Podcast Transcript

# 6 Engaging Online Discussion Strategies

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**Stan Skrabut:** Well, thanks for joining me, I really appreciate you being here. I realize with all those podcasts out there, you're hanging out with me today, and I can't thank you enough. Today, we are going to pick up where we left off last week with online discussions. Last week, we talked about some of the benefits of online discussions and also some success tips to help make more engaging discussions. Today, I'm going to look at six different strategies or online discussion format to make some engaging discussions. Let's get started.

One of the typical online discussion strategies is to ask a question. Now based on this question, determines if you are going to have an engaging discussion or a discussion that just falls flat. If you are putting together a discussion that could be seen as something that requires factual information that would be on an exam or a quiz, it's probably going to fall flat, but if you build a discussion where it requires reflection and critical thinking, then you're probably going to tap into an engaging discussion.

You definitely want to tap into what the participants think and how maybe they're applying this information. It's just how you put the question together will determine how successful your online discussion will be. Here are six different I guess strategies or ways that I and others have put together online discussions. It certainly doesn't cover the whole spectrum, but these are six that I looked at and I said I'm going to share this information with you.

Number one, Jigsaw Prompts. This is named after a social psychologist Elliot Aronson and it's based on his jigsaw classroom. These prompts require each student to contribute information that hasn't been previously contributed. You're putting these different pieces together as a jigsaw and different prompts for this for example are, find a blank that no one else has found. Find some kind of information, talking about this subject that nobody else has contributed before or describe it in a way that no one else has described it and so forth.

That is how it is. You may lead off with this, lead off with some information and say, "Okay, what is something that we don't know about this topic," that start contributing and grade it accordingly. It may be that everybody in the class, if you have a class of 24, maybe 24 different responses to this are enough. Now, you want certainly a way that students will come back to see what was contributed. There may be an entire reflective piece around that and say, "Okay, based on what others have contributed, write a reflective piece," and that may be an assignment that students have to turn in, so, definitely one strategy, that is the Jigsaw Prompts.

Number two is The Snowball. Very similar to the Jigsaw Prompts, with The Snowball prompt, each student is required to build on the information that a previous student

contributed. It's kind of like adding a story, that if you were going to write a story online with your entire class, that somebody starts the story and then the next person adds another sentence that continues the story. That's one way that you can approach this, but very much like the Jigsaw Prompts is, "What is some ways or information that we don't know about this topic that you can contribute?"

Where the Jigsaw Prompt, they may have narrowed it down where they said, "Describe it in a way that no one else described it," or, "Find an attribute that no one else has found," or, "Identify something that no one else has identified." That's where I see the difference, but The Snowball is you just keep adding to it and just making this bigger and bigger as students move along. Those are ways that you can twist how you would normally ask a question and maybe this follow-up makes it a little more engaging.

Now from Jennifer Stewart-Mitchell, we have this 3C+Q. This is strategy number three is 3C+Q and Jennifer Stewart-Mitchell, what she does is when students respond to other students, they have to have at least two of the following, The three C's are: a compliment, a comment, or a connection, and the Q is a question. Whenever a student responds, they have to provide at least two of those. It could be a comment and a connection, or a compliment and a question, and she provides prompts for that. Like a compliment is, "I like how you did this and I like that," but also going into detail why.

This reminds me of Pixar's way of providing feedback and it's that "Yes, and--" "Yes, I like this and here's how we can take it in a different direction," so, the "Yes, and--" and I like this. I like the fact that you're recognizing what the previous person answered, before you jump in to the information that you want to provide.

This fourth one is the discussion format that I use, and it's called the IRA Discussion. I picked this strategy up from Rita-Marie Conrad and J. Ana Donaldson in their book called *Engaging The Online Learner: Activities and Resources For Creative Instruction.* I used to put together, I guess bad discussions, because they just were not getting any traction and not engaging. I switched to this model and this is the model that I continuously go with.

This IRA discussion has basically three parts, it has insight, resources, application, so, insights, resources, application, IRA. Students are first required to do reading, and for all these reading could be definitely a requirement. I have them read, it could be a number of chapters, it could be a bunch of articles, I could have them watch videos, all kinds of different things. In that, the learners are expected to find three things that resonated with them. Things that they agreed with or disagreed with, or just anything that just jumped out. Those are the insights, what things just grab them, and they have to explain why these insights were important to them, not just say, "Okay, I like this," but, "I like this why?"

Next is the Resource. Based on whatever we're reading at the time, I want the learners to go out and find something on the interwebs and report on it. "Here I found this, it's related to our discussion, here's why I thought it was important." Then finally, application. How would they apply the reading that we're doing or what they watched?

How does this apply to their lives, either currently, or what they expected to do, or what they've done in the past, but what's the application for this?

This has been very fascinating because the students-- I work typically with grad students and where they are pulling information from and how they're applying it, it's just been absolutely wonderful and fascinating. I am never bored in these discussions seeing where they're going with it. My grading rubric for this is very simple. They get graded zero to three points, and based on those, how well that they met that challenge to do this. I'm not a very hard grader. The participation is pretty important, but if they mailed it in, if they did absolutely like the minimal zero participation possible, they're probably not getting the full three points and I do that on a regular basis.

I also, when I have them respond to fellow students, and they have to earn 20 points in a week. This IRA post is worth up to three points, and then they have to respond and all their responses are zero to three points also. Where I mentioned in last week, when I was talking about online discussions, I mentioned that I try to front load discussions as much as possible to get participation early in the week as possible, so it's not heavy at the end.

One way that I do that if they post on Sunday, Monday and Tuesday, I give three additional points for their IRA post. Then if they post Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, I give them one point and on Saturday, the last day, no extra points. As it works out that, by posting early, they eliminate one extra post in the week. I'm finding, as we get started, students figure this out, and so the discussions start very robustly at the beginning of the week.

Here are some comments from some of my students regarding this strategy that I wanted to share with you. One student said, "The IRA method that was used for our discussions made the interactions much, much more valuable. This is a method I will utilize if given the opportunity to lead my own course." Another student said, "I was also amazed at how much interaction on the discussion post. I often would have full points on a discussion thread, but would continue interacting with my peers because I was so enthused and interested." For me that's what you want, that you want an engaging discussion. Those were a couple comments that I wanted to pull out.

Here is the fifth strategy and it's called a Primary and Secondary Reaction Discussion Format. I found this format in an article that Ashley Harvey wrote for Faculty Focus. The article was, *An Activity That Promotes Engagement with Required Readings, Even in Large Classes*. This method, it could be used very much for face-to-face or online courses. What Ashley has done is divided the class into two. One group are the primary reactors. These primary reactors started the conversations and were required to email the class a critical reaction to the readings. What they liked, what they didn't like, what they agreed with, what they didn't agree with, no later than 24 hours prior to the class time.

The secondary reactors were to read the readings and the primary reactions, and then come to class prepared to continue the conversations. In their primary reaction, they would say something like, "These two mentioned X. My thoughts are this but a question I have for the group is this." Then for the next week, the groups alternate

roles, and the primary reactors will become the secondary reactors. They kind of flip-flop back and forth in these two different groups. This was interesting for me and something that I may actually consider experimenting with in a future class, but in order for this to work, just basically like most discussions, that the students have to have read the material.

The last strategy that I want to leave with you is called Save the Last Word for Me. This strategy also came from a Faculty Focus article and the article was *Save the Last Word for Me: Encouraging Students to Engage with Complex Reading and Each Other*. This strategy could be used in any class that uses a complex reading or one that where individuals read the material, could interpret it maybe different ways. It can be used different levels, undergrads all the way through grads. You just kind of adjust it according to the formats that you're doing.

How this works. The students will read the articles dealing with this complex content and then jump into the discussion. At the beginning of the week, half the class, so they split it into two halves, created a discussion thread which included a section from the material. They basically pulled a quote, something from the reading, that they thought was important and complex. They just posted that quote. They didn't give any explanation why they chose it, but they wanted the other students to openly interpret it. During the middle of the week, two students are required to go in and post a reaction to each of the passages.

The first part, students will pull out, pull quotes or paragraphs, that they're looking for interpretation to. Something that is open to interpretation. Then a couple days into the week, two students have to reply to each of those different quotes or paragraphs that were pulled. Then finally, the last part of the week, the students who selected the passages had to go back and respond why they selected those passages and how they interpreted them or reflected on it. Then the next week, the group's kind of flop. They keep going back and forth that way. Based on the feedback from what was shared in that article, that this seemed to go over quite well.

I will put in these different strategies into the show notes and definitely go in and check them out, but I think these are six different ways that you could go in and kind of make your discussions just a little more engaging. As a reminder, the first one, Jigsaw Prompts. Number two, The Snowball. Number three, 3C+Q. Number four, the IRA Discussion Format. Number five, the Primary and Secondary Reaction Discussion Format. Then finally, number six, Save the Last Word for Me. There you go, something to kind of add some juice to your online discussions and before I let you go, here's a quick plug from my book.