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## Engaging Students in Online Discussion Boards

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# Engaging Students in Online Discussion Boards

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## Teaching Practice

My teaching practice highlights ways to keep students engaged in online discussion boards. I offer four tips that have increased student participation in a productive way: 1) rotating small groups, 2) two due-dates and assignments 3) specific instructions on responding, and 4) I participate in the discussion, too. For the first, students are rotated weekly to ensure engagement with different views and opinions over the course of the semester. Groups can be randomly assigned in Canvas (also called WebCampus). For the second, the discussion board due date is set for the initial post, and I add a second, zero-point assignment that hyperlinks back to the initial board for the response post. For the third part, students are required to only post one, substantive reply, that requires they reflect on comprehensive similarities and differences in posts within their group. Finally, I engage as well to help students think more deeply on the topic(s) discussed and to help them see connections across content in the course.

## Evidence of Student Benefit

I have seen success in this practice through increased participation in discussion boards that have produced useful conversations to inform other assignments in the course. Students have also voiced their appreciation in the course evaluations for the second due-date zero-point assignment to help them remember to make a response post. Students also report liking the discussion boards more as they see them as helping them better make sense of the application of concepts as the course proceeds.

## Example Assignment

The screenshot shows two panels from a Canvas LMS interface. The left panel is titled 'Measurement Discussion Board' and contains an 'Assignment Description' section with instructions on how to respond to a peer's post. It includes a 'Newly Participated in Discussion Board' section with a list of steps: 1. To post your own thread, click on 'Reply here'. 2. To respond to a discussion board, click on the name of the student who posted the thread. 3. Once you've completed, click on the 'Post Reply' box in the lower right. 4. To comment on a post, click 'Reply' or 'thumbs up' within their response box, from there you will get a text box to provide your answer; once complete, click on the 'Post Reply' box in the lower right. 5. If you're finished, click on the 'Post Reply' box in the lower right. 6. As a reminder, if you have any questions about this course or any assignments please post your question to our class Canvas. Below this is a 'Newly Participated in Discussion Board' section with a list of names and dates. The right panel is titled 'Measurement Discussion Board Replies' and shows a list of replies from students, including names like 'I am going to...' and 'I have been...'.

## Adapting Across the University

This approach to discussion boards is comprehensive and can be applied across a wide variety of classrooms. Discussion boards are a great way to keep connected and visible with students, particularly in asynchronous courses. In methods courses this is a great fit, especially in encouraging students to evaluate themes across responses (e.g., qualitative analysis) or in sharing tips and ideas for projects and measures. For topic-based courses, the same criteria can apply. This works best in classes with 20+ students to allow for the switched-up groups and new ideas over the course of a semester. I do not recommend having a discussion board every week, but as a way to supplement and build on other assignments in the course to assist in comprehension of content.

# Best Teaching Practices Expo 2021

## Resources

UNLV Teach Online (n.d.). Best Practices in Communication. <https://www.unlv.edu/teach-online/best-practices/communication#discussions>  
Inside Higher Education (2019). Discussion boards: Valuable? Overused? Discuss.

<https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/article/2019/03/27/new-approaches-discussion-boards-aim-dynamic-online-learning>

UMass Center for Online Learning (n.d.). How can I effectively integrate discussion formats into my course? <https://www.umass.edu/ctl/how-can-i-effectively-integrate-various-discussion-formats-my-course>

Wake Forest Center for the Advancement of Teaching (n.d.). Encouraging productive online discussions. <https://cat.wfu.edu/2020/04/online-discussions/>

Vanderbilt Online Course Development (n.d.). Discussion boards. <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/cdr/module1/discussion-boards/>

Canvas (n.d.). How do I create a discussion as an instructor? <https://community.canvaslms.com/t5/Instructor-Guide/How-do-I-create-a-discussion-as-an-instructor/tq-p/1029>

## Contact

If you would like copies of assignment prompts or rubrics, please reach out: [natalie.pennington@unlv.edu](mailto:natalie.pennington@unlv.edu)

