

# Facilitating Great Discussions: Online and Face-to-Face

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## What do discussions accomplish?

While lectures and demonstrations can be an effective means of communicating certain types of information, it is often difficult to know what students are gleaning (and retaining) from the presentation. In fact, recent research indicates that seven days after hearing an “effective” lecture, student recall averaged only 20 percent (Fink, 2003, p.4).

Discussions address several vexing problems: they provide teachers with insight into student perception; they provide an opportunity for students to deepen their understanding and transcend misconceptions; and the process of discussion often results in an increased sense of ownership or investment in the course.

## What’s involved in facilitating a discussion?

There is an element of trust, honesty, and risk involved in discussion, so it’s best to choose a question or case study whose solution is genuinely debatable. If students perceive that there’s a “correct” answer that’s being kept from them, they will likely feel resentful and used. One useful strategy is to ask students to draw on their own life experiences in the discussion – thereby building a memorable bridge between course concepts and each student’s unique past.

As part of pre-discussion planning, write down the following:

- **Goals** – what you want students to understand and/or be able to do as a result of the discussion.
- **Experiences** (lectures, readings, case studies, experiments, life experiences) that you want students to draw on in their discussion – be as specific as possible and limit it to two or three things.
- **Open-ended questions** you want students to discuss – make sure these align with your goals for student understanding and skill development.

Also consider follow-up questions you may want to ask in the moment. These questions are usually short – designed to demonstrate interest and help students flesh out what they’ve just said. For example: Why?, What happened next?, What do you make of that?, How does that differ from X?, etc.

You may choose to divide your class into discussion groups of five to seven people, and then ask each group to report back. If your class is small, you may prefer to facilitate the discussion as a whole group. In any event, share the discussion goals with the class and be clear about the experiences you want them to draw on as evidence in making their points.

Discussions can take time to get rolling. If you are facilitating a whole group discussion, be wary of jumping in too soon when the room goes silent. While you may feel uncomfortable with the “wait time,” eventually someone in the class will speak up – sometimes the most profound things are said after painful lapses of silence. If you feel that you have to say something, look to your list of follow-up questions for guidance.

As a facilitator, your role is to help students clarify their own thinking. This is quite different from providing “the answers.” Be on the lookout for incongruities and discrepancies among the points being made – gently point these out and respectfully ask the group to work on resolving anything that’s unclear. Sometimes it’s useful to summarize things that have been said – reflecting the group’s words so they have a sense of how the discussion is adding up. If an intriguing question comes to mind – a query for which you genuinely don’t have an answer, offer it to the group.

As you listen to how the conversation is developing, keep an eye on the goals you have set for the discussion. If the group is digressing, gently remind them of the discussion goals and guide them back on course (for example, “this is a fascinating offshoot to the conversation, but I’d like us to get back to the question of ...”).

Remember to allow time for wrap-up and reflection at the end of each discussion. Wrap up is a time for summarizing what has been learned. It is also a time to clarify any unfinished business. If there’s a concept that the group has not grasped, characterize this as unfinished business that will need to be attended to in future discussion.

There are always a few people in face-to-face discussions who don’t participate. This is why it is important to allow 5-10 minutes at the end of each discussion for individual journaling. Ask each person to reflect on what she has learned, how her thinking has developed or changed, and what questions remain. Collect the reflections – they will help you distinguish between people who are simply soft-spoken and people who are floundering.

## How do online discussions differ from their face-to-face counterparts?

Face-to-face and online discussions have much in common – but there are some critical distinctions. According to Gilly Salmon, effective online groups go through four stages of development:

1. *Access and Motivation:* Getting online successfully and testing out the system. Call or email students who don’t “show up” online for class in the first few days – swift intervention pays off in the long run. Offer a “Help!” discussion so that you can address students’ needs without burdening the course discussion with “how do I” posts.
2. *Online Socialization:* Make sure you send a welcoming email message to students after they have posted for the first time. In addition to an “academic” discussion area, provide a social discussion – this is a useful place to direct chitchat as well.
3. *Information Exchange:* Include course content and relevant links. Encourage first reports to be “about” something – a reading, lecture, experience, etc.
4. *Knowledge Construction:* Students work together to develop their own generative thoughts, questions, and insights in relationship to the topic. Encourage students to compare and contrast their experiential reports.

“Online discussion can reach beyond the temporal and spatial constraints of the campus class, and as a result can often add a richer and deeper perspective as students respond when they are informed and inspired ... Some students do not learn well from lectures, and many students actually discover their own voice for the first time when working online...”

We are all familiar with the situation of being immersed in a terrific discussion in the campus class, and then having to stop as it is the end of the scheduled class time. Rather than having to wait for the next campus class, by which time the idea might have lost some of its force, the discussion can continue online ... ‘pushing the classroom walls.’”  
Tisha Bender

5. *Development*: Students take time to reflect on what they have learned as individuals – bringing the focus back onto each person’s own learning journey.

In a face-to-face classroom, you can always rephrase a question if it is misinterpreted. In an online setting, it is very important to think through the wording of your questions in advance. The question should be written in plain “spoken” English – and as uncluttered as possible. You may want to test your questions out on others in advance to see how they respond.

In a face-to-face setting, you may have three or four questions written in your lesson plan. But if you ask several questions all at once online, the discussion can become unfocused. Ask one question at a time – and provide a succinct outline of the things you’d like to see in a response.

Be clear about the time frame in which you want the discussion to take place (e.g., “Post your response to the following question by Friday ... in your response, include the following information to support your assertions.”).

Be explicit about how you want students to interact with each other’s posts. For example, you may ask them to read each other’s first post, and then respond to at least two with a follow up message. Provide specific guidelines for what should be included in their response – otherwise, the message board may be filled with “me to” or “I like your post” messages. You may want to provide students with a rubric to help them distinguish between a “fluff” post (that gets little or no credit), and a substantive post that probes the topic to take conversation to a deeper level.

Finally, be clear about the role you plan to play as an online facilitator. Tell students when you will check messages – you should check at least twice a week. However, do not pepper the discussion area with your own responses. Research indicates that this actually deters student discussion. This is the online equivalent to “wait time.” Read through the messages carefully and compose one message to the whole group. For example, summarize the discussion thus far and then pose a question intended to take the conversation to a deeper level.

Crafting successful online discussions can be a bit tricky at first. If you would like help, contact the Pottruck Technology Resource Center – one of our instructional designers will be happy to provide consultation, advice, and support.

### Composing a Facilitation Message

1. Before reading discussion posts, identify the 2-3 insights or skills that you want students to achieve during their discussion and *write them down*. These discussion goals should inform your decisions as a facilitator.
2. Collect all messages posted by the group on the topic (you may want to print them out so that you can jot down notes and highlight passages). Review the messages as a whole, asking yourself: What are the learners’ ideas? What does the group need to pursue in more depth?
3. Write a message to the group that reflects their ideas, points out incongruities, and ends with a question designed to prompt further progress toward the discussion goals.
4. Before you post the message, consider the following questions: What behaviors do I want to model and/or encourage? How do I think my students will perceive the post? Re-read your message, revise it, and run it through a spell checker.

*Gail Matthews-DeNatale & Sue Doubler*

## Where can I go to learn more about facilitating discussions?

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