

## 10 Strategies for Engaging Learners in Online Discussion

### Overview

This document outlines 10 strategies for engaging learners in Online Discussion. This is not a how-to document; we simply describe some of the types of activities and strategies that may be useful in your course.

### 10 Strategies for Structuring Online Discussion Groups

#### Strategy #1: Establish Small Group Discussions

*The basics:* Engage learners by allowing them to more easily collaborate in a small group environment. Section off larger class numbers into smaller groups. Only allow access of those discussions to group members. Allow all groups to discuss the same content. The small groups will encourage learners to feel more welcome and less overwhelmed in high population classes.

#### Strategy #2: Thinking Colors (aka Six Thinking Hats)

*The basics:* Six Thinking Hats is a thinking tool that provides a framework to help people think clearly and thoroughly by directing their thinking attention in one direction at a time. Participants are organized into groups of five and are each assigned a color. Each color corresponds with a role the student is to represent during the discussion.

- Neutrality (white): Ask Questions. Given the available information, what are the facts?
- Feeling (Red): Responsible for instinctive gut reactions or statements of emotional feeling (but not any justification).
- Negative Judgment (Black): Seeks mismatches in the discussion by applying logic and identifying flaws or barriers
- Positive Judgment (Yellow): Seeks harmony in the discussion by using logic to identify benefits.
- Creative Thinking (Green): Keeps the conversation going through statements of provocation and investigation.
- The Big Picture (Blue): Often used by the instructor (or group facilitator), who sets the objectives, keeps the group on task, and sets new objectives.

*Variation of the strategy:* Use 2D avatar chat or google docs to allow discussions to be visually representative of the role being played.

#### Strategy #3: Allow for Student Self-Assessment

*The basics:* Allow students an opportunity to reflect on their individual contributions and identify their strengths and areas for improving future discussion participation based on course objectives. This document, [Self-Assessment and Online Discussion Groups](#) outlines this strategy in more detail.

#### Strategy #4: Create Individual Forums

*The basics:* Facilitate Student-Instructor interactions by creating 'Individual Forums' in your asynchronous discussion boards. With basic restriction settings, you can create threads for each student that only you

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and he/she can view and use. Prompt students to contact you directly if they need assistance. Directly engage with students in conversations regarding their specific coursework.

#### **Strategy #5: Utilize Role Assignment**

*The basics:* The literature suggests that the assignment of roles for the use in online discussion boards can be a valuable structuring tool in order to set expectations about student engagement, particularly if the roles are introduced at the start of discussions. This document, [Roles in Online Discussion Groups](#), contains a brief synopsis of role assignment, as well as references.

#### **Strategy #6: Use Zoom or Synchronous Online Discussion**

*The basics:* In an online/hybrid course, schedule a time for all students to congregate online at the same time. Utilize [Zoom](#) or another supported online meeting software to deliver course materials, lecture and online discussions between students.

#### **Strategy #7: Establish Engagement Rules for Synchronous Meetings**

*The basics:* Online synchronous discussions can become a messy back and forth with too many people trying to communicate at the same time. Increase engagement by setting expectations. Establishing general ground rules for communication in your synchronous meeting can prove to be very beneficial to your discussions. This document, [Synchronous Online Discussion](#) contains some language on how you might approach this.

#### **Strategy #8: Concept Test**

*The basics:* Students take a minute or two to write down an answer to a question posed by the instructor. Then, using pre-assigned groups of 2 or 3, students move into private chat sessions in order to discuss opinions and answers to the question. After a few minutes, students return to the synchronous classroom and take an online survey for the instructor to assess their answers.

#### **Strategy #9: Simple Jigsaw Discussion**

*The basics:* Assign small groups and provide each student of the group with a unique reading assignment for homework. When the synchronous class is held again, allow the small groups to convene in private chat. Each participant takes a turn discussing their unique assigned reading, thereby introducing and discussing a wider range of topics within the whole group conversation.

#### **Strategy #10: Debate (aka Structured Controversy)**

*The basics:* Divide the class into two groups of participants, who then debate a topic in a reasoned and organized fashion. This could be a formal debate or a more simplistic model depending on your structured rules. A debate would usually involve these parts:

- 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

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most and least compelling.

- As a group, participants now reflect upon whether their beliefs have changed as a result of the debate.

*Variation on the strategy:* 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.

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