity for everyone.

While online courses are becoming increasingly available, online facilitators are faced with finding effective strategies that help promote excellence in teaching and learning. Knowing and implementing ways to facilitate that respect diversity and ensure equitable interaction is a sure step in the right direction. This could result in deeper insights, reflection, and understanding.

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Using Individual and Group Instant Messaging to Engage Students

By Rob Kelly

Debby Kilburn, a computer science professor at Cero Coso Community College, has two compelling reasons for using instant messaging (IM) in her online courses. First, it's an integral part of the content—she teaches an online version of introduction to computer information systems, and "learning about computers involves learning about instant messaging." Second, it creates a sense of connection that, she says, improves student satisfaction and retention.

Kilburn uses IM for conducting synchronous chat sessions, as well as to provide individual communication with students. She also encourages students to add each other to their buddy lists and use the tool throughout the course as they see fit.

The syllabus explains how IM will be used in the course and how to get set up. In many cases, students have already been using IM, but not neces-

Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning Tools: 15 Strategies for Engaging Online Students Using Real-time Chat, Threaded Discussions and Blogs
www.FacultyFocus.com

14

sarily in an academic setting. Kilburn uses a multiprotocol instant messaging application and encourages her students to do the same. This makes communication easier across different synchronous communication systems, such as AOL Instant Messenger, Yahoo! Messenger, and MSN Messenger.

Group sessions

Kilburn uses IM for one-hour chat sessions throughout her online courses. She schedules them at different times and on different days to accommodate as many students as possible. She allows students to sign up for sessions that are convenient for them but limits each chat session to seven or eight people to keep each session manageable.

The chat sessions are not intended as spaces for formal writing; rather, they should be used for collaboration and brainstorming. The only thing Kilburn asks of students is to avoid multitasking during these sessions. However, she does not restrict the individual student-to-student instant messaging that goes on during group sessions. "Having multiple streams of communication going on doesn't bother me, as long as the students are participating in the [main discussion]. What I want [them] to get out of using instant messaging is some sense of community—some sense that there are classmates [whom] students can turn to. In the face-to-face classroom, students may chat with the people sitting next to them or talk to people on the way out the door. Using instant messaging mimics that in the online classroom," Kilburn says.

The first group chat sessions occur during the second week of the course. During these group chats, students have the opportunity to

establish study groups, and Kilburn encourages students to add each other to their contact lists. After this first session, each student has a group of six or seven people that they have already interacted with, whom they can turn to individually if they have questions. "Even if they don't talk to each other, they can see when [other students are] online, which gives them some sense that they're not in this by themselves," Kilburn says.

In addition to seeing when classmates are online, students and Kilburn get a sense of people's personalities when interacting synchronously that they might not get otherwise. "It seems that the people who are involved in instant messaging more tend to be a little more engaged. They joke around. You get a real sense of people's personalities. To me, that comes through much better than it does just in a flat discussion-board message. When you're chatting with somebody, or a group of people, you get a sense of who jokes around, who's more serious, who likes to think about things a little bit more. When I chat with students I've chatted with a lot, I can tell when something's wrong. They don't even have to tell me," Kilburn says.

Instructor access

IM increases the level of access that students have to the instructor. Generally, when she is online, Kilburn keeps her IM open, which indicates to students that she is online and open to having a conversation. When she is not available to communicate synchronously with students, Kilburn turns off her IM. She encourages students to view this as the equivalent of an open office door. All she asks is that students who want to IM her let her know

which class they're in and to keep the conversation focused on the course.

When Kilburn sees that one of her students is online, she may contact him or her as well. "I'm very random, especially if I see somebody come online whom I haven't seen a lot of activity from. I'll pop them off a quick note such as, 'Hey, I see you're online. Do you have any questions?' just to let them know that I am available for them if they do, but I don't force myself on them," Kilburn says.

IM uses

Not everybody likes to communicate synchronously, but for those who do, it can add a new dimension to an online course. When considering using IM for pedagogical purposes, instructors should carefully consider how they might use it.

IM is not a good way to deliver a lecture, Kilburn says. It's better suited to brainstorming, investigating, or exploring issues. "I set things up on two levels: here's how we're going to use it academically for class chat; but also here's a list of all the other people in the class. Add them to your buddy list. Reach out and connect with people, so that if you have a question, and I'm not available, you might see three other people on your buddy list and one of them might have the answer." **@**

Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning Tools: 15 Strategies for Engaging Online Students Using Real-time Chat, Threaded Discussions and Blogs
www.FacultyFocus.com

15

Protecting the Online Classroom Community

By Patrick Durow, PhD

"Dr. Durow, the grad students think they're smarter than we (the undergrads) are and are always putting us down." Thus read the private message from an undergraduate education student during a recent synchronous chat session in my 500-level course, Secondary Teaching Methods in the Humanities. The message came during the sixth week of the course. I was shocked and surprised. During none of our asynchronous or synchronous discussions had I perceived any offending messages. While I knew how I would respond in the traditional classroom setting, I was given pause by the student's plea. What to do?

The students in this course fall into three groups, all with academic majors in either English, history/social studies, or Spanish: 1) traditional undergraduate students completing their subject area majors and the required education courses just prior to student teaching in the next term; 2) graduate students with a baccalaureate degree in one of the disciplines named above, completing the sequence of education courses in about 15 months for a master's degree in teaching; and 3) another group of students with undergraduate degrees who are seeking teacher certification but not a graduate degree. Some of the graduate students are nontraditional-age college students. Silverman (*Online Classroom*, March, 2006) noted that teaching across generations may be more challenging in the online environment, but typically that is related to increased comfort with technology in younger students. The coursework is not self-paced, as there are discussion board and chat segments required of each student weekly with time specific deadlines.

I did a mental review of the proactive steps I'd taken to establish the online community in this course. I had followed most of the recommendations made by Sull (*Online Classroom*, January 2006), especially a welcoming email, clear due dates, frequent emails throughout the course, and use of simple, nontechnical language. I had posted guidelines for online discussion participation, and rubrics for evaluating discussion performance were in place and had been reviewed with students. I even scheduled a first session, face-to-face meeting. I'd used icebreakers, making myself the object of humor to make each student feel comfortable. And now some of my students were feeling bullied and intimidated.

Rubenstein (*Online Classroom*, June, 2005) suggested interdisciplinary communities within the larger classroom community. I had used some subject-specific groupings for specific tasks that mixed grads with undergrads, but I did not want to segregate the undergrads from others. In addition, my online students during the last three years have found online group projects to be more burdensome (and less community building) than in face-to-face classes.

In that same June 2005 issue of *Online Classroom*, DiRamio noted two factors that were clear in my course design: the instructor's role and student's responsibility. I had structured my role as mentor and guide and placed significant emphasis on student responsibility. A helpful notion I hadn't tried was to pair students to be helpers to each other. That has promise!

I had set a tone of positive, frequent communication via Blackboard, email, and the traditional methods of phone calls and office hours. My syllabus even indicated "virtual office hours" reserved for the members of this class. Following her suggestions, I had established a positive social atmosphere in the chat sessions, been very predictable in communication patterns, and provided frequent feedback to students. I dare say that my enthusiasm for the subject matter and teaching was infectious! Coppola (*Online Classroom*, June, 2005) did note, however, that "trust can sometimes be undermined by a single comment." I hadn't perceived the negativity in the same manner as one of my students.

While most who write about the online community note that there is a greater potential for misunderstanding than in traditionally delivered courses, two articles in the October 2006 issue of *Online Classroom* caught my attention in particular. Humbert noted that students who feel isolation because of the online format frequently drop out of courses and programs. Bishop commented that online student needs are the same as in the traditional format:

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www.FacultyFocus.com

16

safety, sensitivity to diversity, and appropriate intervention when a disruption of those needs occurs.

My strategy to protect the online environment will include the following: first, I will ask myself, as I always do, "What else do I need to know?" Second, I will be proactive in injecting those elements into our interactions that promote a positive community. Third, I will exercise vigilant oversight to be aware of comments that might be misinterpreted. Finally, I will monitor the apparent level of trust among my students, and supply the appropriate intervention where needed.

Patrick Durow is an assistant professor in the Department of Education at Creighton University. @

Using Discussion Boards for One-on-One Interaction

By Rob Kelly

In a face-to-face class, students have many opportunities to interact individually with the instructor before, during, and after class. This interaction can be an important factor in a student's success. Opportunities for interaction online can be plentiful as well, provided you design and facilitate your course to bring about one-on-one interaction.

To facilitate this online conversation, Karen Kirkendall, psychology professor at the University of Illinois at Springfield, uses what she calls "personal learning spaces" in her online courses. These are individual Blackboard discussion groups that she creates for each student, where she interacts with students individually. These personal learning spaces enable one-on-one interaction and provide a way to document each student's progress.

Students submit all their assignments to their personal learning spaces, and Kirkendall provides feedback within that space in several ways. For informal assignments, she will respond in a thread on the individual discussion board. For more formal assignments, she will respond with a score and the student's assignment with inserted comments as an attachment.

This type of interaction is a more effective means of communication than email, Kirkendall says. "I find email to be very discontinuous in interacting with students. I don't care for it at all. My students do contact me via email, and that's fine, but I don't feel I have any way of connecting with my students in a continuous way through email."

Kirkendall uses these personal learning spaces to provide students opportunities for continuous improvement, much like a portfolio. She encourages students to turn in assignments early by offering them feedback on each version of an assignment. "They can turn assignments in again and again. I have students engage with me over a particular exercise as many as five or six times until they master it. I'm trying to model the [interaction] we see in the on-ground classroom setting, where we know that the students who have more interaction with faculty, whether it is before class, during class, or after class, the more they learn," Kirkendall says.

For ease of use, Kirkendall divides these personal learning spaces into meaningful units rather than having all the semester's assignments in a single forum. For example, one unit might be on textbook chapters 1 though 7 and include 10 exercises. Kirkendall also has multiple forums for different phases of writing assignments. For example, in her adolescent development course, she has students develop interview questions and conduct interviews with adolescents. For this assignment, she has each student submit their interview questions for review before doing the interview in a separate forum ("to make sure they're not asking outrageous questions") and the finished interview in yet another forum.

These individual discussions are not the only interaction in Kirkendall's courses. Each course also features extensive use of group discussions. Since providing a high level of individual interaction takes a lot of time, Kirkendall sometimes

Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning Tools: 15 Strategies for Engaging Online Students Using Real-time Chat, Threaded Discussions and Blogs
www.FacultyFocus.com

17

uses an online peer tutor to help with the group discussions. The tutor is a student who has taken the course and other online courses and helps facilitate discussions, chats, and group sites, and addresses technology problems.

The peer tutor asks questions (many of which Kirkendall has provided in advance) and keeps the discussion on track. These discussions are intended to get students to apply the course content to real-world issues that "[don't] always come off as you think they would." And every once in a while discussions can get heated. This is why it is important to have somebody monitor the discussion continuously.

Kirkendall starts each discussion, even when she is not the main discussion facilitator. She also reads all the responses to make sure the students are not being rude or disrespectful. She also ends the discussion with a summary of the discussion and feedback on it. @

Threaded Discussion: 'Lifeblood' of Online Math Courses

By Rob Kelly

Threaded discussions are the "lifeblood" of Kathleen Offenholley's online math courses. They help build a sense of community, encourage higher-order thinking, and provide opportunities for peer collaboration.

Offenholley, associate professor of mathematics at Brookdale Community College in New Jersey, teaches statistics, liberal arts math, and basic skills algebra using WebCT. In each of these courses, participation counts for 10 percent of each student's grade (part of the homework and lab grades).

Offenholley's use of threaded discussions varies somewhat among her online courses. She requires students to post seven times a week in the liberal arts math class and a little less frequently in the algebra class. She uses threaded discussions to
- encourage higher-order thinking,
- monitor students' progress, and
- encourage peer collaboration.

Offenholley encourages higher-order thinking by asking students specific questions about the concepts they learn in the course. "I think that if you ask a vague question, you're going to get a vague answer. So to get at the higher-order thinking, I don't say, 'Tell me about standard deviation,' or 'What does standard deviation mean?' I ask the students, 'Where do you use standard deviation at your job?' Or I give them a problem about a call center where there's a large standard deviation for one telephone call center and a small standard deviation for another, and I ask them, 'What does this mean?' I tell them I want at least two of their three posts to clearly show that they understand what standard deviation means so we avoid those long riffs on how annoying call centers are, which have nothing to do with the discussion about standard deviation."

Threaded discussions in Offenholley's courses go beyond discussion of key concepts. She also uses them to help students to share their work on problems. For example, she will ask students to post their answers to an even-numbered homework problem (the answers to the odd-numbered problems are in the textbook) and how they arrived at their answers. After everyone has had a chance to respond, Offenholley tells students the correct answer.

"It's basically a way to keep track that the students are doing the homework and understanding the concepts," Offenholley says.

Another discussion technique Offenholley uses is the "round robin," in which she gives the students a problem that has traditionally been difficult for students. Once a student posts the correct answer, Offenholley changes the numbers until all the students have solved the

18

Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning Tools: 15 Strategies for Engaging Online Students Using Real-time Chat, Threaded Discussions and Blogs
www.FacultyFocus.com

problems.

"The first person—usually an A student—does the most work. Then the next person who goes models his or her problem off of that first student's problem. I've gotten wonderful results from that where I can see whole classes that used to not get that particular kind of problem now getting it," Offenholley says.

One of the challenges of having students solve problems online is that some course-management systems do not have math symbols. Using math symbols in algebra and calculus is essential, but they are not necessary in some of the courses that Offenholley teaches. And when students must explain what they did using text, they look at the math problems in a different way, which can help students who are more comfortable with text learn math concepts.

However, Offenholley acknowledges that not all students learn best in a text-based environment. "In the future, we're going to see more streaming media. We're going to see the instructor be able to have an audio post, and students will be able to respond by speaking into a microphone."

Offenholley has used tutorial software and various presentation methods, including Articulate Presenter, which enables her to add narration to her PowerPoint presentations. However, the content delivered by these means merely supplements her courses. The bulk of the learning occurs in threaded discussions, which is why she requires students to participate in discussions. "I think in some ways I hear every student more online than I do in the classroom, but that's because I require posts. If you don't require posts, then you get the A students talking the most. The online discussions really turn the whole teacher-lecture-student thing on its head. It ends up more like a graduate seminar, where everyone is supposed to talk and analyze," Offenholley says.

Participating in an online seminar can be empowering for some students. For others, it can be very difficult. To help students who have trouble in this environment, Offenholley holds on-campus office hours and encourages students to call (after scheduling a time via e-mail). **@**

How to Engage Students in Meaningful Discussion

By Rob Kelly

Getting students to participate in an online course is perhaps the biggest challenge of teaching online, says Deborah Raines, professor and director of the Accelerated Second-Degree BSN Program at Florida Atlantic University. Part of the problem is that students often have misconceptions about what participation means. This is why Raines makes it a point, particularly during the first two weeks of a course, to model and encourage appropriate participation.

During the first week of a course, Raines communicates individually with each student. She makes her responses specific so that the students know that she read their posts.

Because many of her students hold full-time jobs and attend to their studies at night, Raines also logs on to the course at night to interact with the students. Although this communication is asynchronous, Raines' responses are timely and demonstrate her commitment to helping them. "If you're authentically there and responding to them with more than 'Good idea' or 'Nice suggestion,' but really asking a probing question that takes them to the next level, I think that gets them more committed to and involved in the whole process," Raines says.

To model the collaborative relationships found in clinical settings, Raines encourages her students to answer each other's questions and

Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning Tools: 15 Strategies for Engaging Online Students Using Real-time Chat, Threaded Discussions and Blogs

www.FacultyFocus.com

19

share information. This collaboration comes into play in regular discussions and those built around realistic nursing situations. Because these simulations evolve over the course of a week, Raines tells her students to log on and participate in these discussions at least five days a week, even if it's for just 10 minutes at a time.

As the semester progresses, Raines tends to be less visible in the course, although she continues to monitor the discussions. However, she does come in at the end of each discussion to summarize the most important points. "At the end of the week, I usually take all the questions I asked them and write a paper that summarizes everything so that they get the right information, because we do get

offtrack sometimes. And sometimes those tangents are important even if they are not directly related to the initial question. By writing the summary at the end of the week, I know that they get the information that's most critical for them to proceed in the curriculum," Raines says. **@**

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

By Rob Kelly

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

> 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.

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 con-

sidered 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

20

Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning Tools: 15 Strategies for Engaging Online Students Using Real-time Chat, Threaded Discussions and Blogs
www.FacultyFocus.com

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 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.

In a unit on creating PowerPoint presentations, Arbisi has students

> 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.

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." @

Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning Tools: 15 Strategies for Engaging Online Students Using Real-time Chat, Threaded Discussions and Blogs
www.FacultyFocus.com

21

Open-Source Blog Platform Provides Much-Needed Communication Flexibility

By Rob Kelly

When Margaret Anderson, a psychology professor at the State University of New York at Cortland, began teaching online 12 years ago, she used an open-source communication tool to facilitate online discussions. She later moved to WebCT when the college decided to stop supporting the open-source product for security reasons. But WebCT did not provide her with the flexibility she needed, so she found a new open-source communication tool—LiveJournal.

LiveJournal is a blogging tool that has helped Anderson to work around several shortcomings of WebCT. WebCT's discussion feature works well for discussions among those enrolled in a course, but Anderson wanted to open certain discussions to former students, interns' site supervisors, and colleagues in similar departments at other institutions (including several overseas).

Anderson chose LiveJournal because it is free, easy to use, and allows users to change security settings to enable variable access. She takes full advantage of the ability to change security settings to provide different access—individual, instructor, class group, entire class, select individuals outside the class, and even the entire online community—to suit specific communication needs.

At the beginning of her courses, the class as a whole has access to LiveJournal to build a sense of community and discuss issues that are pertinent to all the students. Each of these discussions lasts for two weeks. Anderson posts a question in the first week, and students respond directly to the question. In the second week, students continue the discussion. (The discussion can extend beyond two weeks, but it is not required.)

For discussions that are relevant beyond the students in a particular course, Anderson may invite colleagues and students from similar courses at other institutions to participate. For example, a discussion on how states are implementing laws related to No Child Left Behind might benefit from the perspectives of education students in different states or even the perspectives of a broader group. (Anderson reserves interaction with the general public for the end of the term.)

Anderson has students use LiveJournal for group work as well. In these instances, she can easily set up groups by changing the security settings to restrict access to certain students.

She also conducts one-on-one communication with her students by creating groups consisting of herself and each individual student. She uses this mainly for student journal entries based on each class session. In the past, she would ask students to submit their journals every two weeks for her to review. The problem with that method was that often students would write several journal entries just before they were due rather than writing them after each class session. With LiveJournal, however, each entry is date stamped. In addition to journal entries to share with the instructor, Anderson encourages students to write entries that are accessible only to the individual student.

For students participating in internships, Anderson is able to do "virtual observations," in which she can have students post artifacts of their work, such as audio or video files. Anderson also opens these intern blogs to the student's site supervisor, which provides more insight into the student's experiences.

The archives of these blogs provide students with a record of their learning, which they can use to create electronic portfolios, Anderson says. "I have students who have worked with me for three semesters, and they'll look back at their first year's journal and say, 'Wow! I didn't remember that.' In that sense I do like it because it provides opportunities for reflection."

Use of these blogs also benefits students after the class has ended, by providing them with experience using a tool that they might be able to adapt to the courses they teach in the future. "Most of my students are currently teachers, and they hear a lot about the use of technology but don't necessarily see it in action. So for a lot of them this is modeling a tool that they can use in their own classes. One of the reasons I prefer this to something like WebCT or any
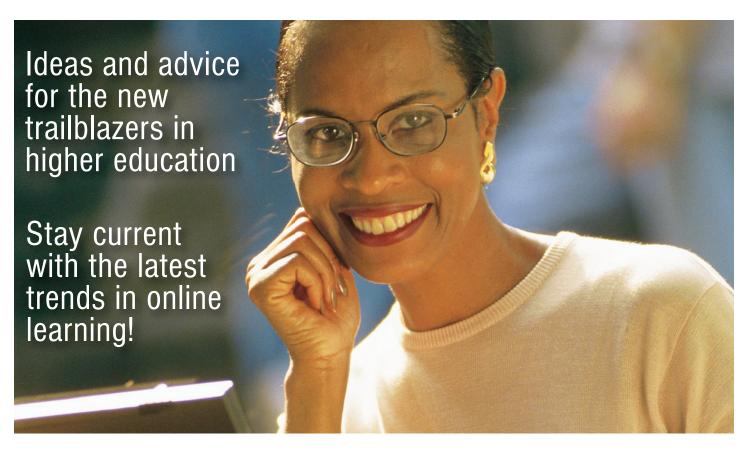
22

Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning Tools: 15 Strategies for Engaging Online Students Using Real-time Chat, Threaded Discussions and Blogs
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of the proprietary course management systems is that if a high school or middle school teacher uses this system in my class, students can replicate it on their own because it's free," Anderson says.

When considering a tool such as LiveJournal or other blogging platforms, Anderson recommends that you carefully consider the needs of the course. "Pedagogy needs to drive the technology use. I love to look at new toys and new things out there, but I want to know what the needs of my course are, and what is the best technology to meet those needs?"

Before using a blogging platform, consider who will have access to each blog before the course begins, to avoid having to change security settings, which can be cumbersome. It also helps to adopt standard user name conventions to make it easier to grant access to specific forums. For example, for students enrolled in her Psychology 501 course, Anderson has students log in as 501lastname to enable her to easily sort users.

One of the disadvantages of using open-source tools is that you may not have on-campus technical support for them. However, in the case of LiveJournal, there are "excellent" user groups and FAQs to help with technical issues that arise, Anderson says. @

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23