A Discussion About Online Discussion

WHEN IT COMES to facilitating online classroom engagement, discussion boards are a great go-to. They're practically omnipresent; a tool used in every virtual classroom in every college curriculum. Ideally, the boards not only fuel student engagement, but they also facilitate critical thinking and a sense of community in online environments.

Discussion boards also fuel an impressive level of student contempt. You'll see it on anonymous discussion boards like Reddit. Or worse yet, in a compendium of Tweets compiled by an aggregator such as Buzzfeed (Martinez, 2019). After an initial post, there is, evidently, a predictable pattern for success in a discussion board response-to-peers. It looks something like this:

Great post, <NAME>! I so agree that "<EXCERPT>". Your observations are so <INTERESTING/RELEVANT/ PROFOUND>. You've really addressed the topic nicely.

Additionally, this viral tweet captures a widespread student sentiment about discussion board posts:

Liv Howard
@olivia_howardd

discussion board posts

Student: I love bread

Me: Joe, I agree with you! I love bread too. I liked the part when you said you loved bread. Great point!

11:32 AM · Sep 19, 2018 · Twitter for iPhone

31.9K Retweets   **118.2K** Likes

As tools, then, it's not clear that discussion boards are truly delivering a sense of community or enhancing critical thinking skills. There is a disconnect between the goals and the outcomes of online discussion.

Some of this disconnect may be addressed by consulting the literature. Afterall, faculty teaching across the spectrum are not typically specialists in pedagogical theories of education; it may be the case that instructors simply don't know how to create engagement using online discussion. There are best practices for discussion boards, and such practices have been established for about a decade; they're nothing new. While researchers have found that higher-level questions won't necessarily generate higher-level responses, they've also observed that students associate discussion quality with active instructor participation, instructor feedback, and relevant questions that incorporate ideas (Christopher et al., 2010; Dallimore et al., 2010).

So, as a practical matter, a discussion board question that has a finite set of acceptable responses, is probably not going to be the best question. For example, "List the events that triggered WWI," required consulting a lesson and regurgitating established information. On the other hand, "Of the events that contributed to WWI, which one is the most underrated/overlooked? Why?" involves looking for something, by definition, that is underexplored in the literature. It creates a ground for an open discussion.

And, because research also indicates that instructor engagement is critical for the relevance of discussions, it suggests that a practice of regularly responding to students on the board itself is valuable.

That is, student engagement stems from instructor engagement.

Student and instructor engagement are both essential for the success of the discussion. It's fair to ask how much "engagement" is necessary to create a satisfying discussion experience? Is it enough to expect a student to 1) Write a response to the discussion question and 2) Write a response to one other student? Or do more students need to be addressed? How much does the number of replies from one student to another add to the discussion board experience?

In many cases, a high quantity of generic student responses has been confused as representative of a high quality discussion.

One thoughtful response to one other student seems as if it would be enough engagement than three throwaway responses that were written to meet the requirement. That's not to say that all students would write throwaway responses if more than one was required, but increasing the number of responses increases the amount of time spent scrolling through student posts, looking for something to respond to. The discussion then becomes more focused on what can be responded to in this post than engagement with concepts and content.

The takeaway for faculty? A successful discussion isn't measured by the quantity of student responses, it's measured by the quality of student responses. And

Eight Simple Ways to Increase Student Retention in Higher Ed

EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS have a great responsibility of graduating all students with the essential knowledge and skills necessary for success in their chosen field. As faculty, we are responsible to do our best to retain as many of our students as possible. This is key for any institution of higher learning we represent.

While the term student retention may sound a little clinical, and one we may not consider in the midst of setting up, managing, and teaching our online courses, it is one we cannot ignore. Your institution may have a specific expected student retention rate for each instructor, such as 95% or better. The pressure is on to make sure you meet or exceed that expectation to remain as a top performer. Whether you are an experienced instructor or new to online teaching, meeting the faculty expectation may require developing or revising your retention strategies. Here are eight simple strategies that will help you to keep your students engaged and improve retention:

1. Make a Great First Impression

It's so much easier to win students over when they feel you are dedicated to their success. Sending welcome emails shows you are excited to meet them and that you will be there for them throughout the journey. When those first-week questions fill your inbox, respond immediately with an extra warm tone. When a student asks for help, commend them for doing so.

2. Closely Monitor

Show students you are paying attention to their progress early in the course. Weekly letters of concern to students who are below a certain average shows them that you care they are not meeting expectations and want to help them improve their performance. "High five" emails show students you have taken notice of their hard work and want them to continue their efforts.

3. Social Media

Connecting with today's students on approved social media platforms will put more of a face to your name and make you seem more real to students who may view you as the "sage on the stage."

4. Clear Feedback

When students see you are taking time to provide clear and meaningful feedback to help them improve, the better engaged they will be in the learning process. Do not only tell students what they did wrong but also offer suggestions, tips, and resources that they can reference to improve future assignments.

5. Texting and WhatsApp

Texting and other free messaging services like Whatsapp are faster and more effective modes of communication in reaching students. Offer students as many ways to connect with you as possible to make it easier for them to reach out and ask for help when needed.

6. Inspire Students

All of us need reminders or a little nudge to be able to see beyond the present. Get into the habit of posting random announcements and/or send emails with inspirational quotes to remind them of their ability and that if they are determined to succeed, they will. Students like to hear that their instructor believes in them, so remind them of this and that you are always there to help. This will create a pleasant and trusting classroom environment where students feel valued and motivated to be their very best. They will be excited to hear what you'll share with them next.

7. Use a Retention Center

If you are using Blackboard, the retention center is an excellent tool for tracking and identifying students who are at the highest risk. Once in the retention center, there is a risk status bar that provides a quick summary of how many students are at risk. This allows for closer monitoring and provides outreach efforts for faculty to help with student persistence and retention. When you send a message via the retention center, it is automatically documented with a date and time stamp in the retention center notes for easy tracking.

8. Address "at-risk" Students Early

Do not wait to address "at risk" students at the mid-point or close to the end of a term but do so as early as possible to allow for more effective prevention and early intervention. Develop an early warning system to identify students who are at risk and have intervention strategies readily available to help them. This will help you have a better chance of retaining your students and guiding them to success.

These are some of the ways that will make for a more pleasant teaching and learning experience which will result in increased student persistence and retention.

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Edna Murugan, PhD and Noura Badawi, EdD; Eight Simple Ways to Increase Student Retention in Higher Ed; Faculty Focus; February 12, 2020; [https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-classroom-management/eight-simple-ways-to-increase-student-retention-in-higher-ed/] March 3, 2020.

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quality requires instructor engagement and thoughtful construction of discussion assignments.

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