Strategies for Participating in Online Conferences and Discussions

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R ecently, I was asked by one of my students in an online course for tips for managing the volume of posts to read and respond to during the course of a week's discussion (also known as an online "conference"). My first course

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of action was to search for online resources that provided such information; however, the majority of sites I found introduced recommendations for instructors or those facilitating discussions rather than strategies for students to make the most of their participation in online discussions. The second step in helping my student was to review the research articles and books I had amassed over the years about online discussions and distance education. Upon reviewing these, though, I encountered the same dilemma: the majority provided strategies for how instructors and facilitators could structure discussions to improve students' experiences but not ways in which students could better manage the process themselves. Therefore, I decided to develop my own recommendations. Below is a summary of the strategies that I have found to be helpful for students to be successful when participating in online discussions, no matter the setting. I am sure there are others applicable to unique settings and situations, but hope these will serve as a foundation from which to build.

Become Familiar With the Requirements for Posting

To ensure you address the minimal requirements of participating in online discussions, it is important to become familiar first with what these are! If the requirements are not clear, be sure to ask the instructor for clarification. Your progress (and also very often your grade) depends on the quality and quantity of your participation and, in many cases, also when you participate. If you are not sure about how you are graded or would like an explanation for why you earned a particular grade–ask! It is your right to know and understand the assessment criteria utilized by your instructors.

Do Not Read and/or Reply to Every Post

In a face-to-face discussion, would you be expected to answer every question asked by your instructor during class, or comment on every reply made by a peer? The answer is "no"! Likewise, you do not need to read or engage in *every* thread of a discussion. Read the subject heading for each post to help you determine if you believe you should read it. Of course, it helps if you and your peers use appropriate subject headings in your posts! One caveat, though, is that your instructor may require you to read every post—so ensure you fully understand the participation requirements.

Use Appropriate Subject Headings!

It is very frustrating to read an entry that essentially says nothing new or is directed at a particular individual. Also, it is maddening to read a list of headings that are all identical. To ensure that your peers and instructor understand what is in your post, provide a clear, concise subject heading that elucidates just this. And, if a particular posting is directed to a particular person, use a heading such as, "To Natalie–I disagree!"

Rephrase and/or Quote Your Peers

To ensure everyone understands your reply or question, be sure to include the portion of the question or comment and the author that your reply builds on in your response by highlighting it or posting it in a different color to differentiate it from your response.

Develop a Personal Schedule— And Stick to It!

After you become familiar with the participation requirements for the online discussion, set a schedule to ensure you address the requirements. Many instructors of online courses factor in the quantity and quality of your postings for your grade, as well as *when* you post your comments. For instance, to earn full points, you may need to post throughout the course of a week as opposed to only the last 3 days of a week's discussion.

Spell Check

Spelling is not each one of our strengths. No need to fear, though—spell check can help. Simply type your reply to a posting in a word processing program first, then conduct a spell check. Then, copy and paste your comments in the online discussion. Note also that many current versions of discussion boards include a spell check feature, so why not use it?

Review Your Response Before Hitting Submit!

Have you ever received or, even worse, sent an e-mail that you did not intend to send yet? This can happen with your posts, too. Before you submit a posting, be sure to read it to ensure the response reflects what you really want to communicate about a topic.

BE PROFESSIONAL AND RESPECTFUL

It is imperative that you show humanity, respect, and professionalism in your posts, even if you wholeheartedly disagree with someone's views! Although we might think that no one will post "ugly" remarks, occasionally some people do. And, sometimes it is not even on purpose. So, be careful, polite, and tactful. In an online environment, words can speak louder than actions. And, if a post is upsetting to you, contact the individual in person or via e-mail directly, or contact your instructor to ask that he or she contact the individual personally—but please do not humiliate or antagonize by making a questionable post that everyone can see.

AGREE TO DISAGREE

It is important to keep in mind that the point of participating in online discussions is not to agree on everything; rather, it is to share and examine various perspectives about different issues. In fact, some of the best discussions I have participated in were those in which I did not agree at all with some of my peers and students. As such, let us agree to disagree!

CONTRIBUTE MEANINGFUL CONTENT AND RESOURCES

Participating in online discussions (and hopefully also an online learning community) involves the sharing and receiving of meaningful information, pertinent to course content. The Web affords us with the opportunity to link to definitions or other resources of interest, so please take advantage of the Web in making a meaningful contribution about the topics examined.

INCLUDE APPROPRIATE REFERENCES

Where applicable, include appropriate references—not only to give credit where credit is due, but also to substantiate your reply. Plus, it shows you have done your homework when you can weave in references from your reading and other sources.

PRACTICE PARSIMONY

Just because you can write a whole lot of information and link to many, many resources does not mean that doing so will add to the "conversation." It is important to practice parsimony in your postings by answering question(s) in a concise manner.

ASK QUESTIONS

If you do not understand a particular post, concept, or acronym offered, ask the author for clarification. Oftentimes, students in online discussions shy away from asking a "dumb" question. Well, there are *no* dumb questions when it involves learning about a topic. And, chances are, if you do not understand something, there are many others who do not, too!

STICK TO THE TOPIC AT HAND

Sometimes students go off on tangents about topics that are not relevant to the topic being discussed. Be sure to stick to the topic at hand, and if you do have something very, very important to share that is somewhat related, ensure that you make this clear in your subject heading.

"COLLECT" OR DOWNLOAD ITEMS IN AN ENTIRE THREAD

Most systems that support online discussions include a feature that allows you to "collect," download, and/or print a group of postings. For many, this is an easier way to read posts (all in one long "thread") that saves time from having to click on individual posts. Also, most systems that have this feature allow you to select which items have been read, too. Thus, there is no need to sift between items that have and have not been read previously.

SUMMARIZE AND REFLECT

To help you get the most out of a discussion, reflect on your learning by summarizing the major points discussed and learned during the course of a discussion (e.g., during one week). This will help you understand the material better, as well as remember the information covered. You may even wish to enlist some peers in dividing up the work if writing a summary is not a required follow-up assignment to the discussion.

EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED

Although most systems that support online discussions are stable, you may encounter a problem accessing it or getting online; therefore, do not wait until the last minute to make posts. And, you may wish to have a backup plan for accessing the Internet to make your posts in case, say, your electricity goes out and your laptop is not charged!

USDLA AWARD WINNERS

Francisco Antonio Soeltl - E-Learning Brasil President and CEO - Country Leadership in Distance Learning Implementation ~ Private Sector

Dr. Thomas Kenan Miller III - Online Technology ~ Higher Education

21st Century Awards for Best Practices in Distance Learning

Keystone National High School - Online Technology ~ Pre K–12

C^2 Technologies, Inc. - Blended Learning ~ Corporation

Western Governors University - Online Technology ~ Higher Education

Virtual High School Global Consortium - Online Technology ~ Pre K–12

Webcampus at Stevens Institute of Technology - Online Technology ~ Higher Education

7city Learning - Online Technology ~ Corporation

Joint Knowledge Development and Distribution Capability's Joint Knowledge Online - Online Technology ~ Government / Military

Army Distributed Learning System - Online Technology ~ Government / Military

USDLA 2008 HALL OF FAME

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USDLA 2008 EAGLE AWARD

The Eagle Award was presented by USDLA to a nationally recognized public official that demonstrated unique leadership in distance learning. This year USDLA recognized Florida Senator Daniel Webster for his commitment to providing greater educational opportunities in his state by means of distance learning technology and especially his support of the Florida Virtual School.