DISCUSSION FORUMS

Discussion forums are one of the most commonly used online tools by instructors, which means that they are often dull and unexciting for online students. There are several ways to make your discussion forum stand out.

The Instructor's Role

Berge (1995) identified four roles for online faculty. Each of these roles needs to be present in the best of classes. Some instructors have gone so far as to create separate avatars for each type (rather like wearing a different hat for different questions).

- Instructional facilitator: In this role, you have to have clear learning outcomes for students, but

need to be flexible enough to accommodate individual learners. You need to make learning relevant and design a variety of student activities that will approximate authentic practice while maintaining a safe learning environment. You need to shape writing prompts that will engage students in higher order thinking in your discipline, and summarize and expand upon threads of student conversation.

- Social leader: In this role, you need to create a friendly and safe learning environment. Establish a code of etiquette for the course, and consider allowing students to help create this code or contract. Introduce yourself with either audio or video (video is best if you feel comfortable with it) and have the students do the same. Build a sense of community in the class. Have synchronous office hours when students can come and chat. Be wary of humor that can be misinterpreted. Avoid sarcasm. Model collegial participation and praise students who emulate that behavior. Immediately address student comments that seem to breach the etiquette you have set for the course. Mabrito (2004) talks about this in greater depth.

- Administrative Manager: In this role, you need to keep the course on schedule and handle tangents appropriately. Clarify student responsibilities and balance your participation so your presence is acknowledged but does not discourage student responses. Allow students time to respond. Respond to student questions in a timely manner, and let students know how long it will take for your response. Above all, manage your time carefully. Online discussions take time to prepare, facilitate and transition.

- Technical Support: In this role, you must ensure that students get the technical support they need. Expect technical difficulties and plan for alternative means of instruction. Encourage students to help each other overcome technical issues but be prepared to provide front line technical support to students if necessary. Limit the number of technical tools you use. Even if you are comfortable with the tools, remember that students may not be.

Variety in Types of Discussion Forums

Discussion forums can be differentiated by a variety of criteria, namely:

- Was the work done by individuals or by the group?
- Was it graded or ungraded?
- Was it shared with just the instructor, or with their small group, or with the class as a whole,
  or some combination of those groups?
- Were the other group members or class members expected to give feedback on the work?
- Was feedback by other students to be collected and/or graded?

The minimum time required for an assignment is an essential consideration when designing a course in a compressed six or eight week format. If one only has six weeks in the course, then the minimum time required determines how many or how often discussion forums can be used. If one wants to design a course that can be taught in both a fifteen week format and a six week format, the course should be chunked initially in its six week format and then expanded to the

fifteen week format, rather than starting with the fifteen week format first.

Type of Assignment	Tools used	What is the assignment?	Follow-up Assignment?	Where is it submitted?	Minimum Time Required
Critique	Discussion Forum or Blog	Go to the class discussion forum or blog and critique the work placed there by the instructor.		All-Class discussion forum or blog	1-2 days
Write-Share	Discussion Forum or Blog	Write a paper individually.	Share it on the group forum or blog and comment on each other's work.	File Exchange *and* Group discussion forum or blog	1-2 days
Sequential Group Presentation	Discussion Forum or Blog	Do a Write-Share, then have next person in group do Write-Share based on yours, etc, until all group is done	Comment on other group papers.	File Exchange *and* All-Class discussion forum or blog	1-2 days per person in group
Write-Share-Compare	Discussion Forum or Blog	Write a paper individually	Comment on other group papers. Binary grade for completion.	File Exchange *and* Group discussion forum or blog	3-6 days
Jigsaw Group Presentation	Discussion Forum or Blog	Do a Write-Share on different topic for each student. Put the individual writing together to complete the group assignment.	Comment or Critique on other group papers.	File Exchange *and* All-Class discussion forum or blog	3-6 days
Group Presentation	Wiki	Work in Wiki or Google Docs to write a paper together	Comment on other group papers in discussion forum or Blog.	Wiki or Google Docs *and* All-Class discussion forum or blog *and* File Exchange	at least 3 days
Team Meeting	Chat Room	Work in chat room to brainstorm ideas for project	Report to instructor on results through File Exchange	Chat Room *and* File Exchange	2 days

SOURCE: http://endicott.edu/Academics/AcadResources/CtrTeachingExcellence-AcadResources/~/media/AcadResourcesMediaLibrary/PDFs/CTE/EffectivePracticesforLargeClasses.pdf