



## Making Discussion More Dynamic and Manageable

Making an online course engaging is not an easy task; but, there are an increasing number of tools in learning management systems that can help. One such tool is asynchronous discussion. However, poorly constructed discussion can frustrate the instructor and the students and contribute little to learning. I have yet to discover a method which allows the instructor to be removed entirely from the process. Expertise, life experience, and leadership are simply too invaluable in the environment.

**Rule One:** Build clear and concise rules of etiquette. Tell students what will not be tolerated in the course of discussion and the consequences of breaking the rules. The rules might include response organization, titles, grammar, writing style, spelling, citation if needed, and of course, proper debate and manners.

**Rule Two:** Create high expectations. Tell students exactly what you expect, in quantitative and qualitative terms. Make sure they understand that a late flurry of posting at the end of the discussion period doesn't contribute and won't count. Discussion is an exchange of ideas, views, and information, not a one way shove of information.

**Rule Three:** Make the discussion a substantial part of the course grade. If it is low value you will normally get a low response. Demand what you expect and grade what they produce accordingly.

**Rule Four:** Present well thought out questions. Think outside the box but keep your eye on the prize—student learning. You want to bring about creative and critical thought. More importantly, tie discussion to learning outcomes and don't go overboard with the number of discussion projects. It is better to have two excellent projects that achieve a learning objective than four or five mediocre ones that promote nothing.

**Rule Five:** Be an active facilitator. You have to enforce the rules, keep the discussion on track, and let everyone know how they are doing in terms of meeting your expectations. Be a visible presence. Praise in public view, but provide critical feedback and corrective dialogue in private.

**Rule Six:** Vary your approach to student posts. Examples include the Socratic Method, devil's advocate, and the fishbowl. This shift will keep discussion lively and make students think in different ways.

**Rule Seven:** Establish set days and times to review discussion. Then at the appointed time, read all of the posts in each given topic space. When possible, respond to the group in one message. This brings the group together, ties your comments to everyone, and saves you time. Ask questions, expound with your personal expertise and experience, challenge student positions, propose alternatives, or through them an unexpected curve ball with wrong information to sort out and correct. Remember, discussion is also about having fun, getting to know your students, and them getting to know you.



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Rule Eight: Depending on the nature of the project, carefully consider the size of the groups. Normally, discussion groups of 8 to 10 students are more effective. Smaller groups work better for project based assignments.

Rule Nine: Consider and document your grading method carefully. Students prefer individual grades as opposed to a group grade due to the varying levels of participation that happen in group work.

Rule Ten: Use first and second person language. Research shows we tend to process more information when we are operating in a social environment. It also helps to make the communication personal by assigning an image to the speaker (instructor, quest speaker, specialist, etc.).