



## Improving Performance in Online Discussions

Instructional Technology Development / Information Services – SAC 284, Lincoln Park

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### Overview

Faculty whose discussion groups had over 100 postings were solicited for input on supporting active participation, creating successful instructional strategies, and identifying best practices. Comments included not only suggestions but also observations. One faculty member used a discussion group in two different sections of the same class—one in an undergraduate daytime section and a graduate section met once a week in the evening—and noted that the evening students posted more messages. In the graduate classes each student posted an average 5.2 messages; undergraduates posted an average of 4.1. This faculty member suggested the difference was due to having working students in the evening class with more exposure to formal electronic communication for business purposes.

### Findings

Faculty repeatedly reported the following ways to support activity in their groups:

- Hands-on introduction to using the discussion tool
- Required participation, either directly such as by posting an assignment or indirectly such as part of a participation grade
- Clear statement of expectations for both quantity as well as quality of postings.

**Evident in faculty comments was a cogent and persistent tension between too much faculty participation stunting student discussion versus too little faculty participation giving students the impression that the faculty member isn't watching or doesn't care.** One faculty member suggested referring to the online discussions during classroom time. Another faculty member approaches the concern with the suggestion that the discussion be facilitated by the instructor or by students assigned and trained to handle this responsibility. Instructional strategies such as this reflect the variety and creativity of faculty members using the discussion board.

From the participants of this study we obtained the following suggestions as useful techniques to provoke and spur meaningful discussion:

- instructor-led questions and answers
- students assigned to summarize material
- students assigned to present specific discussion questions
- group projects
- peer evaluation groups
- structured argumentation
- posting expert papers for review and informed comment
- assignments based on topics revealed in prior discussions

In many cases a faculty member uses more than one strategy in the same group to go beyond the more “traditional” tell-me-what-I-told-you approach to learning. Evident is the need to employ an approach to teaching different from the older tradition. In successful implementations of the new approach students facilitate and discuss, faculty members guide the discussion.

The real secret to effective use of web-based online discussion seems to be that the questions and issues posed must interact with the real classroom discussion—to both precede and follow the classroom conversation and be recognized as integrated with it. If you treat the online discussion as an add-on with little relevance to the topics highlighted in person, students probably won't buy in. And if the conversation in the class is controlled and stressful, no one will take a chance in being very creative in responding to questions there or online.