

OBTC – Teaching Conference for Management Educators 2010: Presentation Proposal

CREATING AND MAINTAINING ENGAGING ONLINE DISCUSSIONS IN YOUR ONLINE
CLASSES

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ABSTRACT

There has been a significant increase in students taking courses online; however, many users stop after their initial experience. One way to combat this is to build an online learning community. One of the primary ways to build these communities is to build and maintain engaging threaded discussions in the classroom. This session will focus on how to create engaging questions, how to keep the momentum going, and how to use a grading rubric to encourage participation.

Word Count: 100 limit

Keywords: online, asynchronous, teaching methods, rubric, learning community, threaded discussions, student engagement

PLANNING DETAILS

Proposed audience:	Anyone teaching online courses or hybrid courses with a threaded discussion component.
Maximum number of participants:	No limit on participants
Type of session:	Discussion followed by an activity
Special requirements:	PC with PowerPoint 2007, whiteboard/blackboard
Length:	60 minutes
Proposal level:	Course development

INTRODUCTION

The goal of this session is to learn how to create engaging discussions for our students so that they want to check-in to our online courses. Online courses use different teaching methods than traditional classroom teaching and are most effective when students feel they have a sense of community in the course. One of the key ways to building this community is by engaging them through the use of threaded discussions.

The key points to be covered in this session are:

- What are online learning communities?
- What does the research tell us about them?
- What are the characteristics of good discussion questions?
- How do you keep the momentum going?
- How do you use a participation grading rubric to encourage participation?

This session will be an active discussion with handouts. I will bring example discussion question and grading rubrics. We will also do an activity in small groups to practice furthering the discussions and grading them.

THEORETICAL GROUNDING

An online learning community is where a group of learners, unified by a common cause and empowered by a supportive virtual environment, engage in collaborative learning within an atmosphere of trust and commitment (Ke & Hoadley, 2009). The development of these communities in the online classroom has been associated with higher levels of student satisfaction and greater student learning (Palloff & Pratt, 2007; Xiaojing, Magjuka, Bonk, & Seung-hee, 2007) and course retention (Liu, Gomez, & Cherng-Jyh, 2009). The study by Xiaojing, Magjuka, Bonk, and Seung-hee (2007) also found that many instructors have a weak awareness of online community and low value of its learning impact.

One of the key ways to building this community is by engaging students through the use of threaded discussions. The online discussion boards (also known as asynchronous discussions or discussion forums) have been widely used in both hybrid (blended) and online courses as they key way of exchanging information, communicating, and supporting learning (Baran & Correia, 2009). For instructors accustomed to the traditional classroom who are used to getting feedback with audio, visual, or contextual cues the design and development of meaningful learning activities as part of online discussions presents new challenges.

Online discussions have the possibility to serve as a platform for students and instructors to interact in a social environment without boundaries of time and distance, which can promote students' critical thinking skills (Baran & Correia; Brooks & Jeong, 2006). Researchers (e.g., Brower, 2003; Palloff & Pratt, 2007) have identified key practices that instructors can use to create a sense of online community for their students.

SESSION DESCRIPTION

The session will start with a brief PowerPoint that shows the key definitions and provides the theoretical framework for the coming discussion and activities. Once this foundation is laid, we will move into a discussion about designing discussion questions for the online classroom. I will provide insight from the research and my own experience and use a whiteboard to capture the experience of the participants. We then we move into how to overcome the challenge of maintaining or creating the momentum in our discussion threads. We will do a small group activity where this skill is practiced. Finally, we will discuss and I will provide handouts of rubrics to aid in the grading of participation in the discussion threads and how it can be used to keep momentum going. At least 3 rubrics will be provided and we will use a small group activity to explore the strengths and weaknesses of each one and how it would be used in a real environment.

APPLICATION TO CONFERENCE THEME AND SUB-THEME(S)

This session fits with the OBTC theme of Engaging Difference and the subtheme 'creating connections'. It will help participants design and maintain their online course in such a way that they create connections with their students and provide the supportive environment necessary to for students to create connections between themselves. Research has shown this to be important for student success in online learning environments. With the growth of online learning and the number of universities offering online programs each year, this is a key skill for instructors to have.

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