

Structured Techniques for Creating Engaging Online Discussions

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Creating Engaging Online Discussions

Each year, more students enroll in online classes than the year before (Allen and Seaman, 2017). Online asynchronous discussions are often used in these online classes as a method of interaction between students and the instructor typically via an online discussion forum. It is in the discussion forums that students examine topics, debate points of view, defend opinions, and receive feedback from their instructor and peers despite the location or time difference that may exist between them (Cho and Tobias, 2016). Within these discussions, communities of inquiry can be created and the sense of isolation that can often be defeating to student motivation in the online classroom can be mitigated (Hung and Chou, 2015). There are many effective techniques to use when implementing discussions in the online classroom beyond the traditional call and response asynchronous format. Strategies such as role assignments, structured debates, discussion artifacts, Socratic circles, or video discussions can engage and motivate students, create a sense of social presence, and provide new ways for students and instructors to interact in the online classroom. Using techniques such as role assignments or online debates can facilitate the development of a student's cognitive presence, help build communities of inquiry, and increase their listening skills (Gašević, Adesope, Joksimović, and Kovanović, 2015; Wise and Chiu 2014; Xie, Yu, and Bradshaw, 2014).

Online Asynchronous Discussions

An online asynchronous discussion forum allows students and instructors to communicate with each other without constraints of time or space. This allows students to reflect and formulate thoughts on their own time and makes it impossible for any one person to dominate the discussion. Additionally, the discussion material can be viewed multiple times and reread, which may help promote the retention of information, unlike a typical in-class discussion

where people are speaking aloud. This is contrast to online synchronous discussion, which occurs in real time between participants, frequently through the use of a video conferencing or text chat tool.

Online asynchronous discussions are but one method of assessing whether students have met or mastered the course learning objectives. For online asynchronous discussions to be an effective learning tool, educators should have rubrics or discussion guidelines that facilitate student participation. Although specifying a minimum number of posts that a student has to make in an online asynchronous discussion is common place in online learning, simply grading students on whether they posted will not promote critical thinking or allow an instructor to gauge the students' mastery of the learning objectives. Some professors treat online asynchronous discussions similarly to participation points, where posting any response will get the full amount of points. This can lead to students feeling like online asynchronous discussions are meaningless busywork (Cox, 2011). Educators often struggle to find an effective and meaningful way of using online asynchronous discussion posts as assessments of student learning.

Online asynchronous discussion boards can be used to promote the development of writing skills and provide instructors a way to formally assess students' progress. Academic writing is a challenge for many students beginning college (Krause, 2001; Krause and Duchesne, 2000; McEntee and Harper, 2007). The primary reason students drop out of a course is due to academic difficulties (Tinto, 1996, 2008). Following the first writing assignment in a course, many students get a bad grade, which is discouraging and can lead to students dropping out of the course (Krause, 2001; Krause and Duchesne, 2000; McEntee and Harper, 2007). Use of online asynchronous discussion boards to promote additional academic writing practice can help

students prepare for larger writing assignments. A study at Southern Cross University in Australia used a scaffolding approach to the asynchronous discussion boards (Horstmanshof and Brownie, 2013). By using a scaffolding approach, students are less likely to become overwhelmed by writing assignments and can learn expectations for their writing as they progress through assignments. Instructors at Southern Cross University had clear rubrics for asynchronous discussion posts, which made it easier for the student to meet expectations, and for the instructor to grade and provide feedback in a timely manner. For each of the posts, there was a focus on a specific writing skill. The first assessment task was focused on format, presentation, and references. The second asynchronous discussion post built upon the first, with the students being assessed on the development of the introduction, conclusion, and the use of academic language. The third asynchronous discussion post was assessed on the student's ability to analyze the literature and apply critical thinking. The final asynchronous discussion post assessed the student's overall academic writing skills (e.g., use of a topic sentence, introduction paragraph, conclusion, paragraph construction, development of ideas). Southern Cross University instructors provided individual feedback to students' discussion posts, and other students were able to see this feedback and benefit from the critiques other students received. Feedback was provided within two days, which allowed students to apply these critiques to their next asynchronous discussion posts. Students reported that they found the scaffolding approach and the ability to read other students' feedback helpful. Students were able to see the positive and negative feedback students received, which provided the students with a better idea of what the instructor was looking for in the writing assignments (Horstmanshof and Brownie, 2013).

Video and Audio in Online Asynchronous Discussions

Most online asynchronous discussions require students to read and type responses. This can be difficult for people with poor typing skills, and especially difficult for people who are learning English as a second language. Additionally, some students have difficulty putting their thoughts into text, and may find it easier to talk aloud rather than type responses in an asynchronous discussion (Arend, 2009). Although contributing to online asynchronous discussions with video or audio can be initially uncomfortable for some students, it may be a way to promote verbal communication skills in students, which is a skill valued by jobs that has been found to be lacking in college graduates (PayScale, 2016). It is also a way to build communities and increase social presence in an otherwise often anonymous environment.

Courses that take place online can lead students to feeling isolated and disconnected from their classmates. One feature that is sometimes utilized with the goal of reducing isolation is using video in online asynchronous discussions. In a study done with graduate students in an online course, 40% preferred posting using video, 30% preferred using audio-only, and 20% indicated that they preferred using text in the asynchronous online discussions. However, the use of video in online asynchronous discussions did not lead to a greater sense of community (Cummins, Rajan, Hodge, and Gouripeddi, 2016). In another study done by Borup, West, and Graham (2012), the use of video in online asynchronous discussions made students feel significantly more connected to their instructors, and also improved the social presence of the students.

Additional Aspects of Online Discussions

Hew, Cheung, and Ng (2009) reviewed the literature relating to student contribution in asynchronous online discussions and comprised a list of the primary factors leading students to

be less likely to contribute in online discussions, and guidelines on how to promote student contribution in online asynchronous discussion. Limited student contribution was defined as few or no postings, or posts that had surface-level comments. Some students do not see the value of taking part in online asynchronous discussions, particularly in the class meets in-person regularly or the students do not find the discussion topics interesting (Xie, DeBacker, and Ferguson, 2006; Zhao and McDougall, 2005). Additionally, if there is not a grade or incentive associated with discussion posts, students are less likely to contribute to online asynchronous discussions (Dennen, 2005). Furthermore, the behavior of the other classmates and instructors impacts how much a student contributes in an online asynchronous discussion. Jeong (2004) found that response rates declined 17% per a day in wait time across message categories. In contrast, posts that included critiques resulted in higher response rates. One benefit of online asynchronous discussions is the ability for several conversations to develop, however some students find it hard to keep up with the conversation (Winiiecki and Chyung, 1998).

Suggested methods of making online asynchronous discussions impactful include:

- Require students to post to discussion threads as part of their course assignments and assign a point or grade value to the posts (Yeh and Buskirk, 2005). Ungraded participation in asynchronous discussions is likely to result in only a handful of student responses, if any. A variety of choices exist for grading criteria such as the number of posts in a given time period, message length, message content, or use of reference support in the message (Rovai, 2003). Stating these criteria in the discussion prompt will let your students know how they will be assessed on a given discussion topic. (Ex: *Post at least one substantial reply (100+ words, with one reference to a course reading) and*

two replies to your classmates' posts.) Including the weight of the online asynchronous discussions to the overall course grade in the syllabus will provide students with insight into the importance of the discussion to their success in the course.

- Require students to post a minimum number of times. Asking students to reply to your discussion prompt, then to the response of their peers, provides an opportunity to increase the flow of the discussion. The requirements for posting shouldn't exhaust students or the instructor but should provide opportunities for students to meaningfully continue the thread of conversation (Rollag, 2010). (Ex: *Participation in this discussion means a minimum of 3 posts, 1 response to the discussion prompt and 2 replies to your classmates*)
- Require students to reply within a certain time frame (e.g., 48 hours). Deadlines for initial posts and for replies encourage student participation and more importantly, set the scene for dialogic conversation (Dennen, 2005). In order to encourage student replies to posts and to give them something to respond to, early deadlines for initial posts followed by a subsequent deadline for replies is recommended. Splitting up the posting due dates can manage the logistics of the conversation. (Ex: *Initial responses due Wednesday, 11:59pm, at least 2 replies due Sunday, 11:59pm*)
- Have a grading rubric for posts which outline expectations for the quality of posts to encourage critical thinking. Providing feedback to the students regarding the quality of their participation can impact their motivation to engage in meaningful dialogue in online asynchronous discussions (Dennen, 2005). Rubrics can be basic and assess the quality or quantity of posts or both or they can be more complex, diving into the content and mechanics of the posts (Tables 1 and 2).

- Instructor contribution in discussions. Research has shown that instructor participation in online asynchronous discussions can positively impact the quality and quantity of dialogue, particularly in smaller classes (Dennen, 2005; Mazzolini & Maddison, 2007; Parks-Stamm, Zafonte, & Palenque, 2017). It is important to strike a balance as a discussion participant and to respond to a range of students rather than to the same several students week after week. Instructor postings should be content driven and intended to move the discussion along and clarify or challenge points. Adding additional resources is another valuable contribution an instructor can make in the discussion (Mazzolini & Maddison, 2007).
- Online asynchronous discussion topics that are specifically tied to the content if they are required or worth grade points generally show the highest participation (Guzdial & Turns, 2000). Using an optional discussion for exam reviews have also been successful because students see an incentive to participate in the discussion. Other discussion forum options are topics such as “Water Cooler” forums (a place for student-driven, off-topic discussions), a Peer Question and Answer forum (student monitored question forum), or an Ask the Instructor forum (instructor moderated question forum).

Specific Asynchronous Discussion Strategies

Discussion Artifacts

Facilitating a group discussion in an online environment can be challenging. Typically, a prompt is posted, and each student spends a considerable amount of time composing their individual post and then reading and replying to one another. This can also lead to increased grading time for the instructor who must then read and grade every individual post. By using

discussion artifacts, each group will have the opportunity to discover and utilize alternative methods for the online discussions.

Discussion artifacts are cohesive summaries of a group discussion that are compiled by a student group after a discussion is completed. The artifact is created and formatted in the style of the groups choosing. The groups can choose to record a synchronous discussion held via video conferencing tool and share a video file or they could choose to record a presentation using a screencasting software. They might use a collaborative tool such as Popplet or Padlet to create a digital cork board of the discussion highlights. The group may choose to have a longer form discussion using a collaborative writing tool such as Google Docs or Word Online. Regardless of the form the students choose, they are responsible for collating the information in a digestible way and submitting the file or URL to the instructor. In this way, only one item is reviewed and assessed by an instructor, rather than a series of individual discussion posts and the group becomes responsible for synthesizing a manageable summary of their discussion and presenting it to the instructor or the class as a whole.

Role Assignments

The literature suggests that the assignment of roles for the use in online asynchronous discussions can be a valuable structuring tool in order to set expectations for student engagement, particularly if the roles are introduced at the start of discussions (Gašević et al. 2015; Wise and Chiu, 2014; Xie et al. 2014). “With respect to the introduction of roles, it can be concluded that introducing roles is a valuable structuring tool, especially if roles are introduced at the start of the discussions and faded out at a later stage” (De Wever, Van Keer, Schellens, and Valcke 2009, p. 185). The website of the Academic Technology Services division of Minnesota State University, Mankato (2014) suggested using the following defined roles:

Defined Roles:

- Starter - The starter is required to start off the discussions, to add new points for other students to build upon, and to give new impulses when discussions taper off.
- Moderator - The role of the moderator consists of monitoring the discussions, asking critical questions, and probing others' opinions and thoughts.
- Theoretician - Students assigned the role of the theoretician are required to introduce theoretical information and to ensure that all relevant theoretical concepts were used in the discussion.
- Source Searcher - The role of the source searcher consists of seeking external information about the discussion topics to stimulate other students to go beyond the scope of the available text (or coursework).
- Summarizer - The summarizer is expected to post interim summaries during the discussions and a final synopsis at the end, which would focus on identifying dissonance and harmony between the key discussion messages and drawing conclusions.

Overall, any student could be allowed to perform these roles and corresponding activities, however, students with a specific role were asked to pay explicit attention to the activities related to their assigned role. Prior to the start of a discussion, the instructor divides the class into groups of 5 and presents the various roles to the students and either assigns students a role or has students select the role they would like to play in a given discussion. Tools such as a graphic organizer (Figure 1) can be used as a role chart to help students remember the role they are to play for any given discussion.

Design practice suggests that role assignments in online asynchronous discussions come later in the course, giving the instructor an opportunity to provide formative feedback on discussion performance for each student. It also allows the instructor to model the desired role behavior in a variety of contexts before asking the students to take on an assigned role. Providing a handout, video, or other overview of the roles and how the students could implement them is an important component to successful implementation of assigned roles in online asynchronous discussions (Wise, Saghafian, & Padmanabhan, 2012).

Thinking Colors/Hats

Based on the *Six Thinking Hats* model by Edward de Bono (1985), the *Thinking Colors* discussion activity provides a structure to assist students to analyze and think critically by focusing their attention on one aspect of a discussion at a time in a fashion similar to the defined roles technique. Students are grouped by six and are each assigned a color. Each color represents a role they are to play in the discussion. The Academic Technology Services division of Minnesota State University, Mankato (2014) lists the following thinking color roles on its website:

- **Neutrality (White):** This role asks questions, looks for facts, and pushes the group to provide data and factual information in their posts. This role provides no opinion, but rather serves as a librarian of sorts to collect information.
- **Feeling (Red):** This role is the opposite of the Neutrality role, posting instinctive gut reactions or statements of emotional feeling without adding any justification. Explanations of feelings are not required, and no supporting evidence needs to be provided.

- Negative Judgment (Black): This is a role that provides a “Devil’s Advocate” look at the topic, adding critical points of concern to the discussion. This role challenges the general consensus and brings counter-points to the dialogue, stating why an idea might not work or reasons that a project won’t get off the ground.
- Positive Judgement (Yellow): This role is the optimistic and positive participant that provides opposition to the Negative Judgement role. This role supports the ideas being put forth by the group and has an overall “Can Do” attitude towards the topic being discussed.
- Creative Thinking (Green): This creative role develops alternative ideas and solutions to the topic under discussion. This role is the “Outside the Box” thinker who proposes innovative solutions to problems.
- The Big Picture (Blue): This role is often used by the instructor (or group facilitator), who sets the objectives, keeps the group on task, and sets new objectives. This participant controls the flow of the conversation and manages the discussion (Sheth, 2012).

You can ask your students to change their font color, or use a visual signifier, such as an avatar, to identify their role in the discussion. As with other role assignment techniques, this one should come later into the class and be accompanied with clear descriptions of the roles and expectations. An instructor should model these roles early in the class and moderate the group discussions for questions or implementation challenges. It is important with any role assignment technique that participants understand that those group members playing the negative judgement or feeling roles are presenting dissenting opinions which should not be considered personal attacks on other group members. However, students playing those roles should also be aware

that they must be cautious in their presentation of information so that they aren't perceived as aggressive or bullying in nature. With any online asynchronous discussion, all rules of netiquette should be followed to maintain productive discourse for all participants.

As with the defined roles technique, using a role chart with the six thinking colors technique as graphic organizer for small group discussions can improve the flow of the discussion and the ease with which students adapt to their varying discussion roles. These role charts can be used with either role assignment technique and merely serve as a visual indicator for each student's place in the discussion (Figure 1).

Structured Debates

A structured debate can be held online asynchronously, using many of the techniques you would use for a face-to-face class. The class is divided into two or more groups of participants, and the debate is conducted using whatever rules of order the instructor chooses. Using the online asynchronous discussion forums, each group has a private forum to construct their own arguments on the topic that they then bring back to a whole class discussion forum for the structured back and forth of the debate. The debate could be formal or simple, depending on the needs of the assignment and depth with which an instructor wants to explore a topic. A debate would generally include these steps according to the website of the Academic Technology Services division of Minnesota State University, Mankato (2014):

- Decide upon a motion/topic/concept to be debated.
- Divide the class into teams and decide which will argue for (pro) and against (con) the motion.

- Pro and con teams take turns adding a statement that either supports their argument or refutes that of the opposing team.
- The instructor should debrief the debate at the end, explaining which arguments he/she found most and least compelling.
- As a group, participants now reflect upon whether their beliefs have changed as a result of the debate.

In addition, one group of participants can be designated to be the jury (3 total groups). After the two teams have made their arguments, the jury will summarize the debate, discuss the strengths and weaknesses, and make a decision. This can take the place of the debriefing or precede the debriefing of the instructor.

Socratic Circles

The Socratic Circles technique is an exercise in both listening and analysis. With this technique, the class is divided into two "circles" or groups, an "inner" circle and an "outer" circle (Figure 2). As a virtual exercise, an instructor may want to change the terms to reflect a more appropriate term for the action each group will take, such as "active listeners" and "discussants". Based on a reading, lecture, or other information input, the "inner" circle spends a specific amount of time discussing the material while the "outer" circle passively observes, "listening" to the inner circle discussion. After the specific time frame has passed, the "outer" circle gives the "inner" circle feedback on the discussion then becomes the active discussants and the "inner" circle becomes the observers. Once those discussions are complete, the "inner" circle gives the "outer" circle feedback on their discussion (Copeland 2005).

Conclusion

Online asynchronous discussions are becoming more commonplace in both on-campus and online courses. Creating meaningful online asynchronous discussion is essential to keep students engaged and provides a sense of community outside of the traditional classroom setting. Online asynchronous discussions can also be a useful assessment tool for instructors wanting to verify mastery of the learning objectives or looking to give their students additional academic writing practice. Student engagement in asynchronous online discussions can be improved through the various strategies discussed above, providing a break from the routine of asynchronous call and response style posting. Discussion artifacts require students to work collaboratively while analyzing their discussion for the salient points resulting in less materials to grade for an instructor. Assigning roles to students in a discussion challenges students to approach discussions in ways they usually may not. Structured debates between groups of students encourages purposeful dialogue within a group about a given topic. Socratic circles provide listening and critical analysis practice in addition to promoting a deeper dialogue between peers. Utilizing a variety of online asynchronous discussion techniques will help instructor and students find a deeper exploration of the topics and develop a community of engaged learners in the online classroom.

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Appendix

<p>Table 1</p> <p><i>Basic Online Asynchronous Discussion Rubric</i></p>	
<p>Weekly Discussion Posting Grading Criteria</p>	<p>Weekly Point Value</p>

Meaningful and New Ideas: Ideas examine topic from new perspective that contributes to group understanding of topic	2
Message Coherence: Messages explain issues, provide new perspectives, effectively question, or meaningfully elaborate on topic	1
Relevance of Replies to Other Messages: Responses elaborate, contradict, modify, or explain the original message	1

Table 2

Sophisticated Online Asynchronous Discussion Rubric

	Unacceptable	Needs Improvement	Average	Excellent
	2	4	8	10

<p>Initial Comments</p>	<p>Initial comments were posted but did not address the assignment.</p>	<p>Initial comments address some of the assignment requirements. Comments are not well organized and show limited knowledge and evaluation of the topic.</p>	<p>Initial comments address most, but not all, of the assignment. Comments are reasonably organized and demonstrate adequate familiarity and analysis of the content.</p>	<p>Initial comments thoroughly address all parts of the assignment. The comments are clearly and concisely stated, demonstrating that the content was appropriately reviewed and synthesized.</p>
<p>Message Quality</p>	<p>Postings are not substantial, limited to "I agree" types of replies.</p>	<p>Only one substantial message was posted.</p>	<p>Multiple postings including some substantial content were posted, however, a limited number include errors or need additional supporting detail.</p>	<p>Multiple postings are made offering substantial, well written contributions/ opinions, observations, questions, experiences, critiques, etc.</p>
<p>Response</p>	<p>Questions/ comments to you were not addressed.</p>	<p>Several questions/ comments posed to you were not addressed.</p>	<p>The majority of questions/ comments posed to you were addressed.</p>	<p>All questions/ comments posed to you were appropriately addressed.</p>
<p>Contribution Duration</p>	<p>Participation was not continuous throughout the discussion period (1 day only).</p>	<p>Postings were submitted on at least 2 different days during the discussion period</p>	<p>Postings were submitted on 3 or more days during the discussion</p>	<p>Postings are evenly distributed throughout the discussion</p>

	Replies were only posted for 1 classmate.	(11:xx PM and 12:xx AM the next day does not qualify). Replies were posted for at least 2 classmates.	period (2 or more during a 1-week discussion) but may not reflect participation. Replies were posted for at least 2 classmates.	period reflecting participation from start to finish. Multiple replies were posted for at least 3 classmates or more.
Etiquette	Postings are not appropriate--poor grammar, slang/abbreviations, etc.	Postings include inappropriate references and several errors in grammar/structure.	Posting are reasonably appropriate but contain a few errors.	Postings are appropriate, using proper language, cordiality, grammar, punctuation, etc.

Group #	Name	Week 2	Week 4	Week 6	Week 8	Week 10
1	Member 1	Green	Yellow	Yellow	Blue	Red
1	Member 2	Red	Green	Yellow	Yellow	Blue
1	Member 3	Blue	Red	Green	Yellow	Yellow
1	Member 4	Yellow	Blue	Red	Green	Yellow
1	Member 5	Yellow	Yellow	Blue	Red	Green

Starter	The starter is required to start off the discussions, to add new points for other students to build upon, and to give new impulses when discussions taper off.
Moderator	The role of the moderator consists of monitoring the discussions, asking critical questions, and probing others' opinions and thoughts.
Theoretician	The theoretician is required to introduce theoretical information and to ensure that all relevant theoretical concepts were used in the discussion.
Source Searcher	The source searcher consists of seeking external information about the discussion topics to stimulate other students to go beyond the scope of the available text (or coursework).
Summarizer	The summarizer is expected to post the final artifact, which would focus on identifying dissonance and harmony between the key discussion messages and on drawing conclusions.

Figure 1. Role Chart Example.

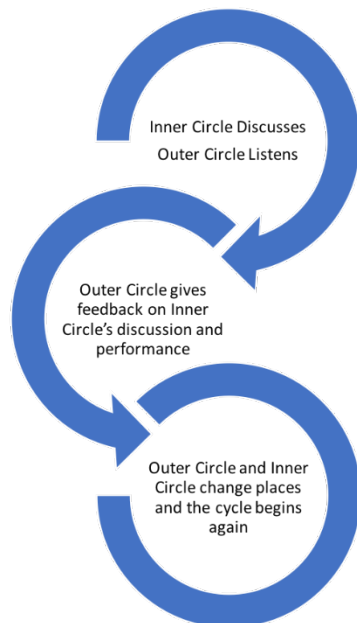


Figure 2. Socratic Circle Process.

