Sarah Anderegg

From: Jonathan Eldridge
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To: Jonathan Eldridge
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Dear College of Marin Faculty:

This week's article is about how to get students to effectively participate in discussion boards. While focused on asynchronous online courses, the ideas included in this short, one-page piece can be applied to both in-person courses that utilize Canvas in some way as well as in-person discussions during class. I hope you find it useful, regardless of the modality of the course(s) you are teaching.

Heads up: Wednesday of this week will see a nationwide emergency alert test, meaning most cell phones will receive a test alert at around 11:20a.m. It is only a test, but don't be surprised by it!

Reminder: If you haven't yet, record an anecdote for a tribute video for Dr. Coon's retirement. You can upload an MP4 or MOV file: UPLOAD A VIDEO SUBMISSION Check out the call for submissions video that was presented at this fall's Convocation by the Centennial Planning Committee for ideas. Some people may not feel comfortable on video and may prefer to send a quote and photo, or just a quote. That's totally fine! Submit photos or email quotes to Nicole Cruz and they can be stitched in with the videos. Contact Nicole directly for assistance with your video submission.

Finally, I hope to see you Thursday afternoon at the Fine Arts Gallery for the opening of the Emory Douglas exhibit!

Thank you for all you do for our students.

Jonathan

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Let's discuss

Discussion boards are now fully integrated into most online courses. Done well, they help students deepen their knowledge and build community. But often online discussions get stuck at the level of sharing information, without analysis or critical thinking, and students dismiss posting replies as meaningless busywork. So, how can instructors make online written discussions more engaging?

I was excited to come across a virtual session delving into that question at the Online Learning Consortium's [Innovate 2023](#) conference, which I attended in April. Instructional designers Laurie Berry and Kristin Kowal, from the University of Wisconsin Extended Campus, [researched](#) role-play in online discussion boards and developed a framework they feel can elevate student engagement beyond info-dumping. They demonstrated how to implement each step by switching between the roles of student and facilitator. Here's their five-step guide to improving asynchronous discussions.

Provide clear expectations. Without a solid understanding of what they need to do, students may default to answering the prompt without engaging classmates or class concepts. So instructors should lay out their expectations of student participation early on. In other words, if you want students to respond to each other's comments and ask questions, say so.

Encourage students to share their thought process. Student responses can include explanations of how they developed their answer as a way of showing their work. Sharing their thoughts also encourages students to explicitly detail their assumptions, explain why they think ideas are related, and perhaps deepen their understanding of a concept.

Invite students to add questions in their replies. Questions invite answers, and answers can become entire conversations. By simply adding a few questions to their reply, students open the door to deepening the discussion. Someone who may have otherwise stayed silent may feel compelled to share.

Require students to weave in researched evidence. Supporting conclusions with evidence is one of the most essential critical-thinking skills. Instructors can ask students to weave evidence into their response instead of simply citing links. This challenges students to think critically about how and why they source their information, and may prompt them to integrate course materials into their analysis.

Ask students to include reflection. Ask students how they believe they performed. Did they try their best? Did they contribute something meaningful to the conversation? By adding reflections to their discussions, students can think back on what they learned, what they found useful, and how this new knowledge can be incorporated into their lives.

Berry and Kowal provided examples of instructors implementing only one or two steps into their discussion rubrics and still seeing some positive changes. At the end of their presentation, they asked viewers to write in the chat which steps they would try for their class. Answers flew in so fast that Berry couldn't read them all. "I don't know if we have [one step as a] winner over all of them, but it's so exciting to see people thinking to try some of these," she said.

Do you use discussion boards in your class? Have you found other strategies that work well for making them engaging? If you don't use discussion boards, do these ideas resonate with any other ways in which students participate in your online course?

Beckie Supiano writes about teaching, learning, and the human interactions that shape them.