



ENCOURAGING PARTICIPATION IN ONLINE GROUPS

(Originally written 2005 for University of Leeds. Updated 2009 M. Highton)

Many teachers find that they open up an online discussion room for their students but the students do not participate. Is this your experience?

Poll: why do you think your students don't participate online?

- They are not motivated
- They can't access the discussion
- They are shy or do not want to share their views
- They do not know what to do
- They do not know why they should
- They prefer to lurk
- They are too busy
- It is not assessed

STUDENT MOTIVATION

There has been much research into what motivates students in higher education. A good summary of this research is provided by Davis(1999)ⁱ

The key lessons from this research for online tasks and discussions is the importance of making your online discussions:

- Interesting and stimulating
- Useful and relevant
- Appropriately challenging
- Linked to feedback or assessment

Many online discussion tasks feel 'bolted on' as though as an after-thought by teachers who decide to use technology without designing it in to their module objectives or learning outcomes. Students will quickly spot this and only the most highly motivated will take on extra work for little reward.

Another theme which arises from the research described above is the importance of teacher enthusiasm for the task. Your students will pick up from you what is important. You should ensure that you make regular reference to online tasks and integrate what the students are saying online into your face to face teaching.

BE PROACTIVE

“The lack of adequate leadership is one of the factors sometimes responsible for conference failure; unless a moderator sets an agenda and keeps the group working toward its goal, nothing much will occur.”
Kerr, (1986) cited in Mason, (1991)

There are many reasons why participation may be slow in an online discussion room but you should be prepared to be proactive in encouraging discussion.

As with any conversation, online communication needs participants; without continuing exchange, conversation falters and dies out. This may occur in a course discussion area for a number of reasons:

No community. *Classroom dynamics play a large part in the success of online discussion — if there is little exchange in the classroom, there isn't likely to be much online. It is important to build community in class if you want online discussion to flourish.*

No motivation. *If you give too little weight to discussion, students may not bother to participate. Make sure they know that online discussion is essential to your teaching method and that you expect them to participate.*

Unfamiliarity. *Students new to online discussions may not participate because they are unfamiliar with the technology. Spend class time showing your students how to use the discussion area — how to read submissions and post comments.*

List adapted from Horton et al (2003)ⁱⁱ

Here are some methods for encouraging participation:

Participate. As a tutor you should show that you value every contribution. This may involve replying or simply reading messages regularly, just as you would acknowledge something someone says in a face to face discussion it is important to do so online too. You should also know what you are looking for and you should be prepared to intervene to steer discussions by asking open questions as you would in a face to face seminar.

Motivate. Colleagues have tried different techniques of assigning marks to activities in online discussions or tempting students to participate with various rewards. What does seem to be clear is that students must see some clear benefit in participating. You may want to discuss with your students their motivations for participation.

Structure the activity. Thinking carefully about the structure of the activity can make a big difference to participation. You may want to assign individuals specific roles within the discussion or within their team. Paulsen (1995)ⁱⁱⁱ describes a range of techniques for structuring ‘many-to many’ discussion rooms including debates, role plays, buzz groups etc.

Require a deliverable. The purpose of a discussion room should be clear, and that may follow through to there being a specific deliverable at the end of it. This might be a piece of work created by the group or the results of a survey of opinion or a single submission by each participant.

Restrict access. Students may feel more at ease taking part in online conversation and exchange if they know that their contributions can be viewed only by the tutor and fellow classmates.

Encourage collaboration. Create assignments that require students to collaborate online. Have students meet together online in small groups to discuss a topic, or use the rooms for coursework critiques and roundtable discussions.

Revisit the starter question. If you have mostly set questions with one or two specific answers, once the answer has been posted students will not contribute more to the discussion. Choose open rather than closed questions.

ACCESS ISSUES

One of the most simple reasons why student contributions don’t appear in your discussion rooms may be that your students cannot access the room.

- Check access permissions
- Provide student training
- Consider web accessibility issues and users with disabilities
- Set a supervised introductory task with a specific time deadline

STUDENT TRAINING

It would be unreasonable to expect that all students will be familiar with using online discussion forums. You may know that your particular group will have been exposed to the use of online discussion in previous modules. If you are not sure of this it is worth providing support or training for your students.

- Ensure that all your students know how to access WebLearn.
- Refer to the VLE Service helpdesk if there are access problems.
- Be detailed and precise in your onscreen instructions.
- Clarify to your students the different purposes of email and online discussion.
- Provide opportunities (and activities) for students to become familiar with posting and reading messages before linking it to assessed coursework.
- Remember, that in the first instance at least, your students may be unconvinced of the benefits of taking part.

CONSIDER WEB ACCESSIBILITY ISSUES

The University provides a lot of information to staff about web accessibility. Guidelines and procedures are outlined on this page maintained by OUCS.

If you are using discussion rooms in the University VLE most of the web accessibility issues will have been checked for you, but you may want to find out from your students whether any of them have specific difficulties in accessing online materials.

USERS WITH DISABILITIES

Online discussion rooms provide an environment in which people with speech or hearing problems are not disadvantaged. Students with reading difficulties, ranging from dyslexia to blindness may however find online conferencing more time consuming than face to face discussion. WebLearn includes a number of features designed to assist students who use screen reading software and options to enlarge text and change colour contrast. There are also features specific to the discussion rooms which are helpful in moving through the messages in a discussion.

SET A SUPERVISED INTRODUCTORY TASK WITH A SPECIFIC TIME DEADLINE

If you have not seen all your students access an online discussion room before. It is worthwhile setting a specific time bound introductory task before the main task which you want them to complete, this will serve to alert you to anyone who cannot access the discussions and you can then follow up with them accordingly. Some teachers make this introductory task part of a supervised student training session as described above.

Many teachers use a 'post your first message and say who you are' style task as the initial icebreaker, but Salmon(2002,p103) iv warns that for a group who are not yet a community, these kind of tasks are actually quite scary and require some thought. If your aim is to identify those who can and who cannot access the room it may be better to suggest a task which can be done quickly and easily with no 'risk'. Be very clear in what you want them to do.

Examples

Reply to this message listing one thing you learned from last week's lecture.

Do a web search for a page about GM foods. Cut and paste the link and post it into your message.

Start a new thread with a subject line including one of the species of butterfly you have studied. Write a couple of lines in your message describing its distinctive features.

These are the kind of tasks everyone can do without having to wait for, or refer to each other.

SHYNESS AND SHARING

Integrating online discussions into your teaching can enable you to help your students to access content and participate in flexible ways. As well as making content available outside traditional classroom structures the nature of online communication allows students to participate on an equal footing. Students who seem reluctant to participate in classroom discussion may flourish online and vice versa (McSporran and Young, 2001^v; Downing and Chim, 2004^{vi}). The asynchronous nature of online discussion rooms also allows time for spell checking and re-reading of messages and sometimes editing for corrections. This can be of particular use to students for whom English is not their first language.

SHARING PROBLEMS

“We set up a discussion room for them to share their problems but no-one ever posted.”

It may seem like a good idea to have an online discussion room where students can post problems or questions about the course or about particular content area. These questions can then be answered by the tutor or by other students with the answers available to all. The reality is though that these sorts of discussions are actually the hardest to get to work successfully. If you had a question about something which you were unsure of, or think might be a silly question, would you post it into a place where it remains as a permanent record for all to see, highlighting your ignorance in perpetuity? Not many people would. If you do not see any posts in discussion rooms like this, it does not mean there are no problems, it probably means students are using other methods to find answers, such as one-to-one email or asking their colleagues after class.

Rather than asking for problems try positive approaches such as:

Invite students to email questions to you and then you post anonymous feedback/response in the discussion room for all to see.

Invite students to post messages listing topics they would like you to cover in the next lecture or seminar - and then do so.

Ask students to work as a group (or in pairs) to identify a list of questions regarding their project and ask one of them to post it. You or other students can then reply.

Create a discussion area in which students can post anonymously or using pseudonyms.

SHARING KNOWLEDGE

Unless they are involved in a group work task or are particularly altruistic students are often reluctant to share their opinions and original thoughts formally with their peers – especially in the light of fears to copying and plagiarism.

“I knew the answer, but no-one else had posted, so I figured there was no reason why I should give them the answer if they hadn’t done the work themselves.”

Think about the task you are asking your students to do. Is there one correct answer? Are you asking for opinions or for analyses? Have you designed the learning task so that all students share knowledge on an equal basis? Do they know what they will gain from sharing in this way?

If you are gathering academic arguments in a discussion you could ask students to reference each others’ contributions when they write their essay or report. If this process is transparent fears of copying will be allayed.

GIVING CLEAR INSTRUCTIONS

Online discussions, like on land discussions, work best if they are focused, specific and time bound with clear aims and outcomes.

“One of the first duties of an online tutor is to 'set the agenda' for the conference: the objectives of the discussion, the timetable, procedural rules and decision-making norms. Managing the inter-actions with strong leadership and direction is considered a sine qua non of successful conferencing..... Just as in a face-to-face course, the online tutor needs to let students know what to expect, what are the requirements of the course, the activities and the schedule.” Mason (1991)^{vii}

THE PURPOSE OF A ROOM

Deciding on the purpose of a discussion room is part of your learning design decision process. Depending on the nature of the learning task you can create one room for a large group to work in over a period of several weeks or months or much more focused small rooms for small groups or individual tasks.

For each room you should consider:

- Why will this room be useful for my students’ learning?
- What do I want my students to do in this room?
- When will they use it?
- Where should it be positioned?
- Who should have access to it?
- How long should it stay open for contributions?
- What will happen to the room (and the messages) at the end of the task?
- What will my role be in monitoring, reading or replying to messages?

If you are designing a learning task you should consider:

- What are the learning outcomes for this task?
- Is there one discussion point or many?
- Will students need to make multiple posts and visits or just one?
- How long will the task last?
- Are there minimum or maximum numbers of participants?
- What information or understanding must the students achieve?
- How will you tutor ensure that they achieve this?

MAKING IT RELEVANT

When we think about student motivation in online discussions it becomes clear that in order for students to see any benefit in participating, the process or outcomes must be relevant to the course and their work and you should be able to make a good case as to what the benefits of doing this online rather than face to face will be.

- To keep a record of progress on a group project.
- To create an online resource for revision and exam preparation
- To model the process of a business group working remotely.
- To enable remote learners to participate in a group task.
- To facilitate the use of images, video or web links as supporting evidence for a discussion.

SETTING DEADLINES

Nothing focuses the mind like a deadline. If you set a specific task to be completed by a specific time stick to your deadline and then close the room by changing the access permissions. If you extend the opening dates for the room the student who did post on time will be annoyed, and those who didn't will think that deadlines are flexible.

If you want good conscientious behaviour from your students online, model it for them. Start on time and finish on time. Decide what will mark the end of each task. Post a summary or a 'thank you' message as the last post and make reference to the contributions your student have made. Remember to lock the room so that no more posts can be made after the deadline date and change the 'introduction' text to say something like: '9/10/05 The discussion in this room is now complete. Thank you all for your contributions'. You may also want to change the text on your resources link page.

DEALING WITH LURKERS

"Lurkers" are students who come into discussion rooms to read messages but rarely post.

WHY DO STUDENTS LURK?

<i>Cause</i>	<i>Effect</i>	<i>Solution</i>
They are simply freeloading.	Students who do participate will soon be discouraged from posting if they think others are freeloading.	Think carefully about the tasks you set for the group, can you assign specific responsibilities or roles to individuals?
They are unsure what the room is for.	Students who are unsure about posting will display similar behaviours to lurkers. Reading and re-reading posts but not contributing.	You can prevent this by being very clear in your instructions, posting model answers and giving positive feedback to those who do post. You might also want to address questions to students by name if you want them to reply.
They don't want to share.	Some students are reluctant to 'give away' what they consider to be their best ideas in case other people use them.	Ensure that the task is designed so that students are credited for their ideas and these form the basis for further discussion, perhaps in a seminar follow up.
They cannot post.	It may be that they cannot see the option to 'post' and assume it is their mistake.	Setting access permissions can be complicated. Check that the permissions are correct for individuals who have not posted. They may be too shy to ask.
They have nothing to say	If the question has been answered in the first posting, it leaves everyone else nothing to do.	Rethink your task so that everyone has an equally valid contribution even if they are the last to post.
They just like to read	Reading or listening to other peoples' views is an important part of learning, and for many is a preferred learning style.	If lurking behaviour is not disrupting the progress of other students, don't worry about it.
They don't have time	Students will make time for tasks which are relevant and integrated into their coursework, but not for tasks which are additional to a full workload.	Revisit your course design to identify a way to integrate this task in to course activity, perhaps replacing something else.

MONITORING

Many VLE discussion rooms provide a number of monitoring tools which may be useful for tutors to keep track of what is going on in a discussion room. For each individual message it is possible to see listed who has, and who has not, read the message. If you do not want to spend a lot of time checking for new messages in a quiet discussion room you can set up a **notification alert** which will send you an email when a new message is posted.

NETIQUETTE

It is important to ensure students are clear about **netiquette** or good manners online and about the kind of writing you expect from them. To a certain extent you can model this for them in the messages you post but it is also a good idea to set clear guidelines at the start of a programme relating to what kind of behaviour is acceptable and what is not.

Will typos and incorrect grammar be tolerated in the interest of getting thoughts coming thick and fast? How will you discourage students from simply adding 'me too' or 'I agree' after the first well thought-out post?

Here are some suggestions of tips you might want to give to your students:

Netiquette in discussion rooms

If your tutor asks you to reply in a specific thread please do so, don't start a new thread.

Remember to read other posts before you write your own to avoid repetition. You may also want to build on or respond to points made by other people in your group.

If you do post a message which starts a thread think carefully about the subject title. This will help other students to know whether they want to read it. A thread entitled 'Some reasons for Henry's military success' will be much more informative in a discussion about Henry II than one entitled 'Henry'.

If your question or post is off topic but still related to the discussion begin your subject title with OT: to mean off topic. If your post is way off topic, post it in another discussion room, perhaps the one set up for general questions.

If you quote from other people's messages in yours, be careful to ensure that the words or meaning of the quote is not changed from the original. People will get very angry if you misquote them.

Don't insult other posters and bear in mind that some phrases seem confrontational in different contexts. You always have the right to disagree with someone but 'I think your point is wrong because...' is very different from 'you're an idiot if you think that...'

If another student posts a message making a point with which you agree, please resist the temptation to post lots more messages saying 'Me too' or 'I agree'. You should always say more, perhaps explain why you agree, or bring more evidence to support the point. Equally, if you disagree, explain why.

Images whose copyright you do not own; that reside on other websites should not be attached to messages. You can post a link in your message which will take the reader to the image.

Writing in ALL CAPS is considered shouting online and makes many people uncomfortable. Only serves to alienate your audience.

You have a choice as to how you sign your messages. If the VLE ascribes your messages to you using your initials you are free to add your first name at the end of your message, this will make it easier for those who reply to your message to address you.

LANGUAGE SHORTCUTS

Emoticons ('emotional icons') are sometimes used in online discussions in order to attempt to stave off misinterpretation.

For example (imagine the page sideways):

:-) means smiling

:-(means frowning

;-) winking

:-o shock

and so on. Occasionally useful they are indicative of some of the communication challenges facing teachers and learners in the electronic space. Other new arrivals in online discussion are acronyms which are used in place of common phrases which take a long time to type. Such as:

AFAIK = as far as I know

IIRC = if I remember correctly

IMHO = in my humble opinion

LOL - laughing out loud (or lots of love!)
ROTFL = rolling on the floor laughing.

ⁱ Barbara Gross Davis,(1999) University of California, Berkeley.
From Tools for Teaching, copyright by Jossey-Bass

<http://honolulu.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/motiv.htm> (accessed November 2005)

ⁱⁱ Horton S (2003) 'Taking discussions online' article on 'Web Teaching' Website :
Dartmouth College USA [Online]. Available:
<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~webteach/index.html> accessed November 2004

ⁱⁱⁱ Paulsen M (1995) The Online Report on Pedagogical Techniques for Computer-Mediated Communication [Online]. Available :
<http://www.nettskolen.com/forskning/19/cmcped.html#v> (accessed Nov 2004)

^{iv} Salmon, G (2002) E-tivities – The key to active online learning. KoganPage:
London

^v McSporrán, M and Young, S (2001) 'Does gender matter in online learning?' *Alt-J*,
Vol.9,no.2: Pp3-15

^{vi} Downing K, and Chim T.M (2004) 'Reflectors as online extraverts?' *Educational Studies* Volume 30, Number 3 Pp263-276 [Online]. Available:
<http://journalsonline.tandf.co.uk/>

^{vii} Mason R, (1991)'Moderating Educational Computer Conferencing', DEOSNEWS
(1:19) [Online] Available
http://www.ed.psu.edu/acsde/deos/deosnews/deosnews1_19.asp