

Welcome to the first Teaching and Tools podcast brought to you by eLearning at Everett Community College. I'm Instructional Designer Derek Jorgenson, here to provide you a condensed version of an in-person workshop held January 25, 2017 at EvCC.

Today's topic is Discussion Boards. Rather than focus on the technical capabilities of our learning management system Canvas, I'd like to visit more broadly about the conceptual considerations when using discussion boards as a classroom tool. As a general note, not all tools are right for the job. That is very much true of Discussion Boards. It's important to think of your purpose, intent, and objectives first, and then consider if Discussion Boards are the proper tool for your task. The answer might be "no" which is okay. What you hear in this podcast might change your thinking on the tool, however, because Discussion Boards are, what I call, a multi-function tool.

All tool-based metaphor reservations aside, today's talk is designed to encourage the thoughtful consideration and use of discussion boards in your classes. First, I'll touch on the types of communication important to our students, then branch into some of the benefits of using discussion boards to engage in classroom communication. Third, I will offer tips to facilitate student engagement, and then provide some general themes that help discussion boards work well. I will wrap up by sharing some of the questions asked and great feedback provided by the faculty who attended the live session.

To start, let's talk about the broader perspective: communication. In any academic setting, there are two types of communication that occur. We have both social and instructional interactions. The social side is the personal side, and it helps build a learning community, encourages healthy relationships, and helps create an interactive and open environment. I think it's easy to underestimate the value of Social communication in classes because it doesn't necessarily feel like "work" and it doesn't really emphasize the course content. All the communication that focuses on the course content is considered Instructional communication. With Instructional communication, students interact with course content and ideas in various ways (such as reflection, critical thinking, demonstrating an understanding of knowledge of key concepts, etc.). When teaching online, I highly recommend providing a space for students to engage in the social communication along with the instructional communication. Allowing students to interact with each other and you outside of the classroom can help students feel connected and foster a sense of belonging. When using discussion boards, you can engage in social communication

by including prompts like personal introductions, sharing portraits, interview pairs, and other icebreakers. You aren't required to grade discussion boards. Social discussion boards might be one of those times you either don't assign points, or grant full points for participation. If community building is the goal, how you measure the completion of the assignment allows you some flexibility.

Thinking about both the Instructional and Social communication needs of your students can provide a new perspective on how you might want to use them in your classes. Beyond this, consider how the asynchronous and permanent nature of discussion boards can enrich the student experience.

Discussion board benefits include:

- Timing – allows for reflection and processing; think about posing questions after a lecture, class discussion, or assignment to build on the activities and continue the learning process. You can also return to a discussion after introducing new content. The written record provides a concrete record of the conversation.
- Community – provides a space for students to interact and potentially develop relationships on their own terms, and in their own time
- Practice – students express themselves in writing; communicating clearly is the goal, but the writing style doesn't have to be as formal as a report, essay, or other writing project

Knowing your purpose for using discussion boards and maximizing their benefits is a fantastic start. Unfortunately, the "if you build it, they will come" idea isn't always the reality. Student participation isn't guaranteed, and can be a challenge. Reluctant participation in a discussion board isn't necessarily a reflection of weak design on your part. We encounter the same challenge in face-to-face classroom settings. Student engagement and participation in discussion boards can be encouraged a number of ways. Some approaches you can try include:

- Getting them involved! Be open to asking their opinions and allowing them to shape the rules and expectations of the class discussion board. This can also provide a lasting sense of ownership.
- Design activities that are interesting and motivating. Content that includes media is often better received than text-only approaches. These types of activities are much more likely to encourage active participation.

- Allow students to suggest discussion topics, or put them in charge of certain parts of the discussion.
- Create discussion boards for small group use to encourage discussion among group members.
- Email or message students who are not participating and offer assistance
- Allow collaboration through paired or group submissions

In addition to these broader ideas about communication and engagement, I can offer some specific and concrete recommendations intended to make discussion boards work well.

- Establish, communicate, and model the expectations. Investing time and energy into creating and communicating the rules for engagement sets the tone and expectations from the start. Students can help build the community rules, even. This is another way of giving them ownership of the space and encouraging more participation.
 - Net Etiquette, or netiquette, should be talked about explicitly. Make sure students are aware of the social rules and norms for communicating online so they avoid unintentionally offending others or miscommunicating.
 - Be explicit regarding your expectations. Create a rubric that addresses what you want to see in terms of formality, quality, and quantity.
- When developing discussion prompts, go beyond summary assignments and foster critical thinking.
 - Exploratory: probe facts and basic knowledge
 - Challenge: interrogate assumptions, conclusions or interpretations
 - Relational: ask for comparisons of themes, ideas, or issues
 - Diagnostic: probe motives or causes
 - Action: call for a conclusion or action
 - Cause & Effect: ask for causal relationships between ideas, actions or events
 - Extension: expand the discussion
 - Hypothetical: pose a change in the facts or issues
 - Priority: seek to identify the most important issues
- Invite expert guests or questions from expert resources
- Include online resources like Ted Talks, news reports, and other resources

Workshop participants asked great questions, provided meaningful responses, and shared some of their most helpful suggestions. To recap, faculty asked:

Why use discussion boards in disciplines like the natural sciences when most of the class work is problem oriented?

Discussion boards can allow students to talk about the learning process; use discussion as a tool to relate the ideas to the world around you and find the transferrable elements/content/tools

What is the ideal size for small groups?

Most research recommends 5-7 and it's also more effective to put high performers with those who aren't performing as well. Odd, right?

How do I curb inappropriate posts or address discipline online?

If you have an unruly student, talk to the student privately and directly, just like you probably would in a face-to-face situation

Tech tips shared include the following:

- Stagger the due dates for students, especially if replying to other students' prompts is part of the discussion process
- Non-participants are easy to find and contact. The Canvas Gradebook lets you view and send messages to all the students who haven't completed an assignment (including participation in a discussion board). Using this option can send a gentle nudge to students and remind them of it.

That wraps up this installment of Teaching and Tools, brought to you by the eLearning department of Everett Community College. Thanks for tuning in! Check out the eLearning webpage at www.everettcc.edu/elearning for more information, including a list of upcoming workshops. I'm Derek Jorgenson, your Instructional Designer. Until next time – onward!