

MODERATING DISCUSSIONS

After working to develop questioning strategies, the resulting discussion activity needs to be maintained throughout the term. Even discussions that start out with ample excitement can dwindle before your objective has been met without some vigilance on your part. You must maintain your online presence and keep students motivated.

- Keep it relevant and interesting
- Require student participation
- Guide the conversation

Facilitation of online discussions also requires an awareness of the nature of computer-mediated communication, a detectable presence in the discussion, and a willingness to use technology to gather information and provide feedback.

Online discussions lack the nonverbal cues that we rely on to interpret face-to-face communication. Therefore, online discussions are open to multiple interpretations. Be aware of tone and word choice when giving feedback. Emoticons and acronyms can help show emotion and can help add personality.

Note: In today's world of text and instant messaging, students may be all too inclined to abandon proper grammar and syntax in favor of all lower-case text, abbreviations, acronyms, and emoticons. Encourage students to aspire to proper grammar, spelling, and punctuation, by modeling such and by clearly stating these expectations.

Facilitating an online class means you can expect to be online at least 1-2 hours per day per class – even more if your class is large or if the coursework is heavy and at the beginning of the course when you are establishing the online learning community. However, merely reading the postings is not enough. You must leave a footprint; let your students know you were there by providing at least the occasional reply.

Ask for feedback periodically. Use the Assessments tool to create an anonymous survey. You might ask:

- What is going well for you?
- What would improve this experience for you?
- Do you feel your classmates have listened to you in the discussions?
- Did you feel the level of interaction from the instructor is appropriate?

Once you have collected your students' opinions, use the information to think of ways you might improve your online course and facilitation. Consider posting the results of the survey and what you have learned from the online experience. Remember: You are a part of the learning community, too!

Tips for Effective Moderation

- Pace the conversation
 - Determine a schedule for posing questions in discussions that allows enough time for responses and also prevents "overload."
 - Provide time frames in which discussions are expected to occur. This will limit "lag" time between posts and responses.
- Set "closing" dates and wrap up discussions so that they have a definitive end.
- State your expectation for message length. Note: the longer the post, the less likely it will be read.
- Move messages that have been posted to the wrong topic.
- Provide a weekly listing of what is due to maintain focus.
- Use the "Lock" feature to make topics read-only after their closing date.