Podcast Transcript

In the Classroom 29
Success Tips for Creating Engaging Online Discussions

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Stan Skrabut: Well, thanks for joining me once again, I really appreciate it. As I always say, I know that you could be doing something else, but you're hanging out with me and I am truly grateful. This week we're going to talk about online discussions, at least talk to you about the benefits and some success tips that you can keep in mind when you're putting together your online discussions. In my experience, online discussions are a centerpiece to student center online courses. That if you don't have this community-building opportunity in some manner, you're really putting together a correspondence course, and that doesn't necessarily make a good online course.

In my experience, I have had some really awesome discussions in an online course but I've also had some that have totally flopped that were extremely poor that were very boring, and the idea is to create some engaging discussions. What we're going to talk about a little bit is some of the benefits but also some of the tips that you need to keep in mind for creating these engaging discussions.

Let's get started. Online discussions are a staple of online courses that most of the online courses that I've been a part of as a student and I've taken countless courses as a student that there is typically an online discussion component to it. I think these are very valuable because, in my mind, learning is about dialogue whether you're discussing with the content that you're mulling over the content and having a discussion with the authors or what have you or discussion with your fellow classmates or the instructor, but that's where really the learning takes place. That you have to go out and justify why you think the way you do about a certain topic. You're basically reflecting on what you're learning.

Depending on how you develop these discussions for your course will lead to increased engagement. The online discussions are not just for online courses that you can also use online discussions to support your face to face courses. Matter of fact, when I was working at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, I remember specifically working with this Chinese professor and he used online discussions to lead in to face to face discussions. Basically, he would assign reading to be completed over the weekend and by Sunday at 10 o'clock, students had to make a post about what they read. This reading was going to be used as a starting point for the classroom discussion. He could walk into the class and see right away because of the online discussions, what they already knew, how in-depth they knew if there was any areas that he needed to clear up. This is just a great way of getting those classes going. Because if they don't read the material then you are getting into lecture mode but if they have read the material then you can turn it more student-centered and make it more of a discussion.

Let's talk about the benefits real quick. I have I've outlined nine benefits that online discussions are really useful for. First of all, all students can participate. Everybody has a voice, everybody has input. In a typical face to face discussion, not everybody gets to talk. Very often there's some individuals who dominate the conversations and there's some that will just hide into the back corner of the room and not participate at all. With online discussions, you can require everybody to participate.

Number two, some students are not necessarily confident to come out face to face. They're self-conscious, they're shy, they don't want to participate in that environment, they're critical of what others may think. Typically their experiences burn when you have these online discussions because everyone asked to participate that everybody jumps into it and provides some meaningful interaction. Not always but for the most part, I've seen this happen compared to face to face classes.

In part, this ties into number three, it allows time for in-depth reflection. Students, some don't have the answers at the top of their head and need time to think about it, to reflect on it, to mull it over before they respond. They do this reflection and research and get their composing thoughts before they participate and this is very useful for these types of students.

Number four. This allows students to work on their replies and make sure that their grammar and spelling is in order before they post and this is really important for students who English and I'm going to use English because that's where I'm at. English is not their first language. In a classroom, they may be self-conscious of their knowledge of the English language and their ability to compose sentences on the fly but, having an online discussion this gives them an opportunity to pull it together.

Number five. This allows students to practice their writing skills in a more informal manner. I would stress with your online discussions, don't make this a research project in that everything has to be perfect. You want them to willfully get involved in the discussion and have a meaningful discussion, and we don't do this in a face to face class where we grammatically correct every single point of the discussion. I would say don't do it in an online discussion either. Let's just have an informal. This doesn't mean that they should not be striving for good grammar or for good punctuation, but don't make that the point that you're going to be focusing on. You should be focusing on the content that they're providing and your ability to understand that content.

This also, number six, allows for peer learning opportunities that you can find out what students know and what they share between each other that students help others continuously learn. Some students have a great grasp of the concept and they're willing to share that information in a way that an expert can't do it. As an expert, there are things that you know and you assume and you have a model that you're working from a framework that new learners to the topic don't have and sometimes we forget what it is to be a learner learning the content for the first time. Other students have a way of sharing content, have a way of explaining things where others grasp it and we should use this as much as possible.

Number seven. One of the benefits is fostering this learning community to create networking opportunities and building this sense of community, without discussions or

such mechanisms students feel isolated, they don't have these connections, they don't know anybody. By having online discussions they get to know fellow classmates and this is really important.

Number eight. Developing their thinking and writing skills. I talked about this informal writing but really this idea of research and pulling all this information together and to think about a topic. That's why it's important when you create these discussions that you know where you are in Bloom's Taxonomy when you're asking the questions. Don't ask just for them to regurgitate "here are the five steps." That doesn't make a great discussion. You want to get to those higher levels where they reflect on those steps and why those steps are important and how they can be used in a different way. That's where the media this is.

Finally, number nine. Allow our guest experts to participate in the course. You can bring in other people to participate into the discussion quite easily with an online discussion and make it work for their schedule. One of the great things about online discussions is that typically you set him up for a week and people come leave their input throughout the week and that's really useful that not everybody can be in the same place at the same time and that's one of the benefits of having online courses.

All right. Now, let's talk about some ways that you can make your online discussions a little more engaging. Here are some success tips that I want to share. One of the things that you really have to think about is this balance that you want to balance this idea of learning but you don't want to go out and make it so complex and so overwhelming that students shut down. Don't have multiple discussions running at the same time if you can help it, just focus on one thing and let it run its course for a period of time. Normally, I set my discussions up for a week and go from there. I don 't know if you hear this, but I have a cardinal in the background just singing its brains out so kind of cool. I will let them continue. Obviously, he's excited about the things that I'm talking about anyways. Here are some success tips. First of all, you have to prepare your students for online learning and how to properly interact in an online learning environment. Upfront, you're going to have to provide examples of what's successful and what's not successful, create some models or have some examples that you're providing.

This may require that you lead off some of these discussions, for example, your icebreaker. Your ice breaker is typically an introduction. I've noticed that a lot of instructors have this introduction but they don't introduce themselves, they don't participate. This is a great place where you can modeling how you want students to reply to a discussion. The early parts of the discussion, at the beginning of the course early part of the semester, the discussions students don't know what to expect, they're not sure how they should respond, expect this kind of clumsiness. It's going to be awkward and difficult, and you may let students know that working in an online environment is different, but they can still be successful in that environment. You're going to spend a little bit of time, probably the first couple of weeks doing a little bit of hand-holding and making sure that they get into it and that they're providing the responses that you're looking for.

Another tip, make it fun. Start off with low stakes context, these icebreakers, getting to know each other, making a fun safe place where students can be involved that you don't want to go in and just lay down the hammer all the time. That's not the response is wrong and then you probably haven't set up your discussion correctly. You want to create an opportunity where there's really no wrong answers if they're reflecting on what it is but you can always give them something else to think about. Create a learning opportunity. That's what we do in our discussions in a face-to-face classroom. It's not just, answer a question wrong, it's like okay, explain why you think that way, have you considered this and those things help lead it, but also interject humor into this? Make this fun and remember that if you're laughing with somebody it's fun, if you're laughing at somebody it's not fun. What I always said that, when someone says, "Hey, this is funny," then I would be looking at if there's something where they're harassing somebody. You don't want to get into that. Breaking into small groups. If you have a really large class do not have one discussion, break the group up into multiple discussions into small discussion. This is from my personal experience, I had a discussion board where I had more than 20 students in it. It was really tough for them to think about how to respond to the question because 20 students are responding to it. They pretty much dried up the well. The students themselves asked me if I would break up the discussions, and so I did. I now keep it somewhere around 10 students, and that seems to have been a good number for discussions, at least for me.

Avatars, in an online discussion, typically students because have a profile. Ideally, you want to have them create a picture, to replace that egghead that's normally there because if everyone's an egghead, it's really hard for the mind to map who is talking. They can either use picture of themselves or maybe their dog or something that helps identify who is doing the talking. That is actually an important thing. Once again, you have to model this. Make sure that your profile is up-to-date and that you have a picture of sorts so they know that, the teachers out there going in and contributing to the conversation.

Write clear instructions. That's another tip that when you put together your instructions, you need to put in the who, what, why, what, when, where, how all the pieces, that's really important. You'll find out that if you use your discussions over and over, students still don't necessarily get it. You're going to constantly make tweaks to your instructions, and I still do. I've been teaching some classes five or six times and I still have to go in and make tweaks to my instructions to make sure students get it, but you want to try making them as explicit as possible, what you want them to be able to do. One of the frustrations that's often mentioned by students is they don't know how to start, they don't know how to participate in order to meet the instructors' expectations. The clearer that you can provide your instructions the better it's going to be for the students.

Make sure that those instructions are on every single discussion at the top of the discussion so they know what to do. Other piece of the discussion is provide time guidelines. Try to provide, so they know how long the discussions going to be open when they're supposed to do different phases if you have it set up that way. Those things are also very important. Provide assign actions. In this article five tips for improving online discussion boards Morton and **[unintelligible 00:14:39]**, she said phrasing in assignments in terms of actions such as find, explain, describe, identify

and compare give students a sense that the discussion board is a place where real work gets done, rather than a place where everyone sits around just shoot the breeze. I totally agree that you want to provide clear directions on what you want to do.

Next week I'm going to talk about one of the discussion formats that I use, that I think is pretty powerful, I get a lot of positive response to that. Set aside, this is another important thing is you cannot-- in order to get the most out of your day as an instructor, you can't just jump in every five seconds and respond to discussion board. You have to set up specific times in order to do this and to be able to respond in order to get all your other work done. Make sure that you set up specific times.

I will start my discussions on Sunday but I will not typically start responding to students until Tuesday, Wednesday, somewhere around that time because one of the reasons is if you start posting too early, then you'll shut down student response. You want to make sure that the students are leading the discussions or actively-- they're the center figures in the discussions rather than the instructor. As I noted earlier, that your job in this is to keep the discussions going. That's by asking, questions and other probing questions and just providing encouragement for them to continue to respond.

As part of your discussions, you want to make sure that you set guidelines for appropriateness, that you're creating this safe learning environment. Netiquette is really critical in this, and I have instructions for netiquette as part of my course that I have students read, but you may also want to consider having at the beginning of your course, something that they tapped into this idea of netiquette and can reflect on it and why this is important to make good online discussions. Grading the discussions, what makes a good response, I would say and a lot of other folks have also said this, don't put down a word requirement saying "Oh, you need to give 400 word," just get rid of that, because we don't have that in a face-to-face class.

If somebody responds, we're not counting the words that they're doing this so why are we doing this in an online class. What we want is we want them to focus on the top, and we want them to create a learning purpose. If we shift the attention where they now have to count words, then we're not focusing on the real important piece and that's the learning piece. I would say, tying into that you can't force collaboration. There's ways that you can encourage it, but you can't force it. A lot of discussions I've seen are, you will respond once to the question, and then you have to respond two times to your fellow students.

Well, that's exactly what they'll do. The way that you should try to encourage this is to figure out how you can keep that discussion going. That's the challenging bit. You have to have a way that you can measure this, but what you really want to do is get people involved in a robust conversation. Some things to think about when you're doing there. If you leave discussions to their own devices, all the discussion will happen at the end of the week. It's better if you can figure out how to reward participation for early part of the discussion.

Some instructors will break this into phases that at the first part of the week that they have to make a certain post and the second part of the week they have to make another post. I personally, I give extra points if you post Sunday, Monday, and

Tuesday, I opened my discussions on Sunday and then I'll give a smaller number of points for Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, and then I don't give extra points when they post on Saturday. I have some students that are a little critical of that, but my goal is to get this thing push forward to get the discussion started as early in the week as possible, and so far it works that I've managed to model that behavior.

Part of his discussion was students that was like, "Oh, I don't have time to read this." Well, only if they think that they're reading starts at the beginning of the week, but if they start the week prior, then they should be able to craft the post. Just matter of how you frame it, I post quality, it's up to you how you do things post quality. I mentioned the length of the message, that's one way that you can measure post quality that's not a measure that I recommend the level of formality that some want, you could go from very informal to very formal. It's up to you where you want to put this but the more formal that you make it, the more barriers that you're going to put into place to have an actual robust conversation. Those are things that you're going to have to way out.

Make sure that you have some type of grading rubric. Something that students can see to understand what was an acceptable response and what was not an acceptable response. For example, maybe you require some outside research, that they need to give an example from a textbook and another example from a research article or a journal article. If they're not providing those parts, do you give them full points or not? Those things that you have to make sure that are clear to your students in order to do this. The same way of naming conventions or how you want the subject line to be worded to make it easy for you and the rest of the students to manage all these messages. Something to think about there.

Was it last week? Last week, I believe I talked about this book called *Small Teaching Online*. One of the things they talked about over and over and over again was this idea of reflection, but also tying it back to the course objective. Good discussions tie back to the course objectives. What do you want them to learn as part of the course and how can you tie that discussion so you can reflect upon that. That way, they don't just see it as busywork, but this is why we're having this discussion. As I mentioned at the very beginning, in my mind learning is all about dialogue. That you're there to talk things out, to mull it over until you create this mental model of it.

One thing I mentioned earlier, was instructions or instructors can be conversation killers so you need to be a good participant but remember, do not get involved too much because you'll kill conversations. I have students that get very frustrated with this and they're like, "He didn't lecture it to us." He was like, "No, I'm not going to lecture." "We had to talk among ourselves about this concept. He was there briefly." I'm in there more than briefly. That often students have in their mind that the instructor is supposed to provide all this information. Well, we're dealing with adult learners. At least, I'm dealing with adult learners who come with a variety of experiences and skillsets and knowledge bases. That they can participate very well and make sense of what they're reading and share that information and be able to frame it in very, very successful ways. They don't need someone to just lecture to them. By tapping into 10 to 20 different voices, you can pull out great information, just be careful that you don't kill the conversations. I'm great for this. I know how to kill a conversation. I consciously try not to do that. Grading. You have to grade a discussion board, you have to assess

points to it. If a discussion board is a central piece in your course, you need to grade it as such. I remember talking to a faculty member, they had this activity and in my mind, there was a lot of work to it, but they were only going to give them 3% points or 5% points.

I told the instructor outright. I said if I was taking the class, I would weigh it and say, "I can do the rest of the class and not do this, and still get the grade I want." Because my discussions are a central piece, I typically make it worth at least 20% of the grade. This is two-letter grades that they can be knocked off if they decide they don't want to participate in the discussions. I can't force anyone to participate in the discussion, that is something they have to decide whether they want to participate or not. With this, I've managed to create some really good discussions that students have jumped in on and they have responded back that they like the way that I pull together discussions. Next week, we're going to talk a little bit about some different formats that you can use for discussions, but until then, thanks for joining. Here's a quick plug from my book.