

Distance Learning Systems

Teaching Tips #5 — Creating Community: Asynchronous Online Discussion

The literature is rife with documentation of the importance of creating a community for distance education students. Online discussion groups (also known as forums or bulletin boards) are a valuable tool for creating such communities, whether your class is wholly or partially distance delivered—or even face-to-face! At UAF, you have immediate access to a discussion group for your class as part of the Blackboard system (<http://classes.uaf.edu/>). But simply enabling the tool in Blackboard will not spontaneously create a community!

Terminology. A message added to a discussion board is a *post*. A series of posts in response to an initial message (or to each other) is a *thread*. Thus you will often hear reference to *threaded discussion forums*. Discussion boards are an *asynchronous* tool, accessible at different times by different people. Don't confuse this with *chat* which is a synchronous discussion, such as the type provided the Blackboard virtual classroom tool.

Managing Course Integration. You must integrate the discussion board into your course delivery. If you make discussion board use an optional course “extra” you will receive little participation. Participation is the key to community. Some basic strategies to encourage participation are:

- Make forum participation part of your grading rubric (not effective by itself)
- “Open” and “close” discussions on certain dates.
- Where possible, direct Q&A that might be handled via email to the discussion boards
- Create directed discussions by being an active conversation starter and participant. Don't be afraid to interject yourself into threads multiple times to guide discussion as you would in a classroom.
- Encourage topical online debate, perhaps even dividing your students into position groups.
- Require unique contributions. One UAF faculty member requires that students post unique responses to his starter questions. This forces students to read previous material and rewards early participation.
- Make a quick polling question the start of a thread... and kindling for a longer discussion.
- Use discussion threads for roundtable critiques and peer evaluation of papers, ideas, and projects.
- Make use of role playing. For example, have a student play the part of an author or political figure and allow peers to ask questions and engage in debate.
- Appoint temporary student facilitators. Peer-to-peer learning is important to any community—taking on the role of “teacher” will force students to reflect, synthesize, and anticipate.

Creating a Strong Learning Environment. You must see yourself as a participant, moderator and—most importantly—a facilitator. Recognize every contribution, as even the smallest might be the tentative first steps of a student on their way to success. It is up to you to make your students feel safe to say what they think and feel.

Teaching and Modeling Collaboration and Analytical Discussion. You shouldn't assume that your students know how to conduct an online discussion, and even those who are familiar with the concept might not understand that it is not purely a social outlet. Model active learning, questioning, collaboration, reflection, and discussion by being an active participant yourself.

Recognizing Success. We will discuss evaluating the effectiveness of discussion forums in a future Tip, but one quick gauge can be found by examining student participation. If students are interacting out of their own initiative, rather than solely through directed, graded discussion, you have one unmistakable sign of success.

Considering the Long Term. The temporal benefit of online discussions goes beyond the convenience of current learners. Archived discussions can be a valuable resource for future learners, allowing them to find (or you to direct them to) answers to their own questions in a context richer than you may spontaneously provide.

For more Teaching Tips and other Distance Education information, please visit the new and enhanced Center for Distance Education Distance Learning Systems website at:

<http://distance.uaf.edu/dls/>