

Strategies for Engaging Students in the Virtual Classroom

Communicating with Your Students in the Online Classroom

There are multiple communication tools that are simple to implement that can help keep students stay on track as they progress in your course. These tools can be a replacement for in-class announcements that you might give at the beginning or end of your in-person class. You might also consider making a video to convey your messages below.

- **Announcements** can assist you with keeping your students up to date on what's happening in the class. If possible, create a calendar of announcements that you can schedule to release throughout the course. Frequent single-focus announcements are generally more effective than less frequent announcements that cover multiple points.

Add announcements for these types of course activities:

- Due dates for assignments and projects
- Changes to your syllabus
- Corrections/clarifications of materials
- Exam schedules

When you add an announcement, you can also send it as an email to students in your course. Students receive the announcement even if they don't log into your course.

- **Class Messages** are an efficient way to share important and helpful information with the entire class or select students. Course or class messages are private and secure text-based communication that occurs within your course among course members.

Although similar to email, you must be logged in to a course to read and send course messages. Messages activity remains inside the system, and you don't have to worry about email addresses that may be incorrect or outdated.

- **Online discussion prompts** or starting a general questions or comments thread is advisable. Online discussions provide unique benefits. Students can take time to ponder before they post ideas, thus leading to more thoughtful conversations.

A sense of community among students is crucial for a successful online experience. With online discussions, course members can replicate the robust discussions that take place in the traditional classroom.

Additional instructor benefits:

- You can observe as students demonstrate their grasp of the material and correct misconceptions.
- You can extend your office hours and reach students more often during the week so that learning is continuous.

Managing Discussions in the Virtual Classroom

Develop successful online discussions

Discussions are a good way to encourage students to think critically about their coursework and interact with each other's' ideas. You can create discussions around individual course lessons or for your course in general. As the instructor, you own the discussions. After you start a discussion, you can post comments of your own to guide students.

The most common form of interaction in an online course is through discussions started by an instructor. Participation and interaction in discussions don't occur naturally. You need to intentionally design it into your courses. To encourage engaging, quality discussion, craft discussion questions carefully, and create inquiry.

Help your students feel comfortable and provide them with guidelines as they begin to participate in discussions.

Here are four general steps to developing successful online discussions to help build community and fulfill assignments.

1. Define requirements.

- Share your expectations. Create a discussion where students can read about etiquette and access grading information.
- Model proper online interaction and reinforce appropriate behavior with public recognition.

2. Craft an effective question.

- Incorporate multimedia resources into your questions to reduce the monotony of purely text-based interactions. With the popularity of services like YouTube™, you can ask students to view a clip and ask for responses.

3. Encourage new ideas.

- If discussion posts contain too much agreement and not enough questioning of ideas, assign students with the last names A-M to support one side and N-Z to support the other.

4. Moderate.

- Establish your presence. Ask for clarification, resources, or input from silent participants.

Discussion etiquette

In discussions, threads grow as users respond to the initial and subsequent posts. Replies build on one another to construct a conversation.

To help students understand your expectations, establish discussion etiquette immediately. You can model proper online interaction and reinforce appropriate behavior with public recognition. In addition, you can provide specific guidelines:

- Use descriptive subject lines to make threads easy to follow and scan.
- Keep posts short and use plain language. Your audience is reading onscreen and may have several messages to read.
- Support your statements with evidence when you agree or disagree with others.
- Use professional language, including proper grammar, in academic-related posts. No slang, emoticons, or chat acronyms allowed.
- Use attachments or links to websites for long, detailed information.
- Stay on topic. If you want to introduce a new tangent, find a suitable forum or start a new thread if allowed.
- Be respectful of other people's opinions and remember the golden rule—to treat others as you want to be treated.

For graded forums and threads, tell students specifically what you expect both in terms of quantity and quality of posts. You can even share some exemplary posts. You can also use rubrics to help students understand your objectives. When you compile your grading criteria in a rubric, you can provide students with clear performance standards and grade consistently.

Grading a discussion

Discussions strengthen students' ability to think critically, express their thoughts in a clear way, and communicate with others. With graded discussions, you can assess these abilities as part of each student's course grade. Show a student where their contributions excel and where they can improve with grades.

You may find that assessing a student's discussion participation is ambiguous. How do you differentiate between a student who is active, but doesn't advance the discussion and student who speaks less frequently, but with greater impact?

Student interactions in discussions create a permanent record of participation. But before you begin, you need to have reasonable expectations about what an online discussion can accomplish. Due to the nature of the online environment, you may need more time for well-articulated points to emerge in discussions. Students need a practical number of discussion opportunities and timely and constructive responses regarding the quality of their contributions. Evaluation lets them know how they performed and can shape the improvement of future interactions.