

Inviting Students to the Party:

Fostering Educationally Valuable Discussions

Instructors, especially those new to the online environment, often find themselves struggling to find the best way to effectively engage students in the discussion. How many posts are needed?

When are we posting too much, when not enough? What role is the discussion designed to play?

An online discussion board can, and should, encourage authentic, compelling conversations with students. Discussions are meant to be fairly informal spaces for students to explore concepts in a supportive environment. They are meant to be informed conversations, not short papers.

Within that informal space, the challenge becomes to drive what Sedef Uzuner refers to as “educationally valuable talk” or “EVT.” In their article, Sedef Uzuner and Ruchi Mehta describe EVT as “constructive, and at times critical, engagement with the ideas or key concepts that make up the topic of an online discussion, and build knowledge through reasoning, articulation, creativity, and reflection” (Mehta & Uzuner, 2010).

Discussions play a key role as “one of the few unique places in an online course where all the pertinent levels of interaction occur: student to student, student to content, and student to instructor” (Hayek 2012). Ensuring that educationally valuable talk takes place within the discussions can contribute to a constructive developmentalism approach to learning, one in which students actively participate in constructing their own knowledge. This model promotes engaging and meaningful interactions amongst students and faculty which, in turn, will measurably increase student success.

Your role in the discussions is critical. Instructors guide and moderate discourse. A successful online environment requires an instructor who

approaches learners as a mentor and who shares in their learning experience. Without this, and without a facilitator to provide structure and encourage a safe environment, it is not possible to establish the social connectedness that influences collaborative learning.

Provost and Chief Academic Officer at Grantham university, Cheryl Hayek, Ed.D suggests a simple schema to help faculty engage effectively in student discussions. She advises that instructors approach discussions as they would the role of dinner party host. A dinner party host is visible, personable, proactively plans for a great evening, and immediately attends to guests' needs (Hayek 2012).

A successful host will follow these guidelines:

- Welcome EVERYONE personally at the door
 - Online forum
- Serve them something delicious.
 - Content!
- Make sure every person feels comfortable in the new environment and ensure that disagreements are phrased professionally.
 - Tone
- Ensure no one is silent, including the host!
 - Be present in forums
- Don't ignore anyone. Do spend a proportionate time with every guest.
 - Reply to each student throughout the course. Don't reply to the same students every time.
- Spend extra time with needy guests.
 - Struggling students

- Similarly, don't talk all at once, spread the conversation throughout the party.
 - Post on various days, keeping the volume consistent
- Start up a new conversation when one is stale!
 - Add a relevant link to a current event to discuss
- Invite them back!
 - To weekly forums, to the next assignment even if they've faltered on the previous one, to the university if they've finished your course

*Adapted from Hayek, 2012.

There are many ways that instructors can fulfill their obligation to “spend a proportionate amount of time with every guest.” When a student makes a thoughtful, productive comment using concepts from the course to support his or her answer or position, provide appropriate feedback that encourages the discussion further, perhaps including additional resources or examples to explore. Conceptual clarification, when needed, can be accomplished by using the following techniques:

- Probing assumptions
- Probing rationale, reasons, and evidence
- Questioning viewpoints and perspectives
- Probing implications and consequences

In addition to the key party host responsibilities identified by Hayek, is the responsibility to provide students with a clear invitation to the party! An effective invitation provides guests with all the key information they need in order to have a good experience.

It is worthwhile to begin the course with a clear announcement that clarifies the purpose and function of the discussion board. Just as the dinner party schema is helpful for instructors, it may be useful to provide a similar analogy for students. For example, “Imagine yourself sitting

around a conference table with your instructor and classmates. This discussion board will be similar. It is a place in which you can have lively conversations with your Instructor and peers on the course content.”

Maryellen Weimer, Ph.D., reminds instructors that these may be new skills for students. We can help students to engage in meaningful conversation by providing them with a guide to how they can respond in an educationally valuable way to their classmates (Weimer 2016).

Your guide may identify a number of strategies for a student to experiment with. Potential strategies include:

- Agree or disagree with the initial post and say why. The “why” is the most important part.
- Ask a question about the comment, asking for elaboration on an element of the original comment.
- Provide an example to help illustrate your classmate’s point. You may refer to an example from the reading, from personal experience, from the media or other outside source.
- Draw connections by relating to a comment made by another student or the instructor. Consider building off of a reply another student has already made to the original poster.
- Using the text and/or your own experience, offer an alternative interpretation or perspective. Support your perspective with evidence.
- Help build connections between your classmates ideas and related course content.

*Adapted from Weimer 2016

Students are most successful when they are engaged in meaningful ways with their learning. Discussion boards can be key drivers of this engagement and the strategies above can help ensure that both instructors and students have a meaningful and productive experience.

References

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