

## How to Foster Productive Dialogues in Discussion Forums

### What makes a good discussion question?

Think of the question as a "task," and frame it as a holistic activity that helps students to scaffold learning. Here are a few examples of Discussions that are framed as tasks:

- Have students create a scenario in which a particular situation is played out. Students could role play within the scenario.
- Have students critique a reading or a project draft – for example, ask them to find three ideas that they found to be particularly convincing, and two ideas that they found to be less-convincing.
- Create a debate scenario. Divide students into 3 groups, assign 2 of the groups to a side of the debate and ask them to present evidence to convince the third group. The third group will then respond and discuss why they chose a particular side.
- Present a problem, ask students to create a solution using course materials.

### It's not just the question, but how you frame it. Here are a few tips:

- Start with a question that can be the foundation for a discussion.
  - Begin the question with open-ended language like "Create a reflection that addresses the concept of . . ." or "Within this case study, consider . . ."
- Or provide context to set up the question
  - Use language like: "Scholars who have studied this topic believe that . . ."
  - Then ask the question on which you would like students to focus: "Discuss possible alternative conclusions, based on the evidence in this document."
  - And then a follow-up, asking students to provide evidence or analysis: "Explain why you believe the evidence points to this conclusion."

Then, coach the students on the most effective ways to frame responses that build on their peers' ideas:

- Explicitly describe how students should engage with their peers in the Forum. Give students communication strategies to help them develop responses that provoke dialogue
  - Restating the idea in agreement: "I like the idea that you discussed about . . ." or "I think you are on to something when you say . . ."
  - Extending ideas: "I think you are on to something when you say . . . and maybe it would be good to also consider . . ."
  - Presenting alternatives: "I think you are on to something when you say . . . but another way to look at this problem could be . . ."
- Encourage students to challenge one another's ideas, but emphasize that these challenges should be positive, so that responses foster consideration of alternate views, rather than shutting down the discussion.

### Finally, here are a few logistical suggestions for facilitating effective discussions:

- Provide example posts and responses as models for the students.
- Grading the posts and responses using a simple rubric gives students incentive to offer more substantive posts and responses.

- Limit students' view of their classmates' posts until after they have submitted their own post.
  - This will avoid students simply echoing their peers' ideas.
  - It will also keep students from being self-conscious about posting the same/similar answers to their peers.
- Give students adequate time for their initial post and for any required responses.

An excellent source for crafting discussions in a variety of productive formats is "The Guide to Fostering Asynchronous Online Discussion in Higher Education," available at the *Fostering Online Discussion* website: [http://www.fold.org.au/guide\\_worksheet.html](http://www.fold.org.au/guide_worksheet.html) and in PDF form: [http://www.fold.org.au/docs/TheGuide\\_Final.pdf](http://www.fold.org.au/docs/TheGuide_Final.pdf)