

Managing Online Interaction

Possible Uses for Discussion and Chat

- *Discussions of specific readings/topics*
- *Forum devoted to assignments and procedures*
Having this kind of a discussion board will save you time responding to questions that more than one student might ask in the course of the semester.
- *"Ice-breaker"*
Having a less structured forum can allow students to express themselves more freely and get to know each other better.
- *Group projects*
Setting up a forum for a group of students working on a long-term project allows you to solve a few common difficulties:
 - 1) asynchronous conferencing overcomes the schedule-coordination problems that plague typical face-to-face learning teams;
 - 2) the advantage for promoting online interaction is that learning teams should bond and thus make each student in the group want to do his or her share;
 - 3) you can easily assess the contribution of each student which is normally a difficult challenge.
- *Chats with guest experts*
When inviting a guest speaker is not possible, you can arrange a chat session. This will require additional planning, such as providing guest access to your Telesis community to the expert.

Grading

- *Require participation*
Set aside a portion of the grade allocation for participation in the online discussions. You can tell the students that they must post x-number of items each week or for each topic.
Note: you can also have a separate forum for informal interaction that is not graded.
- *Quality vs. quantity*
Try to grade on quality of the postings. That is highly subjective, but no more so than grading of term papers or essays.
- *Peer grading*
You might want to consider peer grading for some small group discussions. Tell students at the beginning of the conference that at the end of the activity they will be asked to rate each other on the value of each person's contribution. This can be a powerful incentive for students to do quality work in the conference. However, most of the students that I encounter do not like to grade each other. This is especially a problem if they have bonded as a result of operating in a learning team. In that case, they may want to give everybody an A, even when some students made distinctly greater contributions to the conference. Problems also arise by having them rank each other, because they might think that rank 1 gets an A, rank 2 gets a B, and the lower ranked students will get a failing grade. One possible solution is to have students grade the contributions of another group, which also gives them added learning experiences. Another possibility is to structure the ratings so that they don't translate directly into A, B, C, etc. The teacher might say, for example, that everyone will get an A, B, or C for the peer helping portion of the final grade, depending on the peer helping ratings. The ratings might be in the form of "superior, good, fair, poor," or some equivalent. Another possibility is to have each student name the one student in the group who helped them the most. Students who are named more than once might get bonus points on the final grade. A similar approach could be used with a ranking scheme. Students with the best ranks get the most bonus points on the final grade.

Organizing and managing forums and chats

- *Make the activity interesting*
If it is a discussion topic, make it one that students have a reason to get engaged in. Appeal to their life experiences, vested interests and ambitions. It might even be a good idea to let the students create some of the topics, especially if you provide an overall academic framework to guide them where you want them to go. If it is a group-created paper or project, let the students pick the subject within the bounds of the academic objectives.
- *Structure the activity*
Give students guideposts to help them think of things to say that are academically meaningful. Choice of topics has a great deal of influence here.
 - Topics should be organized around an academic theme that serves course objectives.
 - Topics should not be so open-ended that students digress.
 - You can go further by creating activities that are best performed in a structured way. For example, debates can be structured by requiring students to post a position, to which others respond with pro or con supporting arguments, followed by critique of the arguments. Or brainstorming can be structured by having students first generate a list of alternatives; re-think the list by creating new ordering, structure, or relationships, systematically evaluating each item to produce a "short list" of viable alternatives; and then reaching consensus decision on the best choices, followed by prioritization.
- *Allow discussions enough time to develop*
Give at least 3-4 days for each discussion and ask your students to make several posts – at least one a day. This way they can see each other's responses and gradually develop a whole conversation. If you simply ask students to make even multiple posts, they might type them up all in one sitting and never come back to the discussion board – thus missing the whole experience of interactivity.
- *Follow-up assignments*
To make students engage with all of the view points expressed in a discussion, you might want to ask them to create a type-written summary of the discussion or a reflective piece on how the activity proceeded. As Dr. William Klemm points out, "this kind of activity capitalizes on all the advantages of constructivist theory, which holds that students learn best when they have to integrate, synthesize and apply information by creating a deliverable piece of work."
- *Instructor's role in the discussion*
Discussions tend to be more active and productive when the instructor is actively engaged in them. You should at least monitor the activity and intervene to steer students in the right direction. When the teacher participates in a conference, providing extensive critique, feedback, and encouragement, students cannot help but become more involved.
- *Managing chat discussions*
Chatroom discussions tend to be much more layered than your typical face-to-face classroom. Rather than one or two students serially responding to any given point, half the students in the chat will simultaneously respond. This can lead to a richer, more textured response to a particular question or idea, but the danger is a lack of movement across a larger knowledge constructing a narrative. The challenge for the instructor is to think along multiple trains of thought and be able to steer the discussion in more productive directions.
Note: Don't forget to enable the chat log option in Telesis so that you and your students can go over the whole discussion and assess how it went. You can use the log both for follow-up exercises and grading.