

# THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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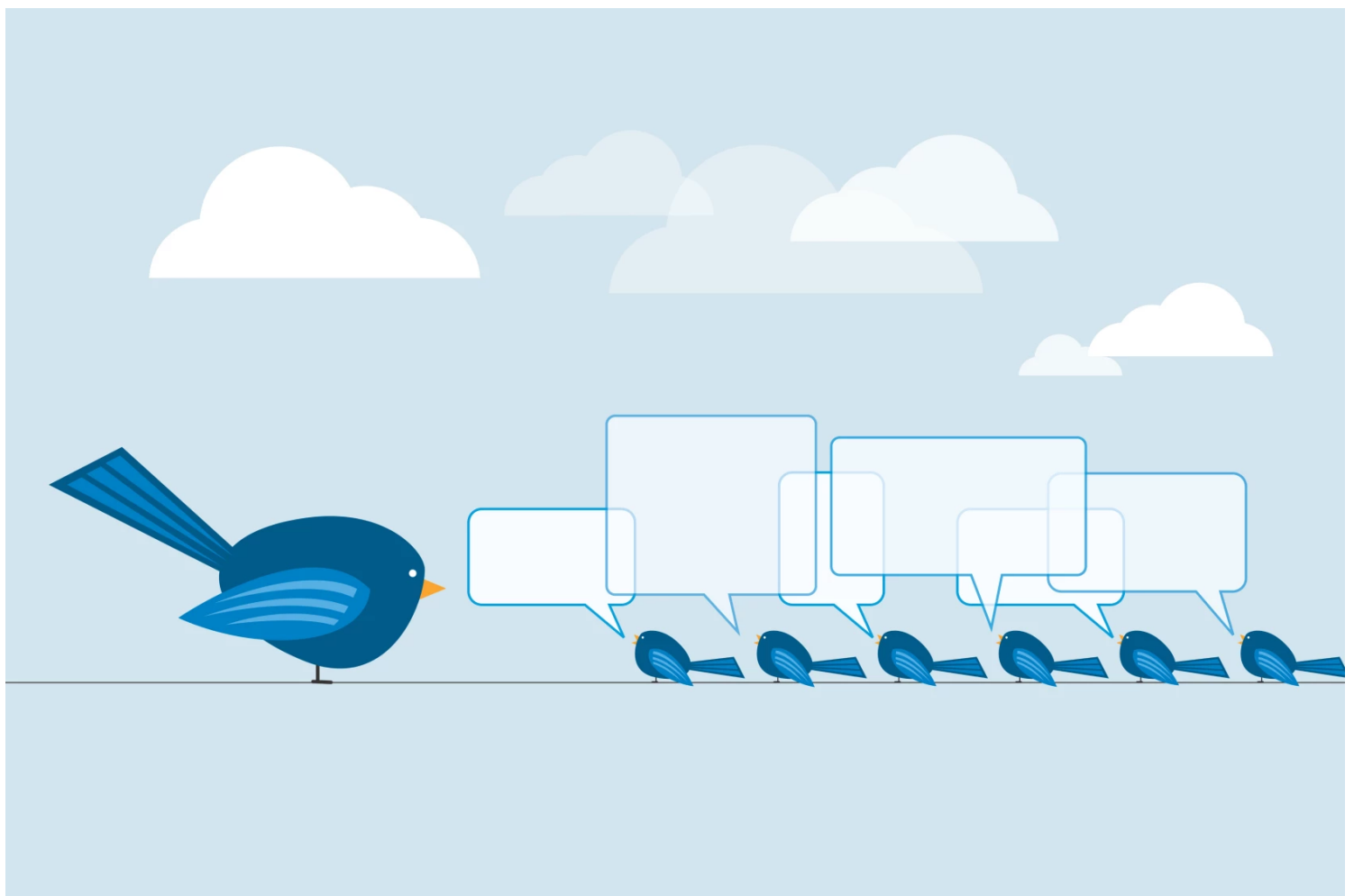
ADVICE

## The Secret Weapon of Good Online Teaching: Discussion Forums

6 ways to lead meaningful class discussions in an asynchronous online forum

By *Flower Darby*

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People often ask me to name my favorite online teaching tool. My answer is always the same: Hands down, it's online discussion forums.

As a veteran online teacher, I view discussion forums as the meat and potatoes of my online courses. They are where my teaching happens — where I interact with students, guide their learning, and get to know them as people. The joy I've come to find in online teaching stems directly from those interactions.

Covid-19 has all of us preparing for a fall semester unlike any we've ever seen. Online teaching is front and center again, but remains underexplored terrain for many faculty members. Learning how to use online class-discussion forums to their best advantage is probably the smartest, and easiest, thing you can do to improve your online teaching and your students' learning.

Why? First, they reinforce what we're all hearing from teaching experts: Lean into asynchronous teaching, and do more with your campus Learning Management System (LMS). That's been my focus in this [online teaching series](#) (with previous installments on how to [connect with students](#) and [be more inclusive](#)).

Second, online discussions are the equitable and inclusive workhorse of online teaching. Using assistive technology, students with disabilities can use an LMS forum more easily than a Zoom discussion. And the low-tech nature of the forums can diminish inequities in other important ways:

- Students can submit discussion posts at any time of the day or night, and they don't need a fast internet connection to do so.
- They're not required to show their physical surroundings to participate.
- Forums get students to interact with one another, which is crucial to helping them feel connected and engaged in virtual classrooms.

Leading an effective discussion in an online forum is a skill you can learn, much as you learned [how to lead class discussions](#) in person. A forum discussion just seems harder to oversee because it's so unfamiliar — you probably never participated in one yourself as a student. To that end, here are six simple ways to foster meaningful conversations in an online forum:

**Take part in the discussion.** Full disclosure: There is a school of thought that suggests only students should comment in your course's online discussion forum, and not you, the instructor. But I'm in the school that argues just the opposite. Would you announce a discussion in your brick-and-mortar classroom, and then walk out the door? If not, don't do it online.

Stay in the (virtual) room. Post clarifying questions. Praise positive contributions. Probe for more detail. Clear up misconceptions. Guide and shape the learning — just as you would in person — to help students get to where you want them to go. I tell my students that if I post in the discussion forum, they should read it, because I'm communicating something they need to know. Basically, when I post, I'm teaching. My students pay attention, and feel more engaged with me, as a result.

Another reason to pay close attention is to make sure incivility doesn't intrude into your class forums because of different cultural values and perspectives. A good example comes from the educator [Courtney Plotts](#): Say a student writes a post mentioning a same-sex partner and gets no replies. That might happen for any number of reasons, but the result is that the student could feel excluded, become disengaged, and struggle to finish the course.

Scour the discussion forums for emerging trouble spots and for clues that reveal how students are doing. Are they confused about something and drifting off? Are they energized and fascinated by a particular unit? The course forum is a valuable source of information to guide your teaching, but you can benefit from it only if you stay in the room.

**But be strategic about your participation.** It's possible to spend too much time interacting with students in a class-discussion forum — especially if you enjoy the interactions, as I do — to the point that it becomes a major drain on your time and energy.

Good time-management strategies can help. Block off times in your weekly calendar to post on the discussion board. Short blocks of 20 to 30 minutes will suffice. All you really want to do is be visible in the conversation so that students know you're there and engaged. If you're teaching a 16-week course, posting a few days a week should do the trick. (For a condensed term of five or eight weeks, I might post for 20 minutes, twice a day, four to six days a week.)

The point is to use your written contributions to facilitate learning, just as you do verbally in your face-to-face teaching.

Some instructors keep a spreadsheet and intentionally rotate which students they respond to each week. Others are more like me: After doing this for 12 years, I go by gut instinct, deciding where I can have the most impact with a quick comment or question, while informally making an effort to write to all students at various times. Just be intentional in choosing where you can get the most bang for your discussion-posting buck.

**The better the question, the better the debate.** The tried-and-true method of sparking good in-person discussions is to ask open-ended questions and avoid the yes-or-no kind. Yet too often in the online realm, I've seen faculty members post discussion questions so black-and-white that there was no room for nuance. Nothing to talk about. Students' answers were right or wrong, with no way to sustain a meaningful conversation.

In a recent [article](#) about transitioning to online teaching, Laura Otten, an associate professor who teaches nonprofit-leadership courses at La Salle University, wrote

about the importance of provocative questions in online forums: “I often ask my students this question: ‘Do nonprofits, regardless of their mission, have an obligation to work for social justice?’” That’s a perfect example of the kind of question that gives students something to talk about.

**Ask students to write about something they find naturally interesting — like themselves.** Engaging students in discussion doesn’t always require a controversial or sensitive topic. Instead, ask students to apply course content or concepts to their own lives and experiences.

An easy way to do that is to adapt [James M. Lang](#)’s recommendation on [connection questions](#). The idea is brilliant in its simplicity: Take a concept you’re teaching, and ask students to post about where else they’ve seen or learned about it. Maybe they first heard about it in high school, in the workplace, in a movie, or in another class they’re taking right now. Get them to post about that first encounter, or other instances when they’ve interacted with the concept.

Having students discuss what they know, based on personal experience, helps them learn from one another, too. The resulting kaleidoscope of perspectives can offer students a rich web of connections.

**Structure the online conversation.** Without any structure, you end up with a lot of students pulling a “post and run” — an industry term for posting an obligatory comment in a forum, and then never returning to engage with others. It’s amusingly illustrated in a video, “[Teacherless Online Classroom – Discussion Bored](#),” and clearly doesn’t lead to meaningful, sustained conversations.

So establish a few simple ground rules:

- Set two deadlines a week — the first for an initial post and the second for a minimum number of replies (usually at least two) to other students’ comments.

- Provide a rubric or a checklist (try using the rubric tool in your campus LMS; it really speeds up grading) to clearly communicate the criteria for success: How long should a post be? Can the style be informal and conversational? Is a scholarly citation needed?
- Discourage students — explicitly — from posting “Yeah, I agree” kinds of replies.
- In some learning-management systems, you can enable a setting that requires students to post their initial comment before they can read what other students have shared. That setting has pros and cons: It can encourage academic integrity and originality, but it can also hinder less-confident students and raise barriers to their success. Think through the purpose of your discussion to determine whether this feature aligns with your pedagogical goals.

**Aim for organic, authentic conversation.** Critics of online discussion forums assert that the dialogue is stilted, dry, tedious. And it certainly can be, especially if you insist on stilted, formal dialogue. It doesn't help that many faculty members have never seen an invigorating online discussion in action.

But think about what happens in a good in-person discussion: You try to foster a stimulating dialogue that keeps students' attention and furthers their learning. Here's what doesn't happen: You don't require each student in an in-person discussion to say one original thing and respond twice to other students; you don't require them to speak formally and include citations. Why, then, expect students to be so formal in your online discussion forum?

Instead, try to foster the kind of natural dialogue you would actually want to join. Maybe you don't have to require citations in every discussion post. Maybe you can take a cue from how people regularly communicate in digital spaces, and invite students to use emoji, GIFs, memes, videos, and the like in their posts. We routinely rely on such visual tools when we text on smartphones or post on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. While I don't advocate that every instructor start using social media in

class, I do argue that we can use [communication strategies](#) from those platforms to create closer connections in an online course.

So encourage your students to use emoji in their discussion posts. Ask them to post a GIF that depicts how they are feeling about a particular topic or task. Have students create and share a meme that represents how their semester is going. We can communicate powerfully and connect meaningfully online. Let's learn from our texting and social-media habits to help us do so in class-discussion forums.

We have a difficult semester ahead. Don't overlook the potential of online forums to enhance your teaching and even ease your workload. Once you get comfortable with these tips and tricks, I think you'll find they really work. You may well decide to keep online forums in your teaching toolbox even when Covid-19 is a thing of the past.

*If you have questions or concerns about this article, please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.*

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