



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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ON CAMPUS/ONLINE: THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

After 32 years as a community college teacher, I recently discovered a delightful paradox that has changed the way I teach and the way I think about teaching: Certain tools for distance learning, when introduced into the traditional classroom, are also powerful tools for bringing students in traditional on-campus classes closer together. And best of all, the simplest online tools are often the most effective.

I teach classes in literature, philosophy, logic, and composition; but online forums, the topic of this article, can apply to almost any college class. And they are very easy to use—for teachers and students. The discussion forum allows the most harried student another opportunity to join the learning community. This is true even if the student has to join the discussion late at night when the children are finally asleep or after returning home from work shortly before midnight.

We hear a lot these days about the tremendous potential for high-speed, asynchronous communication. We are told that with the growth of broadband, high-speed access, educators will soon be doing all sorts of fantastic things online with voice, pictures, and text. But as great as that may be, we have something better right now—speed and bandwidth are not important issues with asynchronous discussion forums.

For years educators have been looking for ways to promote classroom community. Discussion boards provide a simple way for students and teachers to interact—and best of all, this learning community can be accessed from home and is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. These are not the hectic chat rooms that can often resemble the frenetic floor of the New York Stock Exchange. The discussion board is an asynchronous site, where students read and respond to ideas from teachers and fellow students.

For the past year I have watched the tools for distance learning bring my on-campus students closer together. During the first few days of every semester, I enroll students in a password-secured, online environ-

ment that allows them to communicate asynchronously—anytime day or night. And every student can gain Internet access, most from home and a few from the library or computer lab. Nearly everyone takes to it immediately.

Teachers' options in this arena are rapidly expanding. Our college uses the Blackboard platform for distance learning, but there are many others. Most offer free trial periods—e.g., WebCt and eCollege. Some faculty create MOOs or use existing online listservs. Norton sells a package that allows students to purchase a year's access to an online classroom, controlled by the teacher, for around \$20 (less than the cost of most textbooks). So whether one's college subscribes to an online platform or not, almost anyone can create an online discussion board for students.

It seems reasonable, with any online assignment, to ask this question first: Will this medium allow me to do something better than I now do it in a traditional classroom? The answer is a resounding, yes! I have observed for years that many students, excellent in every other way, find it difficult to respond in a classroom setting. This fact has not stopped my attempts at classroom discussions, but I have seen the online discussion board give these reluctant students an outlet that allows them time to communicate in a more considered, thoughtful, meaningful way.

For example, discussion forums have had a big impact on my philosophy classes. I have replaced one of our required papers with a semester-long series of questions to the discussion board—posting a new set of questions every two or three weeks. Students are given time to respond to these questions about the philosophers and ideas we are currently studying and to the remarks posted by their peers (required). These discussion board exchanges are almost always more interesting, thorough, and thoughtful than the typical classroom responses. Frankly, I have been “blown over” by some of the insightful responses of students who appeared too timid to provide more than a ten-word response in the classroom. It has changed my evaluation process. I now have new insights into my students' critical thinking skills.



Another advantage of the discussion board is that it is an ideal place for discovery writing across all disciplines, the kind of writing-to-learn effort where students tend to show less concern about correctness and to focus more on the ideas they are trying to communicate. Online, when students make mistakes in matters of form, no one gets too upset—the focus is on the ideas. Participation in a discussion forum seems to contribute to an attitude of trust among the participants.

That is why I consider this the best of both worlds: While we strive to make each class a lively and significant learning experience, we can add a layer of communication and response that was not easy to access before. On our community college campus, where many students often commute 25 to 30 miles each way, the online community is a powerful new ally.

I sometimes think nostalgically of the 500-mile automobile trips we took on two-lane roads to grandma's house in the 1950s. I still make that trip to my mother's house, but I seldom take the two-lane road. The expressway works better most of the time. We may soon look back on some of our twentieth century teaching methods with the same nostalgia, but if the new information highway becomes the road of choice, it will do so because it works better than the old roads.

The discussion forum is a road that takes me places I never traveled before—and I like what I see. I offer three practical suggestions for asynchronous discussion forums:

1. Establish guidelines that clearly state dates and times that each project and each response must be posted. Give ample time to respond.
2. Make students' contributions—postings and responses to postings—a significant part of the course grade. But do not just add this on top of an already full schedule.
3. Establish a clearly defined penalty for any posting not submitted on time—because late postings will affect the opportunities for others in the class to respond in a timely fashion.

Ideas for Discussion-Board Activities

Last spring, about 25 percent of our faculty voluntarily attended a workshop devoted to the use of discussion forums across the curriculum. A few of the potential discussion-board activities generated in that workshop are listed here.

1. We learn best what we can teach. The same holds true for our students. The discussion board can provide an opportunity to have students post a lesson that teaches others a key concept in the course: political theories, nursing procedures, grammar rules, math solutions, etc. The discussion board is also a good place

to have other students reply to and evaluate their peers' lessons.

2. Post early drafts of all papers for peer review. This works best if the teacher provides a very specific rubric to guide the peer review—one that requires more than "yes" or "no" answers. (If your campus has a writing center, these drafts can be available to trained writing tutors instantly.)

3. Post a question of the week (or day). After each class or after each week, students may be assigned to post a response such as, "What I learned this week (today) and things about which I am still not clear." This assignment can require classmates to try clarifying information for their peers. The instructor can review this site while planning the next day's or week's classes.

4. The instructor can post a problem to the forum and have students solve it, then have other students critique their peers' solutions.

5. Post a controversial argument. Have half of the class refute the argument and the other half refute the first half's response.

6. Post a topic and use the discussion board as a site for students to brainstorm ideas related to the assignment by making lists, clustering ideas, listing useful Internet links, etc.

7. Conduct a debate or a trial online: assign students to a position for the debate or assign some to prosecute and others to defend.

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