Online Discussion Boards that Students Don't Hate

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As an undergraduate in the early 2000's, I *hated* online discussion boards. When I later became an instructor, I vowed never to use what I took to be such an ineffective activity. And then COVID hit and I needed a quick replacement for in-class discussion between students. What I threw together at the time—and have iterated since—quickly became one of my go-to pedagogical tools, which I now use in every class I teach. They are especially useful at the introductory level because they give students opportunities to develop a variety of important philosophical skills and habits. Since 'discussion boards that students don't hate' makes for a terrible anagram, let's call them 'modular online discussion-boards' (MODs) instead.

There are a few key components of MODs:

1. No Strict Deadlines

   Rather than requiring a certain number of posts every week or every unit, MODs only require that a total number be completed by end of term. This way, students only post something when they think they have something worth saying. In practice, perhaps ten percent of the class will do several posts early, sixty percent will post on a semi-regular schedule throughout the semester, and thirty percent will procrastinate and do almost all of their posting at the end of the semester.

2. Consistent Engagement

   I've used totals from fifteen to thirty posts required over the semester, which works out to one or two per week for a fifteen-week class. This means students have to constantly think about what to post all semester long. In other words, they're constantly thinking about class while outside of class and are always primed to notice something worth posting about.

3. Low Stakes Assessment

Each post is graded, pass/fail only, with a low point value (≤1% of the total grade). These can add up to a sizable portion of the overall course grade, which can help with test anxiety. It also helps students get in the habit of thinking about the grade as a holistic, semester-long project, and not just the result of a few concrete deliverables.

4. Peer Engagement

    To encourage conversation, responses to another post are worth the same as an original post. Sections of the same course can be combined to create larger pools of students to talk to each other. This is especially useful for students who are shy, are second-language English speakers, or who simply want some extra time to think before contributing to the class discussion.

5. Open Forum Topics

    Rather than tagging posts to a specific reading or discussion prompt, I set up a number of open-ended forum topics that are used all semester. Students then decide to post something under the relevant forum as they see fit. These forums can be tailored to specific habits of thought or areas of content that instructors want their students to develop (hence 'modular'). I tend to focus on metacognitive topics such as:

    a. In-class Connections

    Students are asked to draw parallels between different texts in the class, connecting dots between earlier and later material. This is a useful tool for delayed repetition and review.

    b. This Reminds Me Of . . .

    Students are asked to draw connections between my class and other classes they have taken or are currently taking. This gets students to think about their education more holistically and share discipline knowledge. It also helps mitigate siloing.

    c. Put Another Way

    Students are asked to repackage class material in new, helpful ways, such as analogies or infographics. This encourages students to think about how material is presented, and to help each other learn by sharing insights. It also encourages creativity.

    d. Wait, what?

    Students are asked to discuss confusions and ask questions. This helps students develop skill in identifying and explaining

confusion. It also gives other students a chance to help by answering questions.

e. I disagree!

Students are asked to argue with the material. This gives students a chance to raise objections, consider alternative points, etc. It is especially useful at the introductory level for students to get out of the habit of passive information acceptance.

f. Very Interesting

Students are asked for pure expressions of interest. This is useful for encouraging engagement and intrinsic motivation toward class material.

g. I never thought about it like that

This is for documenting new perspectives, changed minds, etc. It is great for fostering intellectual humility and open-mindedness.

By fostering student autonomy over their MOD contributions, a wider range of topics is covered, and at greater depth, than what you typically see with instructor-written prompts. Grading is relatively quick and, given the variety and individuality, much more pleasant than usual. One unexpected benefit is that students surprise you with what they find interesting, often contrary to the impressions given during class. Student evaluation of MODs is almost universally positive, and it is clear that students learn from, and with, each other.[1]

Notes