# Conducting Effective Online Discussion COFAonlineUNSW

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## Conducting Effective Online Discussions

[Music plays.]

[Karin Watson – Co-Project Manager, Learning to Teach Online, The University of New South Wales] Online discussion boards offer both students and teachers great opportunity for communication, peer learning, and active engagement in the class content. In this episode, we examine the role of online discussions in the learning process and we also offer some useful strategies for effective moderation to maximize student participation and motivation.

[Dr. Gay McDonald – Senior Lecturer, School of Art History and Art Education, The University of New South Wales]. When you're in the classroom, you'll find that just through, you know, group dynamics, some students will tend to dominate the discussion and more reticent students, shyer students, students who feel that there are less articulate or having trouble with the language may not participate

[Dr. Andy Polaine, Research Fellow and Lecturer, Service Design, Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts] Someone who for whom English isn't the first language or is a bit shy might not kind of respond so quickly; whereas, online they can do that. They can think about that what they want to say. It there are words they don't know, they can go and look them up and all those kinds of things.

[A/Prof Lydia Kavanagh, Director, First Year Engineering, School of Engineering, The University of Queensland, Australia] They use discussion boards to post questions, to communicate with their peers. Sometimes they just have comments that they'd like to share with their peers.

[Prof Ian MacDonald, Director, Centre for Innovation in Learning and Teaching, Victoria University] What the virtual space can offer is greater opportunity for communication, for sharing ideas and for mapping ideas against each other and contesting ideas.

## The Role of Discussion

[Prof Matthew Allen, Head Department of Internet Studies, Curtin University] One of the mistakes teachers make when they first start using the internet for their teaching is to spend far too much time engaging with their students on a one-to-one basis. That's why online discussion groups and collaborative workspaces where student, individual student questions can be answered by an academic but for the benefit of everybody who's in the unit of study. That's one of the ways that you can manage your time effectively.

[A/Prof Lydia Kavanagh, Director, First Year Engineering, School of Engineering, The University of Queensland, Australia] Because I can't do that one on one with the thousand students, it allows a lot of people to see any information that a lecturer or a tutor feeds back to an individual.

[Prof Ian MacDonald, Director, Centre for Innovation in Learning and Teaching, Victoria University] Everybody's got an equal opportunity and a lot of people can contribute at once and that means everybody can participate in an active way, instead of just listening to someone else making a contribution.

[A/Prof Lydia Kavanagh, Director, First Year Engineering, School of Engineering, The University of Queensland, Australia] My students in a class of a thousand can get very isolated. This is a community function, if you like, that allows them to connect and answer each other's questions so there's some peer learning going on there as well.

[Dr. Gay McDonald – Senior Lecturer, School of Art History and Art Education, The University of New South Wales]. Peer-to-peer discussions were very helpful for the students in trying to sort out perhaps their concerns or questions about the content that was being covered. So it allowed them to go a little further, a little deeper into that course content and in that way I think it was a very useful learning strategy.

[Dr. Catherine Suttle, Lecturer, School of Optometry and Vision Sciences, Faculty of Science, The University of New South Wales] The whole point of our online discussions is for the students to talk to each other and learn while they're talking and for me to gauge their understanding.

## Effective moderation, motivation, and participation

[Andrea North-Samardzic, Facilitator, MBT Program, Australian School of Business, The University of South Wales] It's really important to emphasize that when you are teaching online the attendance isn't measured in the same way as it would be in a face-to-face class. You can't just log on. We don't know if you're online or not so you have to physically post something.

[Chis Mitchell, Learning and Teaching Coordinator, Royal College of Art] When students logged on the first day of that tutorial and saw that there was something already there. Other students had engaged. It very much encouraged them to do the same. If they logged on and found that nothing was there, they didn't necessarily feel it was worth their time.

[Dr. Leicha Bragg, Lecturer, Mathematics Education and Information Technology, Deakin University] You only need to get a couple of students in there who really engage in it and that seems to bring along the others.

[Unnamed Female Student, Faculty of the College of Fine Arts, The University of New South Wales] What motivates me in a discussion to participate is if somebody responds to what I've just written and that response doesn't necessarily have to be positive and gushy, it can be disputing what I've just said.

[Dr. Gay McDonald – Senior Lecturer, School of Art History and Art Education, The University of New South Wales]. Rather than, you know, going in and targeting specific students, if say, you know ten percent of students hadn't responded, I'd post a general comment to the message boards and congratulating people who had participated and summarizing the, sort of, the key gains that had been made to that point about those contributions and then reminding people gently that the deadline was X day.

[Rod Bamford, Lecturer, School of Design Studies, The University of New South Wales] I very rarely set it to occur at a particular time. I let it extend for a period of time. I might say this discussion is going to be limited for a week.

[Dr. Andy Polaine, Research Fellow and Lecturer, Service Design, Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts] One of the things about having the subtextual base, and also this asynchronous way of working where I will write some feedback for a message and the students then write some response to that, is that everyone, including me but obviously particularly the students, get the chance to think about what it is they want to say.

[Unnamed Female Student, Faculty of the College of Fine Arts, The University of New South Wales] Because of that element where you can sit back and think and then respond to someone, the discussion quality is really high.

## Useful Strategies

[Dr. Catherine Suttle, Lecturer, School of Optometry and Vision Sciences, Faculty of Science, The University of New South Wales] At the beginning, I give reasonably, careful criteria as to what I expect them to be showing demonstrating in their online discussions.

[Andrea North-Samardzic, Facilitator, MBT Program, Australian School of Business, The University of South Wales] Something I emphasize at the beginning of semesters that I would like all post to be a maximum 200 words. Otherwise, you will find students just going on a rant and you basically have to read it and provide some kind of comments. So emphasizing that simple is better is really important.

[A/Prof Lydia Kavanagh, Director, First Year Engineering, School of Engineering, The University of Queensland, Australia] What you need to make sure is that if they are putting a question that's about some content or about an assessment item that they're getting very quick responses. So what I tend to do is I tend to have a number of different discussion board threads and I will have each of those moderated by a different person.

[Dr. Leicha Bragg, Lecturer, Mathematics Education and Information Technology, Deakin University] Because we have so many discussion questions for the assignment what I tend to do is then when they're being repeated is I will collate all the questions so that the students aren't having to read over and over and over the same question.

## Conclusion

[Rod Bamford, Lecturer, School of Design Studies, The University of New South Wales] If there's the discussion going on the website that's picked up something that's happened during the class and it's all still alive at the end of the week when your class was at the beginning of the week. I feel like that learnings taking place outside of the classroom and extending to all those things we hope to have happened that we've got evidence that it's happening in front of us.