

Online Discussion (Script)

Online discussion is a relatively new teaching strategy. It is, in simple terms, moving your classroom discussion to the Internet. Participants provide their comments in the form of text posted on a discussion site instead of speaking. Of course, a closed network instead of the internet could be used, but the activity would lose valuable advantages.

The first online discussions were seen in the 1970's on mainframe computers, then on bulletin board systems in the 80's. Internet relay chat became popular in the 90's. Now, with the explosion of technology, the World Wide Web (WWW) presents a wide variety of ways to host an online discussion.

The technology required to have online discussion on your course Web page is access to the internet and a program called a CGI, a Common Gateway Interface. This processes the dialogue between the user and the web server. CGIs are easy to find. Of course, the first place to start is to check with your school's tech support to what is available already. A teacher would want to make certain that every student in the class has adequate Internet access to participate in the discussion. IT courses are particularly well suited for this strategy since most students in these courses have an interest in technology, and the program facilities are more likely to provide the technology needed to facilitate online discussion.

The two main formats for online discussion are the "chat room" and the discussion area. The main difference between the two is time. A chat room discussion takes place in real time, like a regular conversation, and a participant must be logged on and in the chat room in order to participate. By contrast, a discussion area posts comments and keeps them on line. A participant does not have to be online at the time it was posted in order to participate. A response can actually be made days later. Generally speaking, the discussion area is more useful as a teaching strategy and will be the focus of this podcast.

There are advantages and disadvantages to online discussion. One of the advantages that online discussion brings to the participants is time to think about what they will say. Often, it affords students a chance to research a fact or event before committing it writing. They can often talk to others about their entry before posting it. This usually results in an increase in the quality and clarity of the entry and the confidence of the student. Students can participate wherever and whenever internet access is available. It is easier for students to see the "big picture" of the conversation when all of the comments can be viewed at one time. And, it is much more likely that shy or withdrawn students, who would not normally participate in discussion, will participate online. This is especially true since participation is usually required. Participants often use pseudonyms to feel more comfortable online. Advantages that an online discussion brings to the teacher include a better opportunity to more critically evaluate the contributions from students, and monitoring the involvement of the class as a whole.

Because it is writing and available for review for a longer period of time, a teacher is better able to identify topics that need clarification or that have motivated students. This information can be invaluable to a teacher as they prepare for class time.

The disadvantages of online discussion are similar to regular classroom discussion. Just as some students are prone to talking and contribute too much, too long contributions often dominating the discussion. Some students write too much. This often creates a barrier to the discussion. It is likely that many students will stop reading the posting or skip it altogether once they see how long it is. At the other end of the spectrum are the students that do not write enough. In those cases, it's often difficult to communicate with meaning or clarity. Teachers can work to overcome those barriers by providing instruction and guidelines for online postings, and by modeling those guidelines themselves. A teacher may desire to initiate discussion with a model entry.

The first step, and almost always the most important, is the creation of a discussion question. Often, a teacher will want two or three questions being addressed in the conversation. Usually this can be handled if the questions are closely related, but the more questions to be addressed, the more difficult it is to follow the discussion. The question should be thought provoking and encourage participation. Dr. Dave Knowlton at Crichton College emphasizes the level of Bloom's Taxonomy by including words such as "apply," "analyze," "synthesize," and "evaluate" in the actual question. This practice will guide the students to the quality level of participation desired. In the "Online Discussion Record" example provided, the instructor has completed an introductory lesson that describes the PowerPoint program. The online discussion provides an opportunity for students to process what has been taught and exercise higher ordered thinking skills such as "analyze," and "evaluate."

Next, the teacher must determine and communicate how contribution(s) to the discussion will be evaluated and how long the discussion will last. Factors to consider include:

1. How many times did the student contribute?
2. What is the quality level of the entry?
3. Is the entry grammatically correct and easy to understand?
4. Is the entry respectful of others involved in the discussion?
5. Deadlines for first entry, second entry, etc.
6. Timeline that defines the start and end of the discussion. This is usually driven by the timeline of the course and unit of study.

At times, students will try to take the easy way out and post something like "I agree with John." Entries such as these are not usually given credit. Depending on the discussion, the teacher must determine if the desired response is to reflect material that has been presented, extension beyond presented material, investigation of new subject matter, or simply brainstorming.

After discussion begins, the teacher should monitor and record student participation. An example of an online discussion record and a blank template is available for download at the end of this presentation. [For an example of a discussion record, download the “Online Discussion Record” file. For the template, download the “Online Discussion Record Template” file. Note that the template provides a place for the question or questions, a place to record participation and a guide for evaluation.] You may decide to create one of your own and modify things such as evaluation criteria, etc. Although there are times where a teacher may take a “hands off” approach in order to encourage more honest responses, the opportunity to provide feedback and guide the discussion is part of the value of this strategy. The instructor can also take advantage of involvement to provide praise and reinforcement to students as they participate and continue to model the quality level of discussion desired. And, as mentioned before, this is the time when a teacher can take advantage of what they see in the discussion to better address the needs of the students during classroom time.

Finally, a summary time should be included at the end of the discussion. This provides a review and emphasis of main points for the students as well as feedback for the teacher to determine the success of the discussion activity. Summary can be online or in class.

To encourage student participation in online discussion, a teacher should consider the following suggestions adapted from “Taking Discussion Online” by Sarah Horton (2002):

1. Participate. A teacher’s participation communicates that the activity is important.
2. Give credit. Often extra credit for exceptional work will motivate students.
3. Allow anonymity. This will help shy students. Make sure you know their pseudonym.
4. Restrict access. Requiring a password, etc. helps students know that only you and their classmates will see what they write. This helps to put the students at ease.
5. Encourage collaboration. Students can use online discussion to work together on an assignment, solve problems or brainstorm.
6. Be realistic. If you don’t have much discussion in your classroom, it may be more difficult to generate discussion online as well.

Online discussion can be employed with a variety of formats. In “Best Practices in Online Teaching – During Teaching – Promote Active Learning” Larry Ragan lists several possibilities for using online discussion, including:

1. Small group discussions
2. Buzz groups
3. Case discussions using real-world problems
4. Debating teams where students present and defend their positions
5. Jigsaw groups where subgroups discuss various parts of a topic, and

6. Role playing mocking real settings

However you decide to use it, online discussion can be a powerful addition to your arsenal of strategies.

To download a print version of this presentation that includes the Online Discussion Record and template, download the “Online Discussion” file at the end of this presentation.

To download a script of this audio presentation download the “Online Discussion Script” file at the end of this presentation.

To download a list of references used in this presentation, download the “References” file at the end of this presentation.