

# Interactivity Foundation

A photograph of a person wearing a blue long-sleeved shirt, holding a large red apple with both hands. The person is sitting at a wooden desk next to a silver laptop. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

## The Guidebook for Student-Facilitated Discussion in Online Courses

*Instructor Edition*

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IF...

# Preface

Online education went mainstream years ago. According to the Department of Education, more than 5 million college students took an online course in 2012. Approximately half of these students were enrolled fully in online programs. The vast majority of academic leaders believe that distance learning is critical for the long-term strategies of higher education. Although online education is on the rise, and has been for some time, online teaching pedagogies are trailing behind the technology. Many universities have been reluctant to adopt new pedagogical approaches that are better suited for online learning and for engaging students born in the digital age.

This guidebook is designed to help address this concern. We have learned from years of teaching online courses, collaborating with online instructors, and working with professionals trained in educational technology that online courses work best when they are interactive. Although students can set their own pace and work independently, online courses are most productive when the instructor is able to facilitate interactivity between students. One of the best ways to advance interactivity is by incorporating student-facilitated discussions for collaborative learning. Our particular approach advances student-facilitated discussions, in an asynchronous text-based format where students learn how to lead their own collaborative discussion groups in the discovery of the course subject matter.

There are two editions of this guidebook: an instructor edition and a student edition. The instructor edition includes suggestions for designing the online discussion and guidelines for managing the day-to-day interactions with student facilitators and discussants. It also provides multiple ready-to-apply resources, such as example assignments and grading rubrics. The student edition offers direct guidance on becoming discussion facilitators and good discussion participants. It outlines the day-to-day work of facilitation and discussion participation, offering many illustrative examples along the way.

Both editions of our guidebook provide links to an interactive web application, the IF Wiki, where readers can share their resources, strategies, rubrics, syllabi, and additional material for a continued collaborative experience around online courses that advance the discussion. To this end, users of this guidebook are not passive readers, but active collaborators working together to build a network of educators interested in improving online pedagogy.

These guidebooks reflect and build upon the work of the [Interactivity Foundation \(IF\)](#), a not-for-profit organization with the dual mission of advancing student-empowered learning and improving nationwide public discussions. We hope this guidebook is helpful to those teaching, learning, and discussing online.



## Acknowledgements

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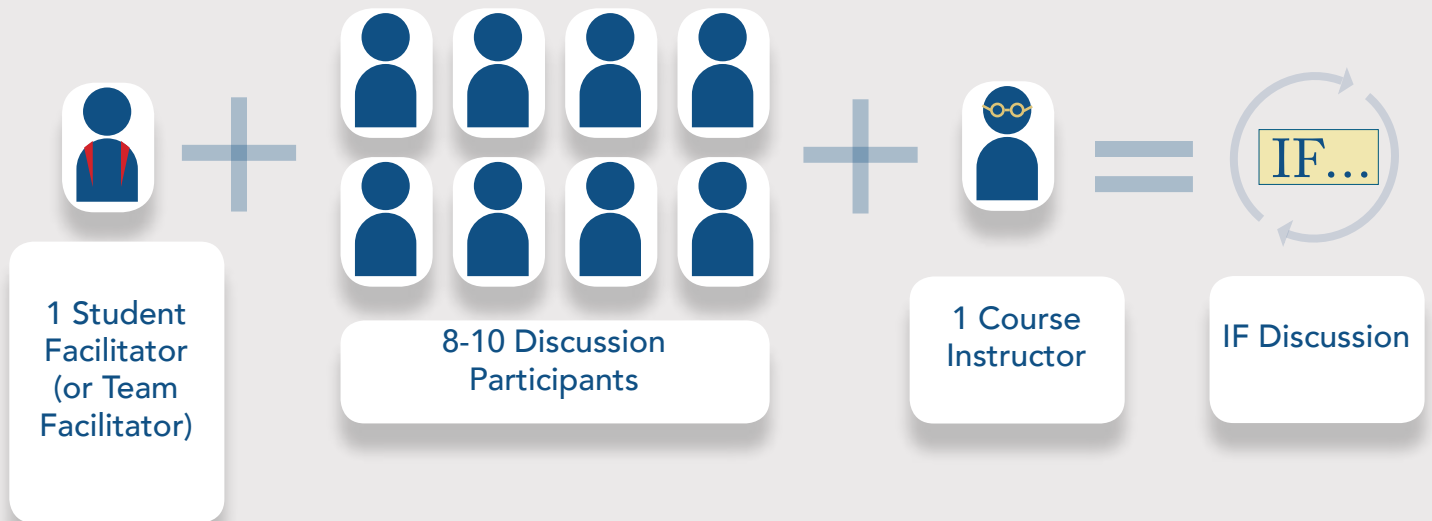
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# Chapter One: Introducing the IF Online Discussion Approach

## Topic 1.0 Chapter One at a Glance



**Each discussion requires:**



**The discussion process is organized in three distinct stages:**

**Pre-Discussion**

- Discussion facilitator and participants review all required readings.
- Student facilitator submits initial discussion prompts to instructor.
- Instructor provides feedback.

**Discussion**

- Discussion facilitator posts initial discussion prompt.
- Facilitator manages the discussion.
- Participants engage the discussion according to the instructions of the facilitator and instructor.
- Instructor coaches facilitator and intervenes if necessary.

**Post-Discussion**

- Discussion facilitator analyzes and summarizes discussion.
- Instructor debriefs with discussion facilitator.
- Instructor offers feedback to discussion group.
- Instructor and/or discussion facilitator evaluates participation in the discussion.



# Chapter One:

## Introducing the IF Online Discussion Approach

### Topic 1.1 Guiding Principles

The IF online discussion approach requires students to take ownership of the discussion for the purposes of collaboratively engaging and developing course content. **The five principles** that help to distinguish this approach from other online discussion approaches are:

**Be developmental:** Build on the ideas of others. Encourage discussion participants to contribute to rather than take away from the discussion. For example, encourage discussants to replace “yes, but...” with “yes, and...” When you respond to a comment with “yes, and...” you are being developmental. You are affirming what someone else has said and you are expressing your will to build upon it. When you respond with “yes, but...” you have a tendency to shut down the conversation or lead it in a more adversarial direction. How do you get discussants to embrace “yes, and...” in the discussion?

- Conduct a trial discussion on a topic for a short window of time (i.e., one day). Provide no guidance on how the discussion should be conducted.
- Send discussants a short description of the “yes, and...” discussion approach.
- Conduct the discussion again on the same topic. This time ask discussants to start each response with “yes, and...” Challenge the discussants to see how they can build on each other’s comments.
- Once the discussion is concluded, ask discussants to contrast the two discussions. Have them focus on both the substance of the discussion and the tone.
- Conclude by asking discussants to continue this approach in the discussions that follow throughout the semester.

See Bob Kulhan’s description of the “yes, and” principle as it applies to improvisational acting: <http://youtu.be/DphjhudlZis>.

**Be exploratory:** Examine the topic from multiple dimensions. Encourage discussants to “surround” the topic by asking questions that enables the discussion to move in various directions. For example, let’s say you are discussing the importance of mobility in society. For the purposes of exploration, you may want to engage this topic from as many dimensions as possible, such as:

- |   |                                  |
|---|----------------------------------|
| • Economic aspects                      | • Health/biological aspects      |
| • Moral, ethical, and normative aspects | • Social aspects                 |
| • Environmental aspects                 | • Psychological aspects          |
| • Cultural aspects                      | • Spiritual or religious aspects |
| • Technological aspects                 | • Political aspects              |
| • Public safety aspects                 |                                  |

In preparation for the discussion, you may ask the discussion facilitators to map the various dimensions of the topic and encourage them to craft a discussion prompt for each dimension.



**Be open-minded:** Engage the topic from multiple perspectives. Encourage students to discuss ideas that they may not particularly endorse. Teach students to examine contrasting ideas and engage diverse opinions. Some ways of incorporating open-mindedness into the discussion include:

- **Role-playing.** Create a game that allows students to create an avatar for themselves or for fellow classmates. Ask them to assume this new personality and participate in the discussion as if they were this person or thing.
- Remind student facilitators to ask discussants, “Who is missing from this discussion? How might X person view this discussion?”
- Encourage students to be anthropologists from another planet. How would someone with no background or context of the discussion topic respond? What questions might they ask?
- Encourage students to take a position in the discussion, then halfway through the discussion process, have them flip their position and discuss the topic from the contrasting perspective.

Open-mindedness is often best cultivated over time. When students have limited time to discuss a topic, it is a challenge to examine alternative perspectives.

**Be civil:** Discuss, but do not debate. Good discussions are often undermined by people trying to “win” the discussion or impress others with their powers of analysis. Encourage discussants to be inclusive and kind to one another. They need not agree on every issue, but they should try to understand the perspective of others AND understand how this perspective came to be. Some tips for maximizing civility in the online discussion include:

- Select discussion topics that are pressing but not divisive.
- Encourage students to think about the “future of...” a particular topic instead of looking at how it affects their lives today. This encourages anticipatory, rather than reactionary, thinking.
- Practice generosity of spirit. Encourage students to look for the grains of truth in each statement. Instead of trying to debunk ideas, cultivate an atmosphere of generosity.

**Be interactive:** Social presence or the ability to be social in a virtual space is enhanced by the willingness to engage in communication. The discussion forum is designed as an interactive exercise, however, social presence can be nurtured by:

- Creating an introductory discussion forum where each student shares information about himself or herself.
- Allowing for team facilitation and small group discussion.
- Constant debriefing between the instructor and the facilitators as well as the discussion group.

Do you have classroom exercises that encourage developmental or exploratory discussion? Do you have classroom assignments that practice open-mindedness, civility, and interactivity? Please share your resources in the [Online Discussion Guidebook—Instructor Edition Wiki: Topic 1.1 Guiding Principles](#).

# Chapter One:

## Introducing the IF Online Discussion Approach

### Topic 1.2 Roles in the Online Discussion

**T**here are three key roles in the online discussion: student facilitator, student discussant, and instructor. Each role has its own set of responsibilities and challenges.

#### Student Facilitator

The student facilitator serves as the overall discussion manager. Each student should have an opportunity to facilitate at least one discussion during the semester. More opportunities to facilitate, however, make for a more engaged experience that helps to develop a sense of ownership in the classroom. As the facilitator, the student will:

- Develop initial discussion questions in consultation with the course instructor.
- Provide initial instructions to the discussion group as to how the discussion will be conducted.
- Monitor the discussion and provide prompts for new discussion directions and redirect the discussion when it goes off track.
- Challenge discussion participants to explore and enhance their thinking on the topic and improve their discussion participation.
- Analyze and evaluate the discussion in consultation with the course instructor.
- Write up a discussion summary at the conclusion of the facilitation.

For a detailed description of these responsibilities, see [Chapter Two: Students as Online Discussion Facilitators in the Student Edition of this guidebook](#).

#### Student Discussant

Participants are the heart of any discussion. Ideally, each discussion group will have between eight and 10 members; however, this number will depend on the specific logistics of each course and the goals of the instructor. Within the discussion, each discussant will:

- Prepare by completing the required readings and lectures prior to the start of the discussion.
- Regularly contribute to the discussion by following the established guidelines.
- Actively encourage fellow discussants to explore the topic and engage in civil discussion.
- Evaluate the overall discussion in consultation with the course instructor.
- Write up a discussion reflection at the end of the course.

For a detailed description of these responsibilities, see [Chapter Five: Students as Online Discussants in the Student Edition of this guidebook](#).

## Instructor

The instructor serves as an administrator, mediator, and mentor in the discussion, as well as a coach for the discussion facilitators. In more traditional courses, the instructor often assumes a centralized role in the discussion. He or she is the driver of the discussion. In IF online discussions, instructors are less visible and do much of their work behind the scenes. By designing a well-organized and structured course, the instructor empowers students to take ownership of the discussion. This allows the instructor to view the discussion from a meta-perspective and revise or redirect the course as needed. To achieve these goals, the instructor will:

- Create the online course and design the online discussion assignment.
- Provide guidance on how the discussion will be conducted and evaluated.
- Help student facilitators devise a plan for the discussion and create initial discussion prompts.
- Provide feedback to the student facilitators before and during the discussions.
- Debrief with facilitators at the conclusion of the discussion.
- Intervene in the discussion when necessary.
- Evaluate the discussion facilitator and the discussion participants.
- Provide feedback to the groups in preparation for the next discussion.

For a detailed description of these responsibilities, see [Chapter Three: The Role of Instructor](#).

# Chapter One:

## Introducing the IF Online Discussion Approach

### Topic 1.3 Structure of the Online Discussion

Online discussions are not for everyone and they are not suitable for every class. You can maximize the likelihood of a successful online discussion by knowing the basic factors that make for a productive online environment. Ideal online discussion environments for the IF discussion approach include:

- Small classes that engage topics conducive to exploration, prolonged discussion, and continued learning. Courses that are centered on the memorization of content or facts tend not to yield robust discussions and are not ideal for this approach.
- Large classes that can be subdivided into small discussion groups. It may be important to have adequate teaching support in such a scenario.
- Locations where basic technology needs and skills are met. If students do not have reliable and frequent access to the Internet or a computer, then an online discussion will not work. Some online classes require basic Internet access. This discussion approach, however, requires frequent checking in.

The ideal discussion size for an IF online discussion is between eight and 10, discussants. The instructor will want to divide the class into discussion groups before the course begins. The instructor should prepare for some students to drop the course or not fully participate in course assignments.

Once students are placed in appropriate discussion groups then the instructor will structure the discussion assignment around student facilitation. This works best if each week of the course is dedicated to a new discussion with a new student facilitator or small group of co-facilitators. The structure of the discussions will depend on the length of the course (five, eight, 10, or 15 weeks). A longer course offers a better opportunity for students to engage the online discussion process. We have, however, successfully used this process in courses as short as five weeks.

Once the class discussions are scheduled and the students are assigned facilitation dates, the actual discussion process can begin. The student facilitated discussion process is organized in three stages: pre-discussion, discussion, and post-discussion.

## Stage 1: Pre-Discussion

- Facilitators will want to carefully review course material for the week of their discussion. They will want to communicate with one another (if co-facilitating) and the instructor about the role course content should play in the discussion. Facilitators will also want to review all resources provided by the instructor and described in the Student Edition of this guidebook before beginning the facilitation process.
- Student facilitators are responsible for crafting the initial prompts for the discussions. We recommend that students submit an annotated set of questions to the instructor at least a few days prior to the scheduled discussion.
- The instructor will give feedback and guidance to the facilitator(s) about the discussion questions. Co-facilitators may also work together to design a strategy for engaging the class.
- Facilitators will want to communicate with participants prior to the discussion to convey any special instructions or required preparation.

## Stage 2: Discussion

- Facilitators will make sure that the discussion begins exactly when scheduled. They may want to develop a strategy for kick-starting the conversation. ([See Topic 2.9 Kick Starting the Discussion in the Student Edition of this guidebook.](#))
- Facilitators will also be tasked with keeping the discussion on track and dealing with any problems or challenges as they emerge throughout the course of the discussion. ([See Chapter Four: Managing Problem Situations and Challenges in the Student Edition of this guidebook.](#))
- Discussants will contribute to the conversation according to the instructions of the facilitator and instructor. ([See Chapter Five: Students as Online Discussants in the Student Edition of this guidebook.](#))
- The instructor will actively monitor and provide behind-the-scenes help throughout the discussion. ([See Chapter Three: The Role of Instructor.](#))

## Stage 3: Post-Discussion

- Once the discussion closes, the facilitators are responsible for reviewing, analyzing, and writing up a discussion summary. ([See Topic 2.12 Doing a Discussion Summary in the Student Edition of this guidebook.](#))
- Facilitators may also be invited to evaluate fellow facilitators, participants, or the overall discussion. ([See Chapter Five: Evaluation.](#))
- Participants may be required to write up a discussion review and/or evaluate the discussion process.
- Instructors will evaluate the discussion, facilitation, and discussion participants. ([See Chapter Five: Evaluation.](#))

## Chapter Two: Designing the Online Discussion



## Topic 2.0 Chapter Two at a Glance

In this chapter, we distinguish between three types of discussion:

- Discussion in Namesake
- Basic Discussion
- IF Discussion

We offer strategies for:

- Grouping students
- Dealing with late admissions
- Deciding on individual or team facilitation
- Balancing content and process
- Encouraging participation
- Setting standards of conduct

Checklist for Instructor:

- ☐ Become familiar with the online discussion platform
- ☐ Consider including supplemental online discussion software
- ☐ Determine the weight of the online discussion assignment
- ☐ Create a list of discussion guidelines for students
- ☐ Create discussion groups
- ☐ Structure facilitation rotation
- ☐ Instruct students on facilitation and participation expectations
- ☐ Distribute standards of conduct



# Chapter Two:

## Designing the Online Discussion

### Topic 2.1 Selecting the Right Platform and Software

Even though you are the designer of this online class, you may not have control over the type of online platform that you will use. Most institutions have invested in an online platform, and it will be the default option used by most faculty. Some of the most popular platforms include:



**Moodle** (Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment), an open-source platform that offers a content delivery system that includes features such as discussion forums, wikis, grade book, and more. It also offers a large support network (much of which is volunteer) to support users. Users tend to be traditional schools, but businesses, community organizers, nonprofits—any organization that wants to facilitate learning with a group of people—can benefit from this online platform. According to the Moodle website, more than 45,000 learning communities take advantage of the software in over 200 countries. The software can be downloaded from the website.



**Blackboard** serves as an umbrella for many different types of educational technology. Its six divisions (Learn, Connect, Analytics, Collaborate, Transact, and Mobile) each take a unique approach to fostering e-learning within and beyond traditional classrooms. Students are probably most familiar with Blackboard through its Internet tools like discussion forums, online tests, online drop box, and the online grade book.



**Aplia**, a resource designed for teachers that also holds major benefit to students. It's an automatic grading platform that swiftly returns assignments with detailed feedback, thereby keeping students engaged with course material. Teachers can customize Aplia to their individual standards, and the platform supports numerous college textbooks and curricula. Though it might seem that automatic grading wouldn't work too well in a college setting, Aplia's user statistics say differently: Their site reports that more than 1 million students in more than 1,300 institutions have used the platform in their classes.



**Piazza** manages online discussion forums for thousands of classes and has shared data with the *Chronicle of Higher Education* regarding online interactions among students and professors.

As the instructor of an online course, many of the decisions about selecting online platforms may not be yours to make. Nonetheless, it is good to be aware of the available platforms and to know that there are always alternatives. In addition, there is a proliferation of free and open-source software that can be incorporated into your class as a supplemental resource. For example:

To enhance communication, think about supplementing your class with:



**Twitter and Facebook** to remind students of upcoming events, assignments, test dates, study groups, news, or to encourage participation in the online discussion.



**Skype, WebEx, Go To Meeting, Zoom, or Google Hangout** can be used to chat with students in real time, face-to-face. You can use these platforms as "office hours" to discuss any issue or concern with individual students. You can also encourage students to use these platforms when working in small groups or studying for exams. These are great resources for discussing strategy with student facilitators prior to the start of the online discussion.

To share visual information, think about supplementing your class with:



**Instagram**, an open-source site used to share photos.



**Cowbird**, an open-source site used to create visual stories.



**Pinterest**, an open-source site used to share organized images around a particular topic.

To enhance collaboration, think about supplementing your class with:



**Google Docs**, an open-source online document-sharing site that updates in real time. This can be very handy for the post-discussion project.



**Wiki pages**, a web application that allows people to add, modify, or delete content in collaboration with one another.

To enhance application, think about supplementing your class with:



**P2PU**, marketed as the anti-MOOC, this online platform encourages everyday people to “teach” a short course on any topic. Students could use this site at the end of the semester to apply what they have learned through teaching it online to others.

To enhance a sense of ownership in the class, consider asking your students about the social networking sites that they use. You will not want to incorporate these sites into your class immediately, but the following introductory assignment will offer you some insight into the online literacy of your students and whether your online platforms are current.

You might ask:

**Which online site do you find most valuable and collaborative? Why? How does this site work? Who uses it and for what purpose? How might it be used in an online course? How might it enhance online discussions?**

Be careful not to overwhelm students with online applications. Most students will be better equipped than instructors for managing multiple online platforms and networking sites. Nonetheless, it is best to keep an online course simple. Do not overuse these sites or include them just to appear technologically current. Be upfront with your students about your online capabilities and do not include supplemental platforms that are entirely new to you. It is best to become familiar with online sites before incorporating them into your class.

How do you use social networking, computer software, applications, or online platforms to improve your online course? Which ones specifically improve the online discussion experience? Please share your resources in the [Online Discussion Guidebook—Instructor Edition Wiki: Topic 2.1 Platforms and Software](#).

# Chapter Two: Designing the Online Discussion

## Topic 2.2 Setting Expectations

There are different levels of engagement in online discussions. It is important to think about the type of discussion you would like to advance in the online classroom. Be realistic about what you are able to execute in your classroom given institutional realities.

**Discussion in Namesake:** Many instructors use online discussions as a policing exercise. At best, they use the discussion platform as a site for students to demonstrate that they completed the readings and at worst as a way of keeping attendance (i.e., full points for just submitting to the discussion). It is important to be upfront with students about what is expected in the discussion and to assign appropriate weight to this assignment. For example, this type of discussion should constitute no more than 10 percent of the course. If this is your goal, then this guidebook probably offers more information than you desire about constructing and maintaining online discussions.

**Basic Discussion:** Some online discussions are designed with the best intentions to engage students. These discussions tend to require students to post a minimal number of times a week (say, two) as a response to a question posted by the instructor. The student contributions might be thoughtful and the instructor might thoughtfully evaluate the assignment, but this style of discussion is still minimal. These types of discussions reflect stand-alone statements and very little interaction. These types of discussions might encourage students to reflect on a particular topic, but they do not offer interactive, facilitated discussions between students. This type of discussion is more like individual journaling in a classroom and might constitute 20 percent of the course.

**IF Discussion:** This type of discussion requires student-facilitated discussions that are monitored and supervised by an online instructor. These types of discussions utilize technology to engage students in online discussions—and they are discussions in the sense that students respond to one another, build upon previous ideas, move the discussion in new directions, explore the topic in new and conceptual ways, encourage students to examine the topic from perspectives that they do not personally hold. This type of discussion is a major component of the class and should be weighted appropriately in the course evaluation. This assignment might constitute as much as 35 percent of the course.

It is up to the instructor to decide which type of discussion best fits the course. Teaching support, course content, time allowed for the course, and size of the course are just a few factors that the instructor will want to consider when designing his or her online course. Once you have determined the type of discussion that you can actually support in your class then the next step is to communicate to your students what you expect in the discussion assignment.

Some expectations for student discussants include:

- Regularly contributing to the discussions.
- Comments that reflect content from the course as well as personal thoughts.
- Comments that are more than just agreement or disagreement. Posts should be developmental and build on what others have contributed.
- Comments that are respectful. Students are developing skills in civil discourse. This takes practice.
- Comments that are collaborative rather than competitive. These discussions are not debates. There are no “winners.”
- Comments that are insightful and bring new perspectives to the discussion that go beyond the more obvious points.
- Taking ownership of these discussions. Students should not rely on the instructor to intervene if their expectations are not met. Instructors should provide feedback to those who are not living up to the expectations of this discussion.

# Chapter Two: Designing the Online Discussion

## Topic 2.3 Creating the Discussion Group

When creating discussion groups, you will want to consider group size, criteria for assigning students to discussion groups, and how best to deal with late admissions and student attrition.

### Group Size

The size of the discussion group can have a major impact on the quality of the discussion. When the group is too small, it may be difficult to foster a robust discussion that engages the topic from various perspectives and through multiple dimensions. When the group is too large, students tend to feel anonymous, overwhelmed by the number of posts, and generally disengaged. What is the right size for the discussion group? There is no magic number but rather a range that works best. Online discussions work best when the number in the discussion group varies from eight to 10 people.

Typically, discussion groups of this size are large enough for a diversity of points of view but small enough for each person to feel comfortable contributing. Also, this size group can accommodate any attrition that might occur should one or two students decide to drop the course. Should attrition become a concern, starting with a larger discussion group is a safe strategy.

### Assigning Students to Discussion Groups

What is the best way to assign students to discussion groups? If the goal is to increase diversity within the discussion group, then random selection is not an ideal strategy. In large online courses, however, this may be your only option, and random selection may produce an equal distribution of student characteristics. If you are able to create student groups or teams based on relevant characteristics, then you may want to consider:

- **Knowledge and Skills:** If you want to structure groups to distribute particular types of knowledge, you can assess students' prior knowledge or ask them to complete a skills inventory. In some courses, instructors might use a student's major and/or GPA as a proxy for prior knowledge. Keep in mind, too, that skills relevant to group projects may be interpersonal as well as discipline-based.
- **Experience and Perspective:** We often think about diversity in terms of age, gender, culture, race/ethnicity, and native language, but you might also consider the relevance of socioeconomic, political, geographic, and other differences that might expose students to alternative perspectives. It is important to make sure that, when possible, there is critical mass in every group so that lone members of a particular social category do not find themselves isolated in a group. For example, in a class that has four men and four groups, instead of placing one man in each group, consider putting two men in two groups.

You can consider any of these characteristics, as well as others, when composing groups. There are also software programs that help faculty create teams according to the criteria that they specify. You may want to check out [CATME Team-Maker](http://info.catme.org) at <http://info.catme.org>.

Remember, the goal of diversifying group discussions is not to spark debate or confrontation. The hope of diversifying the group is to expose students to contrasting ideas and have them challenge their own assumptions. You should avoid grouping students together in a way that will clearly lead to confrontation—or easy consensus—rather than collaborative exploration.

## **Late Admission**

Another issue that instructors often face is the case of late admission to the course. The instructor will need to decide how to deal with late admits. For example, should these late admissions to the class be added to an already full group or should a new group be formed? In most cases, it's better to add another student to an already existing group and assign him or her a later date in the facilitation rotation than to create a new group for just a few students. This will give the student time to catch up with the course and the discussion process.

The number of students in each group should be as equal as possible. You will want to have each student serve as a facilitator at least once. It's much easier to manage this when the number of students is the same for each group. If you suspect that your class may have a high attrition rate or will include many students that are not fully committed to the course, then designing the discussions around co-facilitation rather than individual facilitation will save you from having to step in and assume the facilitator role with little or no notice.

# Chapter Two: Designing the Online Discussion

## Topic 2.4 Individual Facilitation Versus Team Facilitation

Student-facilitated discussions can take many forms. The type of classroom and maturity of students will inform which approach you choose. Individual facilitation allows a single student to:

- Take responsibility for the class discussion.
- Learn how to frame discussion questions.
- Keep the discussion moving and the discussants on task.
- Encourage and manage class participation.
- Review and summarize the discussion.

The opportunity to lead a class discussion is beneficial and empowering to the student. Likewise, co-facilitation allows a team of facilitators, two to three students, to achieve the skills listed above. In addition, co-facilitation of a discussion encourages:

- Reliability and consistency in each discussion group. Often in online courses, students withdraw or fail to participate fully in the course. If discussion assignments are posted early in the semester, the discussion process is not disrupted if one or even two of the facilitators drop out. This is extremely helpful for the instructor and for the discussion group.
- Collaboration on all aspects of the discussion. Co-facilitators can develop creative ways to encourage discussion throughout the week. For example, one facilitator might pose a question, while another facilitator responds to this question first to get the discussion rolling, while yet another might work behind the scenes to encourage particular participants to engage the discussion.
- Soft skill development. Whenever working in a group, students are required to communicate, collaborate, and negotiate. Students inevitably deal with free riders, dominators, procrastinators, and overachievers. Creating the environment for students to develop skills to deal with these scenarios is beneficial.

The size of the class, maturity of the students, and aims of the course will help you choose between individual facilitation and team facilitation.



## Topic 2.5 Balancing Content and Process

Most classrooms have a certain amount of content that must be mastered by students. We maintain that process, in particular the discussion process, is also key to students becoming life-long learners and communicators. Accordingly, we encourage a balance of content and process in the classroom. The instructor must negotiate this balance. There is no magic formula, but we tend to see positive results from the following classroom structures:

- An in-person course that meets three days a week for approximately three hours, where one-third of the time is allotted for student-facilitated discussions, i.e., two days of instruction and one day of student-facilitated discussion.
- An online course, where students work at their own pace while meeting specified deadlines. Accordingly, it is important to be clear with students about the content and process components of the course. Ideally, all content (course readings and course lectures) should be made available to the student at the beginning of the course, as well as facilitation and discussion assignments. Encourage students to complete all of the course readings/lectures by the beginning of each week so that they can focus on process (discussion/facilitation) for the remainder of the week. The content/process ratio tends to be reversed in an online course. Students will spend two-thirds of their time applying what they have learned and one-third of the time engaging text.

This process is what many are calling the “flipped classroom” or “flip teaching,” which encourages students to learn from reading or video lectures outside of the classroom and then spend classroom time for application. Online classes are, by design, “flipped,” and this approach can be maximized if the instructor offers more attention to this process.

For more on the flipped classroom, see [“Let’s use video to reinvent education” by Salman Khan.](#)

### Length of Online Discussion

How long should a discussion be kept open? Online classes tend to resemble in-person classes: They are designed around a weekly schedule. Each week offers a new topic or milestone for the course. Week-long discussions tend to give students the amount of time needed to review the discussion questions and thoughtfully engage the discussion multiple times throughout the week.

- If discussions are less than one week long, students will feel confined by the rigidity of the course.
- If discussions are more than one week long, students will contribute early or late in the process and then tune out for a good part of the course.

Whatever the time frame for the discussion, it is best to decide the structure of the discussions before the course begins. Students will be able to adapt to the allotted time frame. There are a few circumstances that might require the instructor to extend, re-open, or close a discussion early. For example:

- When the discussions are student facilitated, it is unfair to individual students if you extend or close a discussion early. If, however, there is a need to intervene in a discussion then it might be necessary to close, pause, or extend a discussion.
- When a discussion is particularly lively, it is possible to extend that discussion an extra week by working with the next round of facilitators to pick up the key threads of the discussion.

# Chapter Two:

## Designing the Online Discussion

### Topic 2.6 Defining Participation

There are ongoing debates about how best to encourage participation in online courses and, particularly, online discussions. One of the more popular strategies is to encourage students to post two times per week. The first post is required by mid-week and the second post is required by the end of the week. This is a manageable number of posts for the instructor to evaluate, and it encourages participation from students throughout the week.

This, however, is a basic approach to online discussions (see [Topic 2.2 Setting Expectations](#)). More exploratory discussions require more participation. There are ways to do this that are not overly burdensome to the instructor:

- Student facilitators in online courses help distribute responsibility and labor. Invest in students in the beginning of the semester by training them to be facilitators.
- Require a minimum number of posts, but explain to students that the minimum requirement will not earn them an A in the discussion forum assignment. If done extremely well, the minimum requirement might earn them a B. This offers enough information to students so that they know how to pass the class, but it does not create an environment in which they think that if they just post two times, they will earn full points for the assignment.
- Encourage students to visit the discussion forum every day. Inform students that their participation is recorded and easily reviewed by the course instructor in the online course control panel. This is not meant to be a threat, but a statement about online technology and the technological capabilities of the instructor.
- Be sure to explain to students that quality of contribution is better than quantity. Participation in the forum should be frequent (i.e., reading other posts) but contributions should not be chatter. Students should be thoughtful and concise in their posts.
- More frequent, shorter posts are better than infrequent, long posts. Think of this in terms of a face-to-face discussion: Soliloquies get in the way of discussion. Try to keep each post to one specific topic. Save the other topics for additional posts.

It may take students a few weeks to figure out the expectations of the online discussion. Offering immediate feedback to students on their contributions and doing so early in the semester will set the stage for the rest of the semester. Be firm in the first few weeks and you will see improved participation throughout the rest of the semester.

It is a good idea to include an extra credit activity or an assignment that requires students to revisit past discussions for further discussion or personal reflection. This tends to be best accomplished at the end of the semester.

## Topic 2.6 Example of Recollection Essay Assignment

### Recollection Essay

*In proper essay format, you will write a two- to three-page, double-spaced analysis of the progression of your thinking and writing in this course. You should review all of your discussion board contributions. Critically analyze your posts: Identify key themes in your writing, look for any shifts or development in your thought, and reflect on your strengths and weaknesses. You will also want to address how fellow classmates responded to your posts. Were your thoughts clearly understood? Did classmates take issue with any of your claims or arguments? Did you respond? If not, how would you respond to these comments? Overall, how useful were these discussions in helping you to reflect and develop your thought on these course issues.*

**Tip:** Be specific in your analysis. Refer to specific details in your discussion board contributions. Examples from the discussion board will help illustrate your analysis.

Do you have assignments that encourage reflection on the discussion process? Please share your resources in the [Online Discussion Guidebook—Instructor Edition Wiki: Topic 2.6 Reflection Assignments](#).

# Chapter Two:

## Designing the Online Discussion

### Topic 2.7 Setting Standards of Conduct

Online interactions tend to be taken less seriously than in-person interactions. This attitude, however, is rapidly changing. Online users are quickly learning about the importance of professional and mature conduct in the online community. Online discussions should conform to high standards of conduct. You will want to remind your students that:

- All contributions in an online discussion should be well structured, organized, thoughtful, and grammatically correct.
- Most contributions should be written in a formal tone. Online discussions are not Tweets or Facebook messages. There is no place for acronyms (i.e., LOL), slang, or profanity in online discussions unless the instructor specifies otherwise.
- Civility is essential for an online discussion. Intentions are often misunderstood in online exchanges. It is important to remain civil throughout the entire discussion. Remind students of tips for accomplishing this.
- Generosity of spirit is a great characteristic. It often takes multiple questions and responses before someone is able to express his or her exact point. Encourage students to be generous in their readings and promptings of others in online discussions.
- There is zero tolerance for racist, sexist, classist, or generally hateful comments in an online discussion. These offenses will incur an immediate and severe response from the instructor.
- Online discussions are unique in the sense that students are able to reflect, research, and craft a well-written response to others. Unlike in-person discussions, students need not respond immediately.

The primary rule of online discussions maintains that you should not submit any contributions in an online discussion that you would not say in an in-person discussion. You must be able to stand behind all of your comments.



# Chapter Three: The Role of Instructor

## Topic 3.0 Chapter Three at a Glance

### Responsibilities of the instructor include:

- Discussion designer
- Discussion coach
- Discussion manager

### The instructor/student facilitator relationship involves:

- Reviewing content and specific skills to highlight in the discussion
- Crafting discussion prompts and supplemental questions
- Managing the discussion
- Debriefing after the discussion
- Evaluating the facilitator

### The instructor/discussant relationship involves:

- Communicating clear guidelines and expectations
- Intervening in the discussion when necessary
- Offering positive and corrective feedback
- Debriefing with the discussion group
- Evaluating discussants

## Topic 3.1 Understanding the Role of Instructor

The role of the instructor in a student-facilitated online discussion is threefold: designer, coach, and manager of the discussion process.

As the **designer of the discussion**, you need to decide how best to organize the discussion assignment, which includes selecting software, setting up the discussion shell, creating discussion groups, creating the course schedule, and setting expectations (see [Chapter Two: Designing the Online Discussion](#)).

As the **discussion coach**, you will work closely with student facilitators and offer frequent feedback to discussion groups. This will include working with facilitators to craft discussion prompts, monitoring the discussion, offering assistance to facilitators through discussion challenges, and offering constructive feedback to discussion groups.

For example, when **monitoring the discussion** the instructor should:

- Check in on the discussion at least two times a day. You should be able to count on discussion facilitators to drive the discussion, however, checking in is still essential.
- Make his or her presence known by contributing short comments to the discussion and responding directly to students by name. Do not post generic, ready-made responses to online discussions. It gives the impression that you are not following the discussion thread.
- Communicate with individual students and offer feedback on performance through private email. This will not undermine the student facilitator of the discussion.

As the **discussion manager**, you will help to smoothly transition between weekly discussions and discussion teams. One of your goals as the manager is to make sure that the discussions stay true to the course topic. There are tips for **keeping the discussion assignment on track**:

- Train facilitators. Online discussions need facilitators who can keep the conversation on track. As the instructor of the course, it is your job to train and manage the facilitator on this task.
- Prepare participants. Discussion participants need to be aware of what is expected of them. You can provide grading rubrics to students prior to the start of the discussion. You can also clearly outline what is expected.
- Promote a spirit of collaboration. Participants need to want to collaborate in the discussion and not change the discussion thread to something of personal interest. To encourage this, make the discussion topic interesting.
- Encourage generosity of spirit. Participants must want to understand how others think about the discussion topic. The discussion should be a genuine appreciation of how others think and not a competition among differing points of view. Developing a sense of community in the classroom will help to foster this appreciation (see [Topic 3.5 Building Community](#)).

Another responsibility of the course manager is to evaluate the discussion, facilitators, and discussants. Although the evaluation role is familiar, evaluating an online discussion has its own set of special challenges. For more on evaluation, please refer to [Chapter Five: Evaluation](#).



# Chapter **Three**: The Role of Instructor

## Topic 3.2 Working With Student Facilitators

**A**s the instructor of the course, you will work directly and closely with student facilitators in all three stages of the discussion process:

### 1. Pre-discussion:

- Set goals. Talk with facilitators about the course content that you would like emphasized in the weekly discussion. If you have goals for particular discussants, such as contributing more or offering more developmental comments in the discussion, then communicate these goals to the facilitator.
- Review discussion prompts. Writing good discussion questions is difficult and may not come naturally to student facilitators. Spend some time working with facilitators on crafting initial discussion prompts as well as supplemental discussion questions.

### 2. Discussion

- Make sure that the discussion opens and starts on time.
- Monitor the discussion and the facilitation practices. In particular, make sure that the facilitator is encouraging participation, keeping the discussion on track, moving the discussion in new directions when necessary, encouraging civil discourse, involving all students.
- Communicate privately with the facilitator during the discussion on how they are doing and how they might improve the discussion.
- Be present to help address any problem situations should they arise.

### 3. Post-discussion

- Once the discussion closes, debrief with the facilitator. Review the discussion summary and offer guidance for improvement. Highlight achievements.
- Once the discussion closes, debrief with the discussion group. Send a group email noting general strengths and places for improvement.
- Evaluate the facilitator and the discussants.

## Topic 3.3 Communicating With Student Discussants

Many online discussions are simply a collection of disconnected statements that have no narrative thread. Such discussions rarely accomplish more than to give students the credit they need for a grade. How can you avoid having such disappointing discussions? Guidelines to give your students include:

- Each discussion response should build on what others have said rather than being simply a random thought without connection to any other comment.
- Discussion responses should add new insight rather than simply stating agreement or disagreement with others' points of view.
- Discussion responses should be of sufficient length to explain your thinking but not so long as to turn off others from reading what you're saying. As a rule of thumb, responses should be five to -10 sentences or roughly 100 to 200 words.
- Discussion responses should be respectful of others' points of view.
- Discussion responses should invite responses from others. You might suggest participants end their responses with a question for others to consider.

Providing guidance to students on what constitutes an appropriate response is the first step to ensuring the discussion is worthwhile. You also need to provide positive and corrective feedback as the discussion unfolds.

- Positive feedback – You should comment on specific responses with an online post when they are exemplary. When you do provide such feedback, give an indication of why you think this response was a good one and then give students some general guidance as to how the other discussion responses can improve.
- Corrective feedback – In most cases, you should make this feedback private. You should let the student know what needs to be improved in very specific terms. You will also want to require that the student resubmit a response in order to get credit. Generally, the earlier you can provide corrective feedback, the better the overall discussion will be. Once students realize that the discussion guidelines need to be followed, they will meet them.

In large online courses it may not be possible to give as much individualized feedback as you would like. If this is the case, try to give feedback to the discussion group at the midpoint of the discussion and again at the conclusion. This feedback can be conveyed via email or through Web applications. If giving group feedback, try to keep it specific enough so that students know how to improve in the next discussion, but not so specific that individual students feel publically criticized.

# Chapter Three:

## The Role of Instructor

### Topic 3.4 Getting Everyone Involved

Any group is likely to have members who are early contributors and others who hold back. How do you get everyone involved? How do you improve social presence in the online discussion?

- Include introductory discussion exercises so that students have the opportunity to get to know one another before the discussion.
- Designate one person to start each discussion. Rotate this assignment in the group. This way everyone can play a key role in the discussion ([see Topic 2.9 Kick-Starting the Discussion in the Student Edition of this guidebook](#)).
- Assign different comment responsibilities to students. This can be done by varying the number of responses expected of each student for each discussion or topic. Quieter students will have discussions where they need to carry a larger share of the responses. The students who normally dominate the discussion can also be given a maximum number of comments they can make during some discussions so that others can contribute more. Many online platforms allow you to set a maximum number of posts or length of contributions. Explore your discussion board control panel if you want to implement these limits.
- Make sure every student serves as a facilitator for one discussion. When students facilitate, they become more willing to contribute in future discussions. When possible, try to schedule some of the more reluctant students earlier in the semester.
- Connect offline with the students who haven't been involved as much as you would like to find out the reason. You may find reasons that can be resolved.
- Ask the students who are less involved in the discussion to complete extra discussion summaries. This may help them become more comfortable with the discussion process.
- Remind students that speaking up is crucial to personal, civic, and career success.

Of course, one other way to ensure everyone is involved is to give early grades for participation. A very low grade can often stimulate more contributions.

## Topic 3.5 Building Community

It is easy to be anonymous in an online class. Anonymity brings a variety of challenges to an online classroom. Namely, when students feel anonymous they tend to believe that they are less accountable for their comments and work. For example, students will submit comments in an online classroom that they would never say aloud in an in-person classroom. These comments may be directed at other students or even the instructor. It is best to eliminate anonymity before it becomes a problem. A few simple ways to move beyond anonymity in an online classroom include:

- Be sure to include a thoughtful introductory assignment at the beginning of the class. This assignment should require students to introduce themselves and do so in a way that is not superficial. Part of this exercise should require students to respond or connect with other students.
- Be sure to read and comment on all of these introductory assignments. Students are invisible insofar as they are allowed to be invisible. Be sure to make them feel that they are “being seen” in the online classroom.
- Incorporate group work in the course as well as small group discussions that remain consistent throughout the semester. This will allow students the opportunity to get to know a few of their peers well.

As the instructor of an online course, you are required to get to know your students. One of your many responsibilities is to write letters of reference for students. How can you do this if you do not know your students? This is becoming a growing problem for online students in large online courses. You can, however, take the following steps to get to know the students in your class:

- Read all discussion forums. Do not assign this task to your teaching assistant. It is the best way to get to know your students.
- Require all students to meet with you at least once during the semester. This can be in the form of an online chat, videoconference, or phone call. You can even organize this meeting in small groups of three or four students if you have a large class (see [Topic 2.1 Selecting the Right Platform and Software](#)).
- Hold office hours. You can do this by making yourself available to your online students for a few hours each week. You can use free video software (such as Skype or Google Hangout) to meet with students during this time.
- Take a moment at the beginning of the semester to scan your roster and look for familiar names. Be sure to send these students a special “welcome back” note.
- Communicate with students through email, but don’t hesitate to schedule phone calls as well. Sometimes it is important to hear your students.

Just like in-person classes, if you want to get to know your students, you need to be willing to invest some time in learning their names and reviewing their work. This takes time, but it helps make the classroom feel more like a community.

How do you build community in your online classroom? Do you have a creative introductory assignment that can be used in the discussion forum? Do you have an innovative group project idea? Please share your ideas in the [Online Discussion Guidebook—Instructor Edition Wiki: Topic 3.6 Building Community](#).

# Chapter Four:

## Managing Problem Situations and Challenges

### Topic 4.0 Chapter Four at a Glance

The Challenge	Corrective Action #1	Corrective Action #2	Corrective Action #3
Addressing inappropriate conduct	Provide feedback or coach the discussion facilitator to provide feedback to the discussion group on how to improve the next discussion.	Provide direct feedback to individual discussants on how to improve their participation in the discussion. Eliminate the feeling of anonymity in the discussion.	Call a time-out in the discussion and start over and/or remove individual discussants from the conversation.
Intervening in the discussion	Allow the discussion to play out. Give students the opportunity to address minor offenses in the discussion.	Coach the student facilitator to intervene in the discussion and address the concern.	Privately contact the offending student(s) and offer a corrective course of action.
Neutralizing a hostile discussion atmosphere	Identify the source of aggression or hostility. Determine if this is a pattern or an isolated event.	Humanize yourself and/or the discussion facilitator by scheduling a phone call or video conference with the individual(s) contributing to the hostility.	Explore class and/or university disciplinary measures.
Correcting factual errors	Allow student discussants to correct the factual error.	Coach the student facilitator to correct the factual error, if necessary.	Join the discussion and contribute a corrective thread of reasoning to the conversation.
Utilizing personal stories	Create a space for personal stories and narratives separate from the discussion space.	Create an assignment that enables students to generalize from personal stories.	Coach student facilitators to redirect personal stories that limit discussion exploration.
Avoiding last-minute posts	Create guidelines for posting early in the discussion.	Encourage student facilitators to be innovative about encouraging early and consistent participation.	Penalize students for not contributing regularly to the discussion.
Managing grade contestations	Share grading rubrics with all students.	Allow students to contest grades by putting their argument for a grade change in writing.	Empower student facilitators to review grade change requests and make recommendations to the instructor.
Helping technologically challenged students	Provide students with tech support information.	Identify one member of the discussion group to help out students who seem to be having technology problems.	Walk through the technology issue with the student while on the phone or through video conferencing.

## Topic 4.1 Correcting Inappropriate Conduct in Online Discussions

**E**lectronic communication can often be less respectful and harsher in tone than face-to-face communication. As the instructor of an online class, you need to maintain discussion civility. There are several strategies for correcting inappropriate conduct:

- Provide feedback to the entire discussion group about what you consider to be inappropriate. This strategy is especially effective when the inappropriate behavior is exhibited by more than one of the participants. This strategy can also be useful as a teaching moment.
- Provide private feedback to the participant who is acting inappropriately. This could involve someone who is dominating the discussion or someone who rarely contributes. It could also be feedback on the quality of the discussion comments being made or related issues.
- Call a time-out to the discussion and start again. This strategy is fairly dramatic and should only be used when prior feedback has been unsuccessful.
- Dismiss one (or more) of the discussion participants from the discussion. Again, this is an extreme step but may be necessary when a limited number of the participants have not heeded prior feedback.

When you decide to use one of these strategies, it's generally good practice to take action as soon as you become concerned that a pattern may be forming.

One particular factor that tends to contribute to inappropriate conduct in online discussions is the sense of **anonymity**. If you notice that students are making bold claims that they would otherwise temper in an in-person classroom, then it is best to address this concern immediately as these actions might be replicated by other students. You can do this by:

- Reminding everyone in the class about expected classroom decorum. Do this through a classroom announcement or email to the class.
- Contact the offender in the class directly. You can do this by email; however, email does not address the concern of anonymity. We have found that scheduling a phone call with the student is the most direct way of addressing the issue. If possible, schedule a face-to-face conference with the student. Once the student realizes that he or she is not anonymous in the class, classroom behavior will improve dramatically.

# Chapter Four:

## Managing Problem Situations and Challenges

### Topic 4.2 Intervening in the Online Discussion

As the instructor of an online class, you are responsible for creating and maintaining a safe space for all students to explore new ideas. In traditional classrooms, students often offer cues through body language and facial expressions to convey discomfort in this shared communal space. Traditionally, this tends to be the time for an instructor to intervene. Online discussions offer new challenges for instructors. There are different ways to intervene in an online course. As a set of guidelines, an instructor should consider the following:

- Always be present in online discussions. In this space, students engage one another, and it is essential that the instructor is present.
- Don't respond to all minor offenses immediately. Let them play out. Give students a chance to take ownership of the discussion and police minor offenses on their own. Rebukes from students are less traumatic than a public reprimand from the instructor.
- If there is a need to intervene it is sometimes best to discuss the offense with the offending party through private email or a phone conversation. Again, public reprimands tend to not only discourage the particular offender from engaging the conversation, but it frightens all students from engaging the discussion from fear of criticism.
- Allow the student to correct the mistake made before making any sort of announcement to the class.
- It is sometimes better to make the student facilitator aware of the need for an intervention and coach the facilitator on this intervention.
- When the safety or the personal health of a student is at stake, the instructor should intervene immediately and without hesitation.

Most interventions can be conducted behind the scenes or through the use of student facilitators. There is no need for an instructor to micromanage the classroom, which is designed to be student-centered. Distributing this power and helping students address minor offenses tends to have long-term benefits.



## Topic 4.3 Dealing With a Hostile Discussion Atmosphere

Dealing with an aggressive or disruptive student in an online course can be tricky. Unlike the face-to-face classroom experience, students who are being disruptive or disrespectful in your class can simply ignore your reprimands. The first thing to do is to identify the source(s) of aggression or hostility. Ask yourself:

- Is this a repeat offender? Is this a pattern in the course? Or, is this an isolated event? If so, is it necessary to address this isolated incident?

If you must address the offender, then do so privately. Schedule a phone conference or an in-person meeting. Oftentimes online students feel anonymous and say things in an online class that they would never actually say to another human being in-person. Humanize yourself by requiring a meeting. When talking with the student:

- Explain the importance of civility in online discussions.
- Give the student specific examples of unacceptable discussion behavior.
- Be transparent about consequences for bad behavior, such as penalizing the student's grade or removing him or her from the discussion group altogether.

If the offense merits further action, pursue disciplinary action with the university. Keep in mind that it takes only one or two disruptive students to create a general hostile discussion atmosphere. Once a negative mood sets in, it will be hard to get the discussion back on track.

# Chapter Four:

## Managing Problem Situations and Challenges

### Topic 4.4 Correcting Factual Errors in Online Discussions

**"That's incorrect!"** It's a simple phrase, but it can have a chilling impact on a discussion. One of the challenges of overseeing the discussion is to know when to instruct the student facilitator to correct factual errors, when to ignore these errors, and when to intervene directly.

As a general guide:

- Let the student discussants decide for themselves whether a statement is factually correct. All of us are exposed to factually incorrect statements every day. Wait and see if this particular error is noticed by the discussants. Wait and see if it impacts or redirects the discussion in a way that is not helpful.
- If you notice that the discussion is being unduly influenced by a factual error, then advise the student-facilitator to interject a question that takes the discussion away from the factual basis to a broader perspective, i.e., "Let's think of this issue from another perspective..."
- Don't let the discussion digress into a debate about facts. When this happens, coach the student-facilitator to raise the level of the discussion, i.e., "Let's think about this issue more broadly."
- If a discussant continually interjects factually incorrect information, then instruct the student facilitator to ask for a citation. Have the discussant share his or her sources.
- If the discussion continues to be hijacked by factually incorrect information, then it is time for the instructor to intervene directly. As the instructor, you can discuss this issue via email or another mode of direct communication with the individual perpetuating incorrect information. If greater action is needed, the instructor can correct the error by joining the discussion and posting a correction.

Discussions where factual statements become key parts of the discussion are rarely that productive. That is not to say that facts are not important but to suggest that bickering over factual details is not the best use of the discussions space. You might want to establish a tone upfront that the discussion is about the perspectives of the participants and not solely about facts as perceived by someone else.

## Topic 4.5 Making Personal Stories More Generalizable

As a general rule, it is good to limit personal stories in online discussions. Of course, this depends on the course content and the purpose of the course. Oftentimes personal stories detract from the discussion and make it difficult for students to engage the topic. If you choose to allow personal narratives in the discussion, there is a way to keep them from becoming the entire focus of the discussion. For example:

- Designate time in the discussion for sharing stories. These will be posted for all to see in a special discussion board.
- Once the personal narrative period has lapsed, make up a list of the generalizations that evolve from the stories.
- Make the generalizations the theme of the discussions that follow.

How do you develop these generalizations?

- Read each of the stories. Highlight what seems to be the essence of the story.
- Review the list of concepts from the list below. For each concept, ask yourself the question: Does this word have a connection to this story. Make a list of all of the words that connect to the story.
- Take the list of the words and then develop a question that connects the words to the topic of the discussion.

Sample concepts: fairness, equality, civility, openness, generosity, hope, thoughtful, insightful, protective, motivation, rewarding, responsibility, independence, freedom, liberty, love, spirituality.

### Topic 4.5 Example of Personal Story to Generalization

**The story:** *"I spent a lot of my early childhood in a very rural county in West Virginia. This county has one of the lowest labor non-participation rates in the country. That means that people don't have jobs nor are they looking for jobs. I know that county very well. Everyone has multiple jobs. Most of these jobs are off the books. They live on large plots of land and have huge vegetable gardens. They own their own modest homes. They have freezers full of vegetables they planted and game they have hunted. They eat well. They sleep well. They raise their children well. They help their neighbors in a time of need."*

**Concepts that apply:** freedom, protective, motivation, liberty, rewarding, responsibility, and independence.

**The generalization:** How can our economic system give responsible citizens the freedom to live their lives as they want? Should liberty in the United States mean that our citizens could opt out of the social protections as long as they are motivated to take care of themselves?

How do you use personal narratives in online discussion forums? Do you use external software or platforms to isolate these stories? Please share your strategies and resources in the [Online Discussion Guidebook—Instructor Edition Wiki: Topic 4.5 Making the Most of Personal Narratives](#).

# Chapter Four:

## Managing Problem Situations and Challenges

### Topic 4.6 Avoiding the Last-Minute Rush of Comments

**P**rocrastination is a major problem in almost all university classrooms. This problem is especially critical in online courses since last-minute discussions defeat the primary purpose of the discussion. Last-minute discussions are rarely insightful, and they almost never help students develop the desired skill set that we associate with discussion. Some approaches for dealing with a last-minute rush of comments include:

- Requiring students to contribute to the discussion every day or every other day.
- Incorporating the regularity of postings into the assessment of each student.
- Posting a new discussion theme every few days and requiring student postings for each theme. The themes can also be useful in keeping the discussion focused on all aspects of a topic.
- Encouraging student facilitators to be innovative. Encourage them to use social networking sites or provocative prompts to encourage frequent contributions.
- Make it into a game. Design “levels” of participation in the course. All students start off on the same base level, however, students achieve higher levels of participation (“leveling up”) for doing certain things: being the first to contribute in a discussion, moving the discussion in new directions, posting a certain number of contributions, etc.

The problem of a last-minute rush of comments should not be a problem if instructors exercise some firm practices for discussion participation and apply some innovative ways of encouraging participation.

## Topic 4.7 Managing Grade Contestations in Online Discussions

One of the biggest complaints from instructors of online classes pertains to evaluation of online discussions. They are a lot of work to grade and there is a tendency for online students to expect full points for simply participating in an online discussion. After a discussion closes and grades are posted, instructors experience an influx of emails inquiring about individual grades on discussions.

Email correspondence may read something like this: “Dear Professor Hartman, can you please explain to me why I lost two points on Discussion Eight?”

Although it is the responsibility of instructors to give feedback to all students and to address any questions that students may have about their performance, this is a particular challenge in online classes. Online students are able to dash off email inquiries that require the professor to return to the discussion, review the student’s contribution in the context of other contributions, and evaluate the student’s work for a second time. This may not seem unreasonable, but in large online classrooms this may indeed be an unmanageable task.

Our successful approach to this challenge has been to empower students to take responsibility for evaluation. For example:

- Expand the responsibility of evaluation to the discussant. If a student believes that he or she received an unfair grade, then allow the student the opportunity to make this case in writing. Ask that he or she reviews the grading criteria and write up an argument for a grade change.
- Empower discussion facilitators to review the discussion and evaluate contributions. They will take this responsibility very seriously. Compare your grade with that of the facilitator for all contested cases.

### Topic 4.7 Sample Instructions to Students on Contesting Grades

***If you would like to contest your grade for a discussion assignment, please review your own post and then explain in writing how you satisfied the criteria described in the assignment description. Be specific and detailed. You will send this written response to the DISCUSSION FACILITATOR(S), who will evaluate your argument and make a recommendation to the instructor. The instructor will also review your written statement and will make the final decision about your grade, which might be to maintain, raise, or lower your grade.***

# Chapter Four:

## Managing Problem Situations and Challenges

### Topic 4.8 Dealing With Technology

It is difficult to anticipate the degree of help students will need with both new and old technology. As an online instructor, you could assume that all students have basic computer literacy and if they do not then this is not your concern. We would advise against this position.

Online classes attract nontraditional students. Many of these students are older or have particular challenges that may put them at a disadvantage when it comes to using new technology. When dealing with a student that is technologically challenged:

- Try to schedule phone meetings with the student. You may need to walk them through the process step-by-step.
- Write the syllabus and all instructions in the most direct and simply way. Assume no one in the class has a high level of computer literacy and has never taken an online course.
- Introduce tech support and online support to the students early in the semester and encourage them to use it.
- Introduce online tutorials and encourage their use.
- Begin the course with a simple task that requires accessing the discussion board, drop box, online lectures. You can enable the online course to freeze for the student until these basic assignments are completed. This simple test ensures that all students have a basic understanding of the platform.

You should also plan on technological glitches and shutdowns at some point during your online course. It is going to happen. The following tips will help to minimize disruption and frustration. These are tips for both instructors and students:

- Download important course material to your own computer. This might include the course syllabus, schedule, assignments, lectures, study guides, etc. Put all of this material in a file on your own computer. This way you can access course material even when the course is inaccessible for technical reasons.
- Avoid “peak hours” in online courses. These hours tend to be from 11 am – 4 pm. Noon is an especially high access time for online courses. If you notice it is harder to access your course during these peak hours then try again early in the morning or later in the evening. It is possible to do your work offline and then post it during “off peak” hours.
- Experiment with browsers. If you have a hard time accessing your online course, try switching browsers. Newer online platforms do not work well with some of the older Internet browsers.
- Submit or post all work/assignments at least one day early. This is worth repeating: set deadlines for yourself that are at least 1 day early for all work. This way you have time to address any technical issues with the submission of your work.
- When you encounter a technical problem with the online course platform, be sure to send an email to the proper tech support. You should also take a screen shot of the problem. This helps to document the problem and can be sent to the instructor or to tech support.
- Technical glitches and shutdowns will happen in an online course. Roll with it. Send the proper inquiries to tech support, continue your work offline, and send an email to your instructor or students.



# Chapter Five: Evaluating Online Discussions

## Topic 5.0 Chapter Five at a Glance

### Assessment of Student Facilitation:

- Instructor Evaluation of pre-discussion preparation
- Instructor Evaluation of discussion facilitation
- Instructor Evaluation of discussion summary
- Student Evaluation of facilitation
- Student Evaluation of co-facilitator

### Assessment of Student Discussion:

- Instructor Evaluation of student participation

### Assessment of the Discussion and Discussion Process:

- Student Evaluation of the discussion



## Topic 5.1 Managing Evaluation for Online Discussions

Online, student-facilitated discussions are a lot of work! The time commitment to read, respond, and grade online discussions is significantly greater than in-person discussions. In addition, guiding the facilitation process is also time consuming. We need to rethink expectations for instructors of online discussions. Some ideas, many of which are controversial, include:

- Rethink evaluation. Instead of evaluating each student for each post, perhaps you will consider examining and evaluating overall progress throughout the course.
- Develop a peer review evaluation process for online discussions.
- Assume that all co-facilitators do equal work (one grade for all) unless students submit an evaluation form for their co-facilitators.
- Share resources for evaluation.

You will want to think realistically about what sort of evaluation you can and want to do for your online course. To help with this, we have included the following sections that offer ideas for evaluation as well as sample grading rubrics. Regardless of your approach to evaluation, these three tips tend to be helpful in most cases:

- Provide a grading rubric to students. Be very transparent about how you will be evaluating each discussion/facilitation.
- Create a system for students to contest their grades. Acknowledging that students will contest grades and creating a process to deal with this practice will save you time in the long run (see [Topic 4.7 Managing Grade Contestations in Online Discussions](#)).
- If grading these discussions yourself or delegating this task to a teaching assistant, be sure to be consistent. Stick to the grading rubric. Evaluate discussions immediately after the discussion closes and post grades in a timely fashion. Getting behind in online discussions is a tremendous mistake.

# Chapter Five:

## Evaluating Online Discussions

### Topic 5.2 Evaluation of Pre-Discussion Preparation

Student facilitators need to plan their discussions carefully if the discussions are to be successful. A component of the facilitation evaluation should be whether the facilitator prepared properly. You should look for the following in the evaluation:

#### Discussion Questions

- Did the facilitator have a set of starting questions for the discussion?
- Were the starting questions appropriate? Helpfully annotated?
- Were they submitted on time?
- Were there supplemental questions to be used in the course of the discussion?
- Were these thoughtful and anticipatory of the discussion?

#### Discussion Practices

- Did the facilitator provide guidance on how the discussion would be conducted?
- Was this guidance appropriate for the type of discussion desired?

#### Participant Backgrounds

- Did the facilitator obtain information on the participants to share with other participants?
- Was the information obtained useful for the specific topic of the discussion?

#### Discussion Timeline

- Did the facilitator provide a schedule for discussion postings?
- Was the timeline detailed enough to allow for different discussion directions?
- Were the timelines realistic for the discussion format?

#### Discussion Materials

- Did the facilitator provide materials that were useful for the discussion?
- Were these materials appropriate, innovative, or useful?

The evaluation of the pre-discussion preparation is essentially based on two components: completion of preparation and appropriate preparation. In the overall evaluation of the facilitation, the preparation should be 10% to 20% of the facilitation grade.

## Topic 5.2 Sample Assessment Tool for Facilitation Preparation

Task	Did this Task?	Comments on the Effectiveness
1. Prepared the discussion questions		
A.		
B.		
C.		
2. Communicated discussion practices		
A.		
B.		
C.		
3. Obtained participant information (if required)		
A.		
B.		
C.		
4. Created a timeline for the discussion		
A.		
B.		
C.		
5. Developed discussion materials that supported the discussion		
A.		
B.		
C.		

# Chapter Five:

## Evaluating Online Discussions

### Topic 5.3 Evaluation of Discussion Facilitation

Criteria for evaluating the actual facilitation include, but are not limited to:

- **Discussion Strategy:** Did the facilitator have a game plan during the discussion? Did he or she present initial prompts on time and continue with relevant supplemental prompts throughout the discussion? Did the facilitator move the discussion in new and interesting directions? Was the facilitator prepared?
- **Facilitation Mechanics:** Did the facilitator encourage participation? Did the facilitator help discussants to build upon ideas? Did the facilitator keep the discussion on track? Prevent it from stalling out? Properly conclude discussion themes?
- **Discussion Leadership:** Did the facilitator adequately address problem situations? Did the facilitator bring all discussants into the conversation? Did the facilitator guide, but not control, the discussion?
- **Use of Course Content:** Was the course content adequately addressed in the discussion? Did the facilitator help to clarify course material?
- **Quality of Discussion:** Was the discussion developmental? Exploratory? Were discussants engaged? Was there an overall flow to the discussion?

### Topic 5.3 Sample Assessment Tool for Student Facilitation

Evaluation Component	Evaluation Notes	Evaluation Scores
1. Discussion Strategy		<input type="checkbox"/> 5. Outstanding <input type="checkbox"/> 4. Very Good <input type="checkbox"/> 3. Average <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Below Average <input type="checkbox"/> 1. Unacceptable
2. Facilitation Mechanics		<input type="checkbox"/> 5. Outstanding <input type="checkbox"/> 4. Very Good <input type="checkbox"/> 3. Average <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Below Average <input type="checkbox"/> 1. Unacceptable
3. Discussion Leadership		<input type="checkbox"/> 5. Outstanding <input type="checkbox"/> 4. Very Good <input type="checkbox"/> 3. Average <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Below Average <input type="checkbox"/> 1. Unacceptable
4. Use of Course Content		<input type="checkbox"/> 5. Outstanding <input type="checkbox"/> 4. Very Good <input type="checkbox"/> 3. Average <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Below Average <input type="checkbox"/> 1. Unacceptable
5. Quality of Discussion		<input type="checkbox"/> 5. Outstanding <input type="checkbox"/> 4. Very Good <input type="checkbox"/> 3. Average <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Below Average <input type="checkbox"/> 1. Unacceptable
6. Other Observations		
7. Overall Evaluation		Total
*Improvement strategy		
*Continue with		
*Progress made from previous discussions		

# Chapter Five:

## Evaluating Online Discussions

### Topic 5.4 Evaluation of Discussion Participation

Criteria for evaluating online discussions may vary depending on the course, type of discussion, or desired outcome of the discussion. General guidelines for evaluating online discussion participation include:

- **Clarity/grammar/spelling:** Did the discussant write a well-written, structured, and readable contribution?
- **Thoughtfulness:** Did the discussant offer ready-made responses or did he or she offer reflective, critical, playful contributions that added something valuable to the discussion? Is it clear that the discussant gave this issue some thought before posting a response?
- **Originality:** Did the discussant add something new to the discussion? Did he or she lead the discussion in a new direction and encourage others to think differently? Did he or she introduce new dimensions to the topic?
- **Developmental:** Did the discussant build on others' thoughts? Did he or she respond directly to another student and his or her idea? Did he or she continue the discussion and not just post one-off statements? Did he or she respond to questions from other students?
- **Open to exploration:** Was the discussant open to alternative ideas? Did he or she add insights or acknowledge the value of insights that he or she did not personally hold? Did he or she encourage discussion participation or shut down fellow classmates?
- **Tone:** Was the discussant a positive force in these discussions? Did he or she make a good faith effort to understand the value of other ideas? Did he or she engage these ideas with seriousness? Was the discussant fair to other classmates?

Students may not be good discussants at first. It is important that you provide regular feedback to them and let them know how they can improve. The following sample assessment tool can be completed and returned to students according to your own review schedule. We recommend that you assess discussants early in the semester and share this information with them. This will give them time and the necessary information to improve in the discussion process.

## Topic 5.4 Sample Assessment Tool for Online Discussants

	Always True	Mostly True	Sometimes True	Rarely True
Does the discussant post well-written contributions?				
Does the discussant express thoughts in a way that others understand?				
Does the discussant offer thoughtful and/or innovative contributions?				
Does the discussant build on the thoughts of others?				
Is the discussant open to exploring ideas?				
Are the discussant's posts generally positive and sincere?				
Does the discussant post on a regular basis?				
Advice for discussant:				

# Chapter Five:

## Evaluating Online Discussions

### Topic 5.5 Evaluation Of Discussion Summary

Once the discussion has concluded, the facilitator needs to complete a summary of the discussion. A component of the facilitator evaluation should be how well this part of the facilitation was done. You should look for the following in the evaluation:

#### Key Themes

- Did the discussion summary contain a description of the central themes of the discussion?
- Were the key themes that were identified the ones that accurately reflected the discussion?
- Were the key themes worded appropriately?

#### Areas of Agreement

- Were the areas of agreement described in the summary?
- Were any areas of agreement missing from the summary?
- Were the areas of agreement accurate?
- Were the areas of agreement properly worded?

#### Areas of Disagreement

- Were the areas of disagreement described in the summary?
- Were any areas of disagreement missing from the summary?
- Were the areas of disagreement accurate?
- Were the areas of disagreement properly worded?

#### Areas of Concern

- Were the areas of concern described in the summary?
- Were any areas of concern missing from the summary?
- Were the areas of concern accurate?
- Were the areas of concern properly worded?

#### Writing Quality

- Did the summary convey the essence of the discussion in a way that was easy to read and understand?
- Did the sections of the report flow together properly?

#### Timeliness

- Was the discussion summary produced by the deadline?

The evaluation of the discussion summary is essentially based upon two factors: Were the key parts of the discussion identified? Were these key parts properly written? In the overall discussion evaluation of the facilitation, the summary should be 20% to 30% of the overall grade.



## Topic 5.5 Sample Assessment Tool for the Discussion Summary

Task	Did this Task?	Comments on the Effectiveness
1. Identified key themes of the discussion		
2. Identified areas of general agreement		
3. Identified areas of general disagreement		
4. Identified areas of concern		
5. Produced a well written/coherent summary		
6. Produced the summary in a timely manner		

# Chapter Five:

## Evaluating Online Discussions

### Topic 5.6 Student Evaluation of the Discussion

Students can be useful evaluators of the discussions. The following guidelines can be used to train students to evaluate the facilitation:

- Provide a set of questions on the evaluation for students to answer. Students should be required to answer every question. Providing a minimum word count for each comment is also helpful in getting more thoughtful responses.
- Don't ask students to give a numerical or grade evaluation. These are generally ineffective because students tend to rate every element higher than it should be rated.
- Consider using the student evaluations in your grade of the student. This is a difficult decision and may depend on your opinion of your students.
- Complete the evaluation as soon as the facilitation has concluded. Student facilitators should have an opportunity to improve. If students will be facilitating only one discussion during the course you might ask a small number of students to evaluate the facilitator during the discussion itself so the facilitator can adjust to the comments made.
- You should review the evaluation comments before distributing them to the facilitators. Any comments that are not in the spirit of usefulness should be discarded.
- You should also provide what you think are the most important points made in the evaluation.
- You should ask the facilitator to do a reflection on what their peers said about their facilitation.

### Topic 5.6 Sample Assessment Tool for Student Evaluation of the Facilitation

1. How well did you think the facilitator prepared you to participate in the discussion? (minimum 50 words)
2. Were there aspects of the facilitator's preparation that could have been done better? (minimum 50 words)
3. How useful was the initial discussion question in getting the discussion started? (minimum 50 words)
4. How would you describe the facilitator's neutrality in the discussion (i.e., was any bias evident?)? (minimum 50 words)
5. How well did the facilitator maintain the proper flow of the discussion? (minimum 50 words)
6. How well did the facilitator maintain a discussion environment where everyone felt comfortable in sharing his or her views? (minimum 50 words)
7. How well did the facilitator ask supplemental questions when the discussion seemed to stall? (minimum 50 words)
8. How well did the facilitator communicate with the participants during the discussion? (minimum 50 words)
9. How well did the facilitator give feedback to the participants to enrich the discussion? (minimum 50 words)

# Chapter **Five**: Evaluating Online Discussions

## Topic 5.7 Student Evaluation of Co-Facilitation

If you have designed your course around co-facilitation (see [Topic 2.4 Individual Facilitation vs. Team Facilitation](#)), you may want to include student evaluation of co-facilitators. The following questions should be considered when evaluating co-facilitators. Students should complete this evaluation as soon as the facilitation process concludes and return it to the instructor for his or her consideration.

### Pre-discussion Preparation

How did your co-facilitator do on the following?

- Communicating prior to the discussion
- Development of discussion questions
- Communicating with instructor about discussion questions
- Revising discussion questions

### Discussion Facilitation

How did your co-facilitator do on the following?

- Posting discussion questions
- Responding to discussion comments
- Moving the discussion in new directions
- Inviting more people to join the discussion
- Policing negative behavior during the discussion
- Communicating with co-facilitators throughout the discussion week

### Post-discussion Debriefing

How did your co-facilitator do on the following?

- Communicating with co-facilitator
- Analyzing the discussion
- Writing up the analysis
- Submitting the write-up to the instructor

### General

Did your co-facilitator...

- Make himself/herself accessible?
- Submit work in a timely fashion?
- Respond to all communication efforts?
- Take the assignment seriously?

### Topic 5.7 Sample Assessment Tool for Student Evaluation of Co-Facilitation

1. How well did you think your co-facilitators prepared for the discussion? (minimum 50 words)
2. Were there aspects of your co-facilitator's preparation that could have been done better? (minimum 50 words)
3. How would you describe your co-facilitator's style of facilitation? (minimum 50 words)
4. Were there aspects of your co-facilitator's work in the discussion that could have been done better? (minimum 50 words)
5. How well did your co-facilitators analyze and write up the discussion summary? (minimum 50 words)
6. Were there aspects of the discussion summary that could have been done better? (minimum 50 words)
7. How well did your co-facilitator meet deadlines? (minimum 50 words)
8. How well did the co-facilitator communicate with you during the entire discussion process? (minimum 50 words)
9. Would you like to work with this co-facilitator again? Explain your answer. (minimum 50 words)

Do you have sample grading rubrics, forms of assessment, surveys or other materials to share? Please share your resources in the [Online Discussion Guidebook—Instructor Edition Wiki: Topic 5.1 Sample Assessment](#).

# Chapter Five:

## Evaluating Online Discussions

### Topic 5.8 Skill Development and Assessment

Our student-facilitated online discussions are designed to advance particular skills, such as civility, open-mindedness, exploration, knowledge building, and rational or critical thinking. Admittedly, it is difficult to isolate and assess the development of these skills in an online class. The rubric in this section is designed to help identify skills or traits that you would like students to improve through facilitated discussion.

The rubric can be used for instructors evaluating students, student self-evaluation, student-peer evaluation, and students evaluating the overall quality of the discussion. We recommend using this rubric to provide timely feedback to students to allow them to reflect on and improve the quality of their discussions. The purpose of the rubric is more to support learning-while-doing rather than as a way to provide final rank or grades to students.

#### Skill Description

- **Civility:** Being responsive to others. Creating space for others to express and develop ideas. Demonstrating respectfulness, discussion etiquette, and leadership.
- **Open-mindedness:** Being open to the perspectives of others. Practicing self-reflection and not sacrificing authenticity.
- **Exploration:** Willingness and ability to engage a discussion topic from multiple dimensions. The ability to add original and insightful contributions that have temporal reach (past, present, future).
- **Knowledge Building:** Generative thinking. The ability to build on the ideas of others in a way that is relevant, nuanced, and moves the discussion in new and interesting directions.
- **Rational & Critical Thinking:** The ability to construct an argument and distinguish this from unsupported claims or reactions. Being able to explain ideas in an organized and coherent way. Willingness to call into question ideas, especially one's own, and weigh the importance of validity and accuracy within the discussion.

## Topic 5.8 Sample Skill Development Assessment Chart

	Not aware	Learning	Practicing	Advancing
<b>Civility</b>	Posts are reactions that tend to be emotion-laden, sexist, racist, defensive, or cynical. Tendency to dominate discussion or be mostly silent.	Posts tend to be very short or very long. Responds to a few students. Tends to follow basic social decorum and uses reason but is vague and only moderately committed to the discussion.	Posts are appropriate length and consistent. Responds thoughtfully to many students over the course of the discussion. Offers specific points and tries to engage others.	Actively encourages participation and deeper dialogue. Enthusiastic. Points out non-productive behavior in non-threatening ways. Elevates the discussion.
<b>Open Mindedness</b>	Shames, blames, or attacks others. Does not consider multiple perspectives. No reflection on own knowledge or behavior.	Acknowledges others' perspectives. Willing to compromise but with little deliberation. Non-reactive to those offering critique. Willing to admit flaws in ideas but does not work to improve them.	Considers perspectives of others. Negotiates differences. Allows for diversity of opinion. Acknowledges grains of truth. Reflects on and improves one's own ideas.	Empathizes with others. Integrates others' ideas into the conversation. Sees diversity of opinion as beneficial and seeks it out. Welcomes criticism and uses it to improve ideas and discussion.
<b>Exploration</b>	Does not introduce new topics. Tends to focus on just one dimension of the conversation. Discourages new avenues of exploration. Tends to be reactionary or related only to self.	Addresses several dimensions of the topic. Stays close to scope of prior posts. May be able to explore issue in one temporal sense (present).	Introduces new dimensions. Makes original or creative contributions. Can imagine topic relevance in past, present, future contexts.	Explores dimensions systematically. Encourages others to do so. Makes insightful or unexpected contributions. Integrates past, present, future trends.
<b>Knowledge Building</b>	No reference to others or reacts with harsh, emotional tone. Does not engage in discussion. Posts are mostly off topic. Comments discourage engagement.	Refers to others but mostly in disagreement or responses are polite and don't add much. Mostly repeats what others have said. Tends to be on topic.	Acknowledges others with mostly "yes, but" or only refers to ideas one agrees with. Compares and contrasts ideas but only toward "right" answer. Introduces new ideas. Reframes others' ideas productively.	Acknowledges others with "yes, and." Ties ideas together. Deconstructs to improve and reconstruct ideas. Adds nuance and clarity to the discussion. Aware of context.
<b>Rational &amp; Critical Thinking</b>	Comments do not reflect understanding of content. Unreflective and contradictory. Posts blatantly inaccurate facts. Does not seem to care about validity.	Offers opinions but not explanations or arguments. Ideas are understandable. Logical thinking but not very critical. Few or no inaccurate facts. Uses but does not reflect on sources.	Offers justifications, explanations, or analysis. Ideas are clear and organized. Shows critical thinking. Differentiates facts from opinions. Cites and calls into question sources.	Weaves explanation into nuanced narrative. Insightful. Offers nuanced, non-definitive discussion about validity of sources.

What else would you contribute to this guidebook? Do you have ideas for additional topics or revisions of the current topics? Please help us to improve this guidebook and make it accessible to all instructors engaging in online discussions. If you have additional ideas, please let us know by going to our *Online Discussion Guidebook—Instructor Edition Wiki: Topic 6.0 Open Proposals*.