## Teaching Tip

# Encouraging Online Participation

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### ABSTRACT

Online discussion forums are an excellent environment for peer and collaborative learning. Online discussion forums may be used to support out-of-class interaction in traditional on-campus education, or become the virtual classroom in a subject (or course) that is taught entirely online. However, one of the problems often encountered with online discussion forums is that they can suffer from a lack of student participation. This paper provides instructors with a number of guidelines for encouraging student participation in online discussion forums.

**Keywords:** Online Education, Online Discussion, Discussion Forums, Peer Learning

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, universities are taking advantage of the Web to open up new opportunities for teaching and learning (Evans and Haase 2001; Castro et al. 2001). One popular example of this is the use of online discussion forums. Online discussion forums may be used to support out-of-class interaction in traditional on-campus education, or become the virtual classroom in a subject (or course) that is taught entirely online. One of the main advantages of online discussion forums is that they take away the apprehension, embarrassment and pressure students often have about contributing to live-class discussions (Lieblein 2000). As such, online discussion forums are potentially an excellent environment for peer and collaborative learning. However, one of the problems often encountered with online discussion forums is that they can suffer from a lack of student participation.

Universitas 21 Global (U21G) is one of the new breed of online universities (see www.u21global.com). The MBA program offered by U21G is completely online, i.e. there are no physical classrooms or face-to-face meetings. Instead, students are encouraged to interact amongst themselves and with their instructors using a range of Web-based collaboration tools that include online discussion forums. The MBA includes several information systems (IS) management subjects such as MBA 650 E-Business, MBA 770 IT Systems for Business, and MBA 771 IS Strategy, although the ideas discussed here apply to teaching more generally.

Since the launch of the MBA program in August 2003,

U21G has had an opportunity to observe, and experiment with, online discussion forums for over fifty individual classes of varying sizes of between 5 to 30 students. The main lesson from these experiences is that higher levels of student participation are achieved when discussion forums are actively planned, managed and facilitated on the part of the instructor (or mentor or facilitator). Sure, there may be cases in other institutions where discussion forums have been successful without the involvement of the instructor. However, the experience at U21G concurs with previous research (Blignaut and Trollip 2003), suggesting that students receive a richer and more satisfying learning experience when the instructor plays an active role.

### 2. GUIDELINES FOR ENCOURAGING PARTICIPATION

There are no hard and fast rules for achieving student participation in online discussion forums. A forceful approach to participation tends to lead to forums that have a high proportion of 'low-quality' postings. Low quality postings can be characterized as those that:

- provide little new insight
- show little evidence of critical analysis
- repeat what has already been stated
- have little relevance to the main line of discussion
- are factually incorrect

The aim therefore is not only to achieve a high level of student participation, but also to ensure that the participation is of a high-quality nature. The following guidelines have been compiled from the author's

experiences at U21G. There are numerous ways in which instructors can involve themselves in discussion forums. The author doesn't expect instructors to apply all the guidelines here. Rather, instructors should treat the guidelines as ideas that they could potentially try out in their own teaching.

### 2.1 Get The Students To Introduce Themselves

In courses which are taught online, with no face-to-face element, it is particularly important to create a sense of community and to avoid the feeling of isolation that students can experience with distance education (Song et al. 2004). To enable students to know each other better, get every student to post an introductory message at the start of the class. At U21G, we typically have a separate discussion topic called 'introductions' for this purpose. The instructor starts the process by posting their own (fairly detailed) introductory message, and then requests the students to do the same. To avoid overly-brief introductions, the instructor should guide students as to what information students should include in their introductions. For example:

- their preferred name
- their current job role and the organization they work for
- a brief history of their work experience
- interesting experiences or observations they have had in the subject area
- what they hope to gain from the subject

### 2.2 Direct the Discussion

Without directing a discussion, there is a risk that very little discussion will emerge at all, or conversely, that there will be too much unfocussed discussion. At U21G, instructors use discussion assignments as a tool for generating well-focussed discussions. An example of a discussion assignment is as follows:

*"Download and read the following case on e-Business failure at XYZ. What do you think are the key lessons to be learnt from the failure? Post an initial response of between 150-200 words to the discussion board. Alternatively, to avoid repeating lessons already contributed, describe what management practices you would suggest to avert similar e-business failures in the future".*

A discussion topic is set up in the discussion forum to enable students to post their responses to the discussion assignment. With discussion assignments, students have a clear indication about what is to be discussed.

### 2.3 Show Presence

Instructors need to show 'presence' (Anderson et al. 2001) in the discussion forum. A discussion forum that is devoid of instructor postings can give students the unwanted impression that the instructor doesn't care about what goes on in the discussion forum. However, instructors need not respond to every posting (this would be too time

consuming for the instructor), nor should they necessarily feel a need to make a copious volume of postings. As a rule of thumb, I generally recommend instructors log in at least once every two days, and make at least 5 postings a week. However, instructors should avoid making short or superficial postings e.g. "well-done!" or "good work."

### 2.4 Set Expectations and Ground Rules Early

At an early stage, an instructor needs to establish and communicate what is expected of students. For example:

- Should students check the discussion forum every day, or is once a week sufficient?
- Are postings voluntary or mandatory?
- Will postings be assessed, and if so, under what criteria?

At U21G, certain discussion topics require mandatory postings (generally these are assessed) while others are voluntary. It is also a good idea to set some ground rules regarding good conduct, e.g. language and tone of postings, respect for the opinions of others and academic honesty and plagiarism.

### 2.5 Personalize the Posting

An instructor can enhance the sense of community if they personalize the postings they make. This can be as simple as referring to the names of students in the class. For example, *"Janet and Alex have both provided good examples that build on Terry's previous comment on the importance of interpersonal skills in project management".* Without any personalization, discussion forums can come across as faceless, with little sense of community.

### 2.6 Assign Students to Lead the Discussion

One technique that has been successfully used at U21G is for instructors to assign a team of students to lead the discussion on a particular topic. The team not only kicks-off the discussion, but becomes responsible for facilitating the discussion and responding to postings from other students. The technique is particularly useful for including students who would normally sit at the periphery of a discussion.

### 2.7 Use Role Play

Role play is an effective technique for directly involving individual students, and indirectly involving the rest of the class, in a problem-based discussion. Here, an instructor poses a problem, and then asks individuals to play out particular roles. For example: *"John and Alex, assume your are the project managers. Terry and Liz, assume you are the clients. What kinds of information would each of you need to gather in order to develop a sensible project schedule?"* Again, role-play is particularly useful for including students who would normally sit at the periphery of a discussion.

### 2.8 Use the For-And-Against Exercise

Another technique for generating discussion is to ask

students to present the case for and against a particular issue. One set of students is assigned to produce a 'for' case, and another set of students the 'against' case. The exercise has the effect of engaging students with one another in the discussion forum, where the debate-like nature of the exercise often generates interesting ideas and opinions.

### 2.9 Use Trigger Questions

Trigger questions can be used either to kick off a discussion, or inject life into a flagging one. The timing of trigger questions is important. For example, a trigger question can be timed when students are near the end of a particular topic. For example, *"So you should by now have a good understanding about the process of risk management in software projects. In your experience, how well do you think risk management is actually practiced?"* As well as kicking off a discussion, the trigger question here is also designed to reinforce new concepts that the student has been introduced to.

### 2.10 Assessing Online Participation

There is some debate as to whether or not online participation should be assessed at all. Some may argue that assessing participation alters the way in which a discussion would naturally evolve. Others would argue that assessment serves as a good incentive for students to participate. Where students are assessed, however, it is important to assess not only the quantity of postings, but the quality of the postings. I provide students with guidance about how I assess postings, which in turn has a positive effect on helping them think more carefully about how they formulate their contributions and responses to a discussion forum. In particular, I let students know high marks will be awarded to postings that:

- Introduce new ideas or perspectives not discussed in the course material.
- Make an original contribution that no-one else in the class has made.
- Is backed up by prior research or elucidated from the student's own personal work experience.

Peer assessment of discussion forums is another approach, although this has yet to be tried at U21G.

### 2.11 Align Discussion Topics with Assignments

When students are required to do a particular assignment, my U21G colleagues have found it useful to set up a discussion topic for the assignment. For example, U21G make extensive use of Harvard Business cases, and an assignment will often require students to conduct a case-analysis. Setting up a discussion topic allows students to discuss the case-study and gather ideas and viewpoints before they prepare their own case-analysis. Students are strongly motivated to participate because they see how the discussion directly benefits their assignment.

### 2.12 Develop Facilitation Skills

In many areas, the skills needed for teaching online are quite different from those employed in face-to-face teaching. Instructors therefore need to educate themselves in good practices for online facilitation. This teaching tip is one helpful guide; the paper by Bailey and Luetkehans (1998) is another good reference. Importantly, instructors should consciously think about what they are doing, and continually reflect on their practices. As a minimum, instructors should know how to:

- kick-off a discussion
- get students involved in a discussion
- highlight key learning points
- keep a discussion on-track
- rescue a flagging discussion
- close and summarize a discussion

### 2.13 Restrict Email for Private Communication

Restrict the use of email to private matters between the instructor and individual students. When students have questions or viewpoints that would benefit the class as a whole, ask them to make a posting on the discussion forum rather than emailing the instructor directly. This also saves the instructor from having to repeat responses to similar queries asked by other students.

### 2.14 Congratulate Good Postings

Congratulate students whose postings make a significant contribution. For example, *"Thanks for your posting John. Your observation makes a connection between software project failure and changing requirements that no-one else seemed to pick up on. The example you gave helped to both explain and back-up your observations"*. Students are delighted when they are recognized for their contributions and this often has the effect of spurring other students on.

### 2.15 Become the 'Guide on The Side' Rather Than The 'Sage On The Stage'

In traditional on-campus lectures, the instructor often assumes the role of a subject matter expert, the so called 'sage on the stage' (Mazzolini and Maddison 2003). This has a counter-productive effect in online discussion forums, as students become dependent upon the instructor to provide 'answers' rather than exchanging opinions and experiences in a way that is central in peer learning. An instructor needs to become a 'guide on the side' whereby the instructor:

- Refrains from posting 'answers' to the discussion forum.
- Refrains from stating whether answers are right or wrong.
- Avoids posting too much, too often.
- Facilitates the sharing of ideas and opinions.

### 2.16 Ensure Your Discussion Tools Have Good Usability

Students can spend many hours a week on a discussion forum, so it's important that the discussion tools have good usability (and there are plenty of tools out there that place functionality over usability). The early versions of the discussion forums used by U21G suffered from a number

of usability issues—the on-screen fonts were difficult to read, reading and submitting postings involved too many clicks, and navigation was overly complex. In fact, many students complained, indicating how frustrated they were about the lack of usability. Since then, U21G has rolled out several improvements to the usability of its discussion forums. The bottom line is that poor usability impairs online participation, a burden that students can do without.

### 2.17 Keep the Discussion Well Organized
Even with threaded discussions, long discussions can become hard to scroll, follow and navigate. The problem can be addressed by creating separate discussion topics in the first instance. In addition, the instructor should play an active role in:

- Creating new discussion topics when interesting new topics sprout from the discussion of an existing topic.
- Breaking a large topic into sub-topics, each with its own separate discussion topic, so that the original topic doesn't end up being overwhelmed.

Well-organized discussions also serve as a useful resource that students can refer back to and re-trace ideas at a later point in time.

### 2.18 Have an 'Informal' Area
Socialization takes places in an online environment as it does in a face-to-face environment, and is a central component in creating a sense of community. When a student is part of a community, they are less likely to feel inhibited about participating in online discussions. At U21G, we set up a discussion topic in each class which we often call 'informal discussion', 'informal area', or 'café lounge'. Students therefore have a designed area for socialisation. This also keeps other discussion topics clean from socialisation discussion that might otherwise interfere with more serious discussion

### 2.19 Closing and summarising discussions
Although online discussions may stretch over weeks and months, there is often a natural point at which a discussion needs to be closed or concluded (e.g. at the end of a course or module). Don't abruptly end a discussion. Always close a discussion by summarizing the key points raised and any outstanding issues. This can be done either by the instructor themselves, or by a student nominated by the instructor.

### 2.20 Make Use of Reporting Tools
For large classes, it can be difficult for an instructor to track in detail the participation level of all students. Instructors should make full use of any reporting tools that can be used to identify inactive students. Such students can then be prompted in private by the instructor to participate. In U21G's experience, students are often 'happy' to be prompted, warmed by the fact that the instructor cares enough about the student's performance to contact them directly about it.

## 3. CONCLUSIONS

Online discussion forums are an excellent environment for peer and collaborative learning, and students have a tremendous amount to gain from them. Some of the guidelines presented here are designed to directly encourage students to participate; others are centered on cultivating an environment that encourages participation. Importantly, educators need to learn how to become good online educators. I encourage instructors to experiment with the guidelines here, and to use them as a platform for developing their own online teaching practices.

## 4. REFERENCES

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