

Turning Lurkers into Learners

Increasing Participation in Your Online Discussions



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Communication and discussion are keys to student learning and understanding in online environments. With more teachers and K–12 school systems adopting course management tools such as Blackboard and SharePoint, online discussion has become another means of engaging students in curriculum-based learning. ISTE’s NETS for Students state that students should “use telecommunications to collaborate, publish, and interact with peers, experts, and other audiences.” Online discussion can serve as a powerful means of developing understanding and as a way to incorporate technology into the learning environment.

The following is an example of a possible discussion-starter for creating positive dialogue in an online learning environment. “Welcome to Online Learning 101! In our first online discussion, let’s spend some time getting to know the other members of the class. Please introduce yourself by choosing a type of fish that you feel best describes you, being sure to explain your reasoning so we can get to know a little bit more about you.

“I would like to introduce myself, your instructor. I am a salmon. I am a strong believer in perseverance, so like the salmon, I never give up. I am a family-oriented person, with two female spawn of my own, so returning to my home and family is also important to me. I also like to travel and see the world, and we all know salmon

are long-distance travelers! What fish best represents you, and why?”

Online discussions provide opportunities for students to generate reflections, share ideas and questions with others, and participate in dialogues that can lead to further investigations and discoveries. However, posting thoughts and ideas online for others to see can be an intimidating experience, which is why it is important for teachers to provide a safe and inviting online discussion environment. To ensure an active, beneficial learning experience, we must entice students into feeling comfortable expressing themselves online.

Hooking Them

It is essential to provide a hook when first introducing online discussion to students. The hook should be something that is going to spark their interests, that makes responding easy to do without too much initial knowledge. For example, the goal of the hook in the introduction example is to get students comfortable in the online environment and as quickly as possible develop a sense of community and belonging with their peers and teacher.

Introducing students to online discussion slowly is important to effective online learning. An easy way to begin is by stating your expectations, with something such as “Please post at least four different times during the week. Be sure to respond to the



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discussion prompt and at least three other responses.” Another good beginning is to help define the tone for the online discussion, stating something like “Your responses should be thoughtful, using key points in the readings as examples, and making sure to use language appropriate for all to read.”

You want students to develop productive relationships not only with the instructor, but also, and more important, with fellow students in the class. Hooking the students at the beginning of the learning experience with non-threatening discussions helps develop positive group dynamics. We will mention several hooks that we found to be effective in our own online learning and teaching experience.

An effective first discussion is an introduction, where students and the instructor introduce themselves online, sharing personal information, interests, and hobbies. This helps create some interest in each other, encourages a sense of belonging, and starts building relationships.

Asking students what they hope to learn from the course or topic, or describing a course-related experience they have had are other hooks to get students discussing and making connections with others. Games as

hooks are another way to get students involved in online discussion because they create a very interactive and enjoyable experience where students can build connections with one another. One such diversion is a “who’s who” game, where each person sends the instructor three facts about themselves, including at least one that is obscure. The instructor then posts these facts, using numbers instead of names, and students must try to identify which student belongs to each set of facts using any method possible, including asking questions of the members of the class—online only, of course. There are other types of online games, such as having students write a story, with the first person beginning the story, and subsequent class members continuing the story in sequence or creating a scenario, for example, a lifeboat that will only hold a given number of people and everyone must explain what qualities would make them a good choice for being selected to be on the lifeboat.

Hooking the students into active online discussion is only the first step in creating a productive online learning environment. Their level of interest and participation must be sustained so they can continue benefiting from their online learning experience.

As the online learning progresses, there are other strategies that will allow you to continue reeling in the students, helping them experience a virtual learning community and gain the deeper understandings that online discussion can provide.

Reeling Them In

Keeping students motivated in an online learning environment can challenge both students and instructors. Ideally, students remain engaged by posting new ideas and responding to existing topics in online discussion forums. This engagement leads to students discovering knowledge through and by their peers. Eventually though, some learners may all-too-predictably begin posting and contributing less, thereby creating a less-than-desirable learning experience for both themselves and the rest of the class. There are many reasons why students become *lurkers*—those that rarely or never contribute to the online discussion. The lurkers may be concerned about hostile responses, not wanting to add another message to an already lengthy discussion, or the topic is new to the student, who needs time to process the online dialogue for better understanding. Whatever the reason, lurking is common.

Offering students various interaction models throughout the school year or semester is a way to maintain discussion momentum and enrich the learning experience. Students also need to understand that their roles as online learners can change. For example, one week they can facilitate an online discussion and another week they can respond to topic points posted by a different facilitator. Knowing what to expect and what is expected of their participation allows students to take ownership of their learning, which aids in maintaining cohesion, collaboration, and clarity. There are many ways to foster this student engagement online. We’ve experienced several

strategies, including role-playing, debate, and rotating discussion leaders.

Role-playing can be used to ask students to consider their reactions or solutions to a certain scenario or case study. However, because role-playing requires students to rely on one another even more for their own individual learning, role-playing should be introduced well after students are comfortable participating in online discussions. Participating in role-playing requires students to not only comprehend their learning, but also to apply and analyze it.

One method of online role-playing includes dividing the students enrolled in a literature or social studies class into separate groups, giving each group a specific topic or situation to consider. Each member of the group is assigned a role, either by the instructor or within the group itself (Be aware that having students select roles could require a considerable amount of online discourse). Once roles are established—for example, which students are going to play the characters from *To Kill a Mockingbird*—students would begin to write an online conversation, almost like the lines in a play, within a discussion forum as it relates to a given topic (e.g., raising a child as a single father). Once finished, the instructor would share each group's play with the other groups so that students, free of their fictitious personas, could ask questions and make comments about the conversations and rationales used by the characters. This type of role-playing allows students to better apply their own understandings of course readings and personal experiences by forming rational and valid responses to a simulated situation.

Debates can also serve as a powerful method to sustain online discussions.

An online debate, unlike one done face-to-face, permits more democratic exchanges because students cannot as easily speak first or get the last word. One type of online debate is to place students into one of two forums: a critic's forum or defender's forum. Critics post individual position statements about a given issue within the critics-only forum where they may read other critics' position statements. Defenders do the same. After a designated time period, critics view the defenders' forum and vice versa. After critics and defenders have had a reasonable amount of time to read the other side's position statements, each critic is paired with a defender so that comments about their opponents' position statements may be posted. A debate between the two opposing views will develop. After all debates are closed, students can enter into a private forum with the instructor where each student provides personal reflections on the debated topic. An example of an effective debate we experienced was with a group of math teachers, where the critics argued against and the defenders supported the use of calculators in an algebra classroom.

Another method that promotes engagement is allowing students to facilitate some of the online course discussions themselves. Student discussion facilitation can even help promote a more active discussion forum where students feel empowered because much of the teaching and learning rests with them. To assist with making this empowerment successful, the instructor should provide student facilitators with strategies to try during their facilitation experiences. Strategies include, but are certainly not limited to, posting very specific discussion topics with minimum re-

quirements, contacting fellow students personally to offer words of praise or encouragement, and contributing (or not) as a fellow student during one's week of discussion facilitation. Aside from helping to keep students engaged, student facilitators provide instructors more time to monitor discussions and assist students privately.

Conclusion

As with any learning experience, some methods and strategies of building community and keeping students engaged may not prove effective for every course and for all students. Instructors must still use discretion to determine which methods will promote the most online interaction and student engagement. Instructors should strive to use strategies that provide the best match between curriculum content and outcomes as well as students' past experiences, learning styles, and learning preferences. Of course, the topic of discussion has much to do with the level of student engagement, but even those lurking students can be pulled into a discussion by other students or by the design of the activity itself. Hooking students, then keeping them engaged and “on the line” for the duration of a semester can be challenging, but well worth the time and effort required.



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