



MACQUARIE  
UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF  
BUSINESS AND ECONOMICS



# HOW TO LEAD DISCUSSIONS

Learning through engagement

*Learning and Teaching Centre*

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# Leading DISCUSSIONS

*Are you keen to engage your students in active learning in your unit?*

*Are you looking for ways to support your students in developing skills such as communication and argumentation?*

*Are you searching for new ideas to spark up class discussions?*

Many areas of the curriculum (and life) are not black and white. There are a range of opinions and perspectives that you can take. Even with areas such as mathematics, you can look at problems from many viewpoints. For example, an engineer, a mathematician, a physicist and a computer scientist may have differing ways of approaching the same problem.

One way to widen students' perspectives and to encourage deep learning is to stimulate class discussion — face-to-face or online. Effective discussions have the potential to guide and motivate students, and provide a safe and conducive environment for learning and communication exchange. They can enable students to synthesise and consolidate their own views, communicate with others and create or refine new knowledge. Discussions can provide opportunities for 'active student-centred learning', one of the values underpinning and shaping Macquarie University practice (Learning and Teaching Plan, 2008-2012).

Getting discussion going can be difficult, especially with diverse groups of students, and not all students and staff are comfortable with leading and participating in discussions. This guide contains some ideas for you to consider when using discussions in your teaching.

A discussion is not a chat about what we did on the weekend. You have serious educational aims in using discussion in class, such as:

- Enhancing learning of the content of the curriculum.
- Developing graduate capabilities, especially effective communication, critical thinking and professional judgment. Other graduate capabilities may also be developed depending on the task.
- Creating an atmosphere where students want to prepare for class, feel confident to contribute and enjoy the classes – even if they find it challenging work!

Some of the techniques we present here are icebreakers to help your class get to know each other. Others are good for exploring differing viewpoints, while most can be adapted in some way to suit your aims. Feel free to modify and experiment.

## Topics for discussion

The critical issue for a good discussion is a good topic! Here is where your skills as a facilitator come to the fore. A high-quality topic has shades of grey or differing ways to look at it. A topical or controversial area can be a useful start. Remember — an opening question that encourages higher order thinking will set the tone for the rest of the discussion. Another way of thinking about writing good discussion questions is to think about the function they serve. The richest discussions are those that open up participants' minds to many possibilities, rather than close them down to a right or wrong answer.

## Stimulus for discussion

A discussion may require a stimulus to assist with the conversation. A common approach is to give a set reading to be done before class. Here are a few other examples you could use:

- Video clip (for example, advertisement for junk food)
- Newspaper article
- Different groups or individuals are given different materials
- Painting or photograph
- Case study.

**Face-to-face discussions** can be conducted as part of lectures, tutorials, laboratories and practical sessions. They can be used to introduce an activity as part of a lecture or tutorial, but their immediacy means they are only available to those present.

**Online discussions** can serve the same purposes for those who do not attend face-to-face sessions. When conducted asynchronously (that is, not in real time), they allow more time for reflection and for giving and accepting feedback. Discussions in online environments can also provide a record of activity and participation. MacKnight<sup>1</sup> gives a good overview of the benefits for developing critical thinking.

<sup>1</sup> MacKnight, C.B. (2000). *Teaching critical thinking through online discussions*. *Educause Quarterly*, 23(4), pp. 38–41.

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## Acting as facilitator

Your role is to guide the learning activity to meet the curriculum aims. However, if good learning is occurring, let the conversation take its course — it will rarely go exactly as planned and often the unplanned will be the highlight of the semester. Discussions require careful preparation of the topics and materials – don't forget you can often involve students in finding their own materials and topics. The first class is critical. Although discussions offer many benefits for you and your students, successful discussions require planning and consideration of your role as facilitator. A good facilitator balances giving direction and support for learners while encouraging autonomy – you are aiming to encourage a collaborative and supportive environment by setting up the conditions so that students feel comfortable and confident in contributing. Using ice-breakers can help in the beginning, for instance getting everyone to introduce themselves. Your main job is to keep the conversation flowing without straying too far off the subject area you wish them to learn about, so it is essential to consider questioning, feedback and summarising strategies that you think will work with the particular student group. This includes mixing probes and supportive comments to extend conversations.

### Some points to remember:

- Be relaxed and friendly with high expectations
- Engage the learners in the process, particularly at the beginning
- Encourage students to move outside their comfort zone
- Be in control, but don't talk too much — your role is to get the students talking; be prepared to stand back and allow silence, rather than jumping in to answer your own questions
- Students can also be given the role of facilitator.

There are several resources to help you enhance your skills as a facilitator, such as a book by Collison et al.<sup>2</sup> that describes 'advanced dialogue skills' to progress conversations from trivial surface level discussion and social exchange to deeper level engagement.

Keeping the discussion going. Here are a few extra tips to keeping the discussion moving along:

- Be very explicit about the value of interaction to the learning process and to the students themselves.
- Keep the discussion on track and step in if a discussion meanders off into irrelevant areas. Remind your students of what they are talking about and give them an indication of when the discussion will conclude, which may be timebased or outcomes-based.
- Model the thinking you want from your students. Be enthusiastic and positive and open to views that you may not agree with. Your students will copy your way of thinking a topic through and will pick up on the language you use.
- Acknowledge good thinking publicly. Praise works better than criticism so name and praise those who make an effort.
- Encourage students to see complexities rather than over-simplifying or seeing only one aspect of a situation/scenario/problem.
- With online discussions, deal with 'shirkers' and 'lurkers' privately. Some of your students may not log in at all to discussions while others may be quiet observers. Email them privately outside the discussion to find out what is happening and why they are not participating. Your taking the time to contact them reinforces that their presence is of value. They will have more incentive to join in.

**The next section presents some suggestions for ways to get your students talking, so enjoy the conversations!**

<sup>2</sup> Collison, G., Erlbaum, B., Haavind, S. & Tinker, R. (eds.) (2000). *Facilitating on-line learning: Effective strategies for moderators*. Atwood Publishing: Madison, U.S.A.

## Peter Petocz | DEPARTMENT OF STATISTICS

**Can you use discussions effectively in large classes?** *Yes, in my experience. You can pose a question and ask students to discuss it in a group of three or four people — the people they are sitting next to. If it's one of the first classes in your series, you could ask them to introduce themselves to each other first. It's always easier to discuss something when you have met the people with whom you are talking. After several minutes, you can ask individual groups to report to the class, or you can take a vote about the issue by a show of hands. Everyone likes a chance to participate as long as you set up the right conditions for it. With a group of three or four participants, people will generally not be too shy to have a go. But it's also important for you as a lecturer to acknowledge and use the information from the discussion.*

# Teaching Ideas

# DISCUSSION STARTERS

*You've tried getting discussions going in your classes and tested all kinds of interesting solutions to the problem of getting the introverts talking and toning down the garrulous students. But no, it's not working, so to help you we've put together some techniques.*

This section contains a number of ways which will assist you not only excite your students but also encourage the quiet ones. The techniques are not mutually exclusive and more than one may be used in any class group – for instance, you can use name tags to loosen your group up, and then run a class debate. Try them out and experiment to find the ones you're comfortable with.

*Below each suggestion is a tip for how to use the discussion starter in an online setting.*

## 1 Name tags

This is an ice-breaker that can be used at the start of the year. Some may think that the use of name tags is a bit corny, but not knowing names is a particular problem in classes with many students. Some students find it hard to remember other people's names, and this makes getting to know everyone harder. Some students may have problems pronouncing other people's names, or knowing how to address them. The first name? The second? Is a title necessary?

The method is to ask each student to wear a name tag for the first few weeks, giving first name, second name, and the name they like to be called, perhaps spelt phonetically. Name tags can also be expanded to target other pieces of information to help build an inclusive classroom. For example, country of birth or most recent work experience could be written on the name tag and used as a discussion starter. Students may also like to personalise them in some way.

Another option is to have name plates for each student to put on the desk in front of them each week. This has the added advantage of a roll call as you know which plates are not collected. Extra information can be added by the students, as for the name tags.

 *Students can post an introduction along with a picture which represents them in some way. Invite them to then comment on another student's posting.*

## 2 What language?

This too is more an ice-breaker than a discussion starter, suitable for when a class has students from different language or cultural backgrounds. Some students are understandably self-conscious about the fluency of their English. Many students simply do not empathise well with others and this exercise allows them to develop a greater understanding.

The method is to ask several students (preferably volunteers) to say where they were born, what their native language is, if they speak any other language besides English, and if they studied another language at school. Then, in a spirit of fun not humiliation, if the student knows any language other than English you can get them to say something in that language.

The point is to see what it must be like for those students whose original language is not English. More importantly, these students witness the process, and so they hopefully feel more accepted and less shy when they need to talk in class.

 *Tools such as Wimba's Voice Tool can enable students to record their message as a voice file and post it to the discussion. You can then invite students to say something in another language and post it to the discussion.*

## 3 Speed dating

Speed dating is a technique to get to know people quickly. You have 3 minutes with each person to find out more about them, and then you move to the next person at the sound of a bell (or whatever). You can split the class into two and form two lines or a circle (perhaps having half sitting at desks and the others moving). Each person has to find three important pieces of information about each other person. You can follow this with asking people to recall all the names of those they talked to — there are many follow-up activities that could be used. The facilitator can be part of the 'dating'.

The speed dating technique can also be used for content dialogue. Students can have 5 minutes with each person discussing the three most important points of the topic then move on. Different people will have different ideas. Because this is a one-to-one activity, it is useful at the beginning of the semester to help people build rapport.

 *Students can post short introductions and also respond to other's postings.*

## 4 Inkshedding

Inkshedding is a method for eliciting quick, anonymous, written student responses to a specific or an open-ended prompt, which are then published for the whole class to review. Inkshedding can be productive in a variety of situations, and it benefits both students and lecturers. It was first developed by writing teachers Russ Hunt and Jim Reither in the 1980s. Inkshedding has become a popular teaching technique with many different variations and we have described one of them here.

### Method

First you need a question to pose to the students. You can either develop a question for the day, or a series of them to use over a few weeks. Ask the students to spend 5 minutes writing down their thoughts on the question. That writing should be what language teachers call 'freewriting', that is, the student writes whatever comes to mind, without anyone making judgments about it or corrections to it. Freewriting helps generate thoughts and ideas, so it's an excellent starting place for discussions.

The students finish their 5 minutes of freewriting and then pass their notebook to another student. Everyone reads the notebook in front of them and then spends another 5 minutes freewriting in response to the first student's thoughts. That process continues through several iterations, until —after 20 or 25 minutes — the students have engaged in an extended dialogue with each other, all on paper, and are ready to start talking about their ideas out loud.

### Advantages

- The technique encourages everyone, even the shy students, to participate in the class 'discussion'.
- Everyone practises their writing.
- The written process helps to spark the verbal discussion.

This method can be ideal for classes where it is difficult to get the discussion going, or where a few students have been dominating the conversation. The technique will ensure that everyone takes part, even if they do so only on paper. You can assure everyone's participation in the oral conversation simply by asking the shyer students to read aloud one of the statements in their notebook.



*Students could post their freewriting to the discussion forum and comment on at least two others. They could then post a final reflection on how their ideas have expanded or changed since their first posting.*

## 5 Controversy

One of the best ways to create a hot discussion is to pose a controversial issue and ask by a show of hands how many students favour one idea or another (e.g. How many of you believe xyz is true? How many think it is false?) The students are split into two groups, according to their view. This prevents fence sitting, forcing students to decide which camp they are in.

### Method 1

Ask each group for 5 statements of evidence or argument for their case. Write these statements on the board. If a class comes too quickly to agreement on a complex issue, play devil's advocate to create a controversy. When this is complete, the groups break off again to come up with 5 statements of rebuttal of the other team's arguments. At the end ask if any students have changed their minds, and why.

### Method 2

You act as a moderator, asking students from one group, then the other, to support their position. At set intervals, say 15 minutes, students are allowed to change groups if they have changed their minds. Optionally, the students can then be asked to argue for the other side. At the end, the moderator summarises the main points for and against.

By creating a controversy and forcing interaction, these methods encourage all students to participate.



*Formulate two viewpoints of an argument in your online unit, one 'For' and one 'Against' the issue. Then ask students to vote by joining one of the groups. The groups each prepare the 5 statements and the 5 rebuttals. Online debates can then be set up.*

## Denise Meyerson | DIVISION OF LAW

*I find **conversation starters** essential for small-group teaching. They get shyer students to participate, which of course helps them to learn, and builds their confidence. But even more importantly, it helps the class, because these students — much to their own surprise! — often turn out to have very perceptive things to say.*

## Nick Lazarou | BCOM-ACCG/LLB STUDENT

*There's less discussion in my EFS classes than my Law classes, but it's good when it happens, it makes class more interesting. Given the opportunity and some encouragement, people seem to want to talk. In **Peer Assisted Learning** we actively encourage people to talk with various techniques.*

## 6 Jigsaw method

This is a collaborative learning method which can help students to make meaning from written material. Students work in groups, with each group having a separate piece of information. They become the experts in that area. The students then split up and recombine in groups where only one person has expertise in each area and they then share their information.

The Jigsaw method was coined from its original use in Austin, Texas, when schools became integrated and students from different backgrounds were first taught together. Staff would use the technique to get students to talk with each other.

It has been used successfully in a wide range of discipline areas and there are now a number of variations — one of these is described here.

### Method

*(For multiples of 5 participants)*

1. Divide students into small groups — around 5 people in each group depending on your class size. For example 5 groups of 5 would be good.
2. Divide the information into 5 segments this is why it is good to have the same number of students in each group as the number of groups). For example, with accounting students you may use different parts of a report for each group (as might happen in the workplace). Or you could use different articles on the same topic.
3. Give each member of the group a different segment of information and allow them time to read it but not discuss it at this stage. This information, or article, could be given in the previous class.
4. Rearrange the groups so that all those with the same information become an expert group on their own segment. Give students in these expert groups time to discuss the main points of their segment and to rehearse how they would present it to non-experts.
5. Now comes the fun part! The students from each expert group go back to their original group which now contains an expert on each piece of information.
6. Each student presents her or his segment to the group. Encourage others in the group to ask questions for clarification.
7. *(Optional)* At the end of the session, give a quiz on the material so that students quickly come to realize that these sessions are not just fun and games but in fact extend their learning.

### Advantages

- Students have their own piece of information (or an article) that they may find difficult to understand by themselves. The expert groups allow them to talk with others and clarify meanings without the intervention of a lecturer.
- Everyone practises reading and speaking skills.
- Students are developing valuable generic and learning skills.



*Groups could be set up in your online unit. These groups could be rearranged and required to prepare a presentation to cover their main points. The groups could be re-formed to include representative experts, who lead the discussion of the presentation online with the new group. The groups could also devise a multiple choice question for you to include in an online quiz at the end of the activity.*

## 7 The summary

Writing a succinct summary requires a good understanding of a topic and encourages students to think deeply.

Students are asked to write down a very short summary of an aspect of their studies, and then to break into groups of 3–4 to discuss and come up with a group summary. A student from each group is selected to read out their group's summary. There could be a discussion about the summaries, with the components that make up a good summary depending on your learning objectives.

Again, quiet students will often speak up if they have the words before them. This method is especially valuable when it tests students' understanding of the purpose behind a topic, e.g. "In 25 words or less, why study xyz?" or "What is xyz all about?". Sharing and discussing others' summaries gives each student a better understanding of the topic.



*Invite students to post their summaries, and then join a group for discussion. The group then works together to make a joint summary.*

## 8 Ranking responses

The summary activity can also be used for journal articles. Students prepare a brief summary of an article (perhaps in groups), identifying theirs by a number to maintain anonymity. These drafts are then shuffled and read out, with students ranking their preferred summaries from the pool.



*The summaries are sent to the facilitator and then posted online with a number or letter as identifier (again maintaining anonymity). Students vote on their preferred summaries, with a short comment as to why they prefer that particular one.*

## 9 Written conversation

Many students, particularly the shyer ones, enjoy debating in writing because they find this less confrontational. To convert an existing written debate into a verbal one is then relatively easy.

The facilitator asks each student to write at the top of a blank piece of paper his/her name and one question they would like to have discussed, related to the current topic. Each page is then passed to another student in a way that avoids debate just amongst neighbours, who may be friends; for example, ask students at the front to pass to those at the back. The page is then passed to the next neighbour and the process is repeated several times. The students write their answers to any queries on the piece of paper containing the original question and to comment on any responses, so that a written conversation emerges. The tutor then asks for volunteers to read out the page they are holding, or perhaps selects specific students to ensure some of the quieter ones are involved. The class can then discuss these written answers. At the end, the pages are all returned to the originating students.

This strategy is useful in helping students understand the nature of the questions other students have, and it provides a means of responding in a non-threatening way.



*Set up a series of topic threads in the discussion forum. Invite students to post a question in a thread of their choice. Then ask them to reply to a question in another thread. This can be of their choice or yours, or you might ask them to reply to questions in more than one thread.*

## 10 Two two-minute essays

In the last fifteen minutes of class, ask students to write answers to the following:

1. What did you learn in class today? *and*
2. What questions or concerns do you have?

In answering the first question, students often discover gaps in their knowledge, and these then appear in the second question. If students are asked only the second question because of time pressures, they may not be able to formulate the more sophisticated questions. Students can assemble into groups of four to share their responses and select the best one or two questions to submit to the entire class. Otherwise, students can simply submit their answers without first discussing them in a group.

These two-minute essays can then be used by the lecturer to begin the next lecture: *"This is what you said you didn't understand last week..."*.



*Students can post their two two-minute essays into the discussion forum. They can then identify other students' postings that answer their specific questions or clarify their concerns.*

## 11 Think pair (square) share

This method allows for individual reflection prior to responding. It allows those who might rush in to instead take their time, and helps the less confident students to participate in the discussion.

The facilitator poses a question requiring abstract thought. Students have 5 minutes to think about it, and write down a response. The students are then paired off and they talk about their ideas with their partner. Finally, they share their responses as a class. The shy students will be more comfortable presenting their ideas having already talked about it with a partner.

Optionally, before sharing the responses with the class, the pairs of students can be joined into groups of four ('square') to compare their conclusions. The instructions to the newly formed squares may be to reach a consensus within each group, or for each pair to explain their conclusions to the other pair who has joined them.

In the initial pair formation, the obvious approach is to ask students to pair with a neighbour. This will usually be a friend. It may be better to avoid this, for instance by asking students at the front to pair with those at the back.



*Students can post their individual reflections. Then the facilitator assigns pairs to share their reflections. These pairs can then be assigned to groups of four to compare their conclusions.*

## 12 Topic teaser

This activity involves students researching and doing a presentation about an area of the course, then the rest of the class discusses the issues raised by the presentation.

### Method

Each week a different student is chosen to create a 10 minute presentation on a topic that relates to the course. Students can present the topic in a range of ways according to their preferences and available technologies — a postcard, an overhead transparency, a ½ page A4, a podcast, a PowerPoint presentation — but a loose structure is needed. For instance, a good structure would be a 2 minute introduction to the topic, 2–3 key writers, 4–5 main issues, 1–2 questions for the class to discuss.

At the end of the session, another student is selected for the next presentation.



*Students can prepare a podcast of a PowerPoint presentation which is uploaded to the Internet; the discussion of the topic takes place online rather than in the classroom.*

## 13 Press conference

Set up a 'Press conference', where one group of 4–6 'reporters' asks questions of another group of 4–6, with the remainder of the class observing. Questions may be addressed either to the group, or individuals in the group. You will need to define the topic clearly, and to moderate to make sure the questions are reasonable. After a period of time, say 15 minutes, new teams are selected from those who have been just observing. At the end, the facilitator summarises the main points. As in all such group set-ups, it is usually better to arbitrarily select group members, rather than have students form themselves into groups of friends.

Optionally, the questions can be written down, either by all students in the class and then randomly selected by the reporters, or you can write the questions out beforehand on slips of paper.



*Students can be allocated to groups of either reporters or interviewees. The groups of reporters then ask questions in the discussion forum.*

## 14 Class debate

Basically, you select an issue that you think will be contentious or of particular interest to your group of students. The students then brainstorm and/ or collaboratively research their responses to this issue, as a class or in groups. They may be in a team that forces them to consider an alternative perspective to that which they normally hold. This can be very effective for learning concepts in the subject area if the debate topic is grounded in course readings.

### Method

The issue for debate is identified and articulated as a statement (written on the board, posted online), such as "Gazing at the stars is good for us".

3. The class is divided into two halves.
4. Each half is allocated their debate position, either affirmative (in agreement with the statement) or negative (disagree with the statement).
5. The two teams then work in their group (or in smaller groups) to either brainstorm or research their response and arguments in the allocated time. Alternatively, the debate itself could be held in the following week, giving the students more time to work up their arguments.
6. When the time is up a scribe begins to record the arguments for and against (or one from each team does the recording).
7. You can judge the winner based on the strength of the argument, or simply according to which team provides the greater number of responses. Alternatively a panel of students can judge the debate.



*Online conferencing tools such as Live Classroom enable students to make synchronous presentations in an online seminar. Teams could be set up, with each team member presenting their argument using a presentation. Such presentations are usually best uploaded prior to the session, so you might need to allow plenty of preparation time.*

## If you want to know more

- Michigan State University, USA, produced a handbook for teaching assistants that included a chapter on 'effective teaching strategies' — see [http://www.tap.msu.edu/handbook/TA\\_HB\\_CH3.pdf](http://www.tap.msu.edu/handbook/TA_HB_CH3.pdf)
- For a discussion of collaborative learning in general, have a look at <http://www.fremonths.org/ourpages/auto/2006/8/20/1156050858242/Collaborative%20Learning%20Groups-new.doc>
- Another discussion of collaborative learning methods is <http://www.co-operation.org/pages/cl-methods.html>
- Inkshedding: two handy sites for more information are <http://www.evergreen.edu/washcenter/resources/acl/c3.html> and <http://www.stthomasu.ca/~hunt/dialogic/whatshed.htm>.
- Jigsaw method: summaries can be found at these sites <http://olc.spsd.sk.ca/DE/PD/coop/page4.html> and [http://mlab.uiah.fi/polut/Yhteisollinen/tyokalu\\_jigsaw.html](http://mlab.uiah.fi/polut/Yhteisollinen/tyokalu_jigsaw.html).

## And onto the next ...

**If you want to get some more ideas about running discussions online, then the next section is for you! The final section will help you think about ways of assessing your students' participation in discussions whether online or in class.**

## Patrick Huang

### BAPPFIN/BCOM-ACST STUDENT

*Students in accounting units are often totally silent for the whole hour, writing down everything the tutor says. Those tutorials are awkward and boring. It would be good if tutors ran a class involvement or **getting-to-know-you activity** at the start of semester. I had that in one tute in 1st year and there was more involvement all semester.*

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# Online DISCUSSIONS

*An online discussion is a web-based communication tool that enables participants to post messages and to reply to others' messages at a time that suits them ('asynchronously'). Unlike the real-time ('synchronous') discussions of chat rooms and instant messaging — and the classroom! — an online discussion typically lasts longer and gives students more time to think about what they are going to contribute.*

They can be an interesting adjunct to face-to-face teaching, as well as their obvious use for remote education. There are some differences from their use in the classroom which are worth bearing in mind:

- Students will engage with the discussion if they see relevance to their learning, so plan the discussion as part of the whole curriculum;
- Students can participate at a time and place that suits them, but it is essential to manage their expectations about when you are available;
- Students can reflect and take time to develop their ideas, but you need to set some guidelines about the length of postings and monitor the discussions to keep them on track; and
- Discussions can encourage peer-to-peer learning, but keep in mind the different levels of computer access your students may have. Visit the Learning and Teaching Centre site for some extra suggestions that can help you plan and set up your online discussions in Blackboard, at <http://www.mq.edu.au/learningandteachingcentre/>

## Planning online discussions

Online discussions can be structured with defined topics and procedures, or unstructured, allowing students free expression of issues and ideas. They may be a compulsory part of the curriculum with students required to make regular contributions, or act as an alternate way for students to communicate with staff and other students.

The strategies for structured discussions to succeed are similar to those for any discussion, including:

- Map out the learning outcomes for your unit.
- Design activities that will enable students to achieve the learning outcomes. How could discussions help you achieve these?
- Devise an assessment strategy that helps students to achieve the learning outcomes. The reality is most students first and foremost look at the assessment requirements for a unit and plan their efforts accordingly. (See also the next section, on "Assessing student participation".)

Attach value to what happens in discussions: use the online discussions as an integral part of the learning process. For example, a task may require students to post their own opinion, read others' postings and comment on the range of opinions in relation to readings that you have set.

## Set expectations before you begin

Be transparent and clear about what you expect from your students in terms of their contributions to discussions, such as:

- The number of posts per week; and
- The length of each post.

You also need to clarify what the students can expect from you. You are not expected to be available all of the time, but you are expected to participate in online discussions if you set them. The students should know how often you will be contributing to a discussion.

Develop a code of behaviour so students know what is acceptable, and make sure everyone knows and agrees to the code. The code needs to be matched by strategies for reinforcing the desired behaviour, which need to be spelled out to the participants.

## Timeframe for discussion

If you have decided that online contributions are compulsory, then the timeframe for discussion is important to consider. If the period is too long, the discussion may be slow to get started and early contributors may have no responses to keep the discussion going. Too short a timeframe, on the other hand, may not provide the flexibility to allow participants to undertake the associated coursework requirements and desired reflection. One solution is to place a time limit on a discussion (say three weeks) with a requirement that everyone should make at least one contribution within the first week.

## Facilitating effective online discussion

Just as teachers manage face-to-face discussions and learning activities in the classroom, successful online discussions need facilitation, too. There are extra challenges for online facilitation, including:

- A lack of a sense of cohesion among students who have not met one another or the teacher face-to-face;
- The limited nature of communication, with no visual or verbal cues; and
- The asynchronous nature of individual student's learning when they are studying remotely.

To what extent should you participate in the discussion? This depends on the purpose of the discussions, and whether the discussions will form part of the assessment for the unit. There are instances where you may need to step in, for example if the discussion is straying from the original topic or if important points are not being addressed. A consistent approach must be maintained to ensure students are not disadvantaged. Many online facilitators maintain guidelines to limit their own participation, for example, 'wait 4 (postings) before me'.

Gilly Salmon developed a Five Stage Moderation Model to encourage interaction among students within online groups, and there is a wealth of information available through <http://www.atimod.com/e-moderating/intro.shtml>. The stages of the model are:

**Stage 1** Access and motivation — getting to know the technology and how to make a post.

**Stage 2** Socialisation — establishing an online identity and getting to know other participants.

**Stage 3** Information exchange — sharing information relevant to the unit.

**Stage 4** Knowledge construction — collaborating about the unit contents.

**Stage 5** Development — reflecting on the learning that is taking place.

Each stage calls for different e-moderating skills and requires participants to develop certain technical skills. The model takes learners through a logical process of induction before deeper-level interactions occur, and the emphasis is on learning through participation and engagement. Motivation is the key, and so is the provision of a positive structure and environment.

### Inappropriate comments, formal and informal language

Inappropriate comments of an inflammatory nature can potentially ruin the tone of the discussion or discourage participation. One suggestion is to remove the message and make personal contact with the contributor to discuss the offensive language or comments. A decision then needs to be made about whether the contribution should still be assessed or not.

The provision of guidelines at the outset of the discussion can help to avoid this problem, and the guidelines should also provide an indication of whether formal academic language or more informal colloquial expressions are acceptable. There are instances where either would be appropriate.

### Controlling the voluble participant

Like all discussions there is the potential for the overly vocal/verbal to dominate, which may be in frequency or in length of contributions. In an online environment, the other participants can simply choose not to read the comments. This is not ideal when discussion is desired, especially since the chatty ones may nonetheless make valuable contributions. Suggestions for controlling the overly talkative include limiting the number of contributions and/or setting a word (or screen page) limit.

## Building a knowledge resource

One feature of teaching online and in particular using online discussions is that you can store and improve the content related to what you teach. Consider the following:

- Save model posts for future use or reference. Store them in a Word file that you can copy and paste from the next time you teach the course.
- Ask permission to use the students' comments and postings for the following semesters — they are generally pleased!
- Create and build an ongoing FAQ page that your students can access the next time you teach the subject. This can save you time.
- Set a task for your students to summarise what new things they have learnt from discussions.
- You could use this as the basis of a wiki on your Unit that your students can own and leave as a legacy for the students who follow them!

## Jason Do-Vuong

BCOM-ACCG/LLB STUDENT

*Participation marks (in law) really force people to talk. In EFS subjects, participation marks tend to involve presentations, not participation every week.*

## Paul McKechnie

DEPARTMENT OF ANCIENT HISTORY

*In online discussions, I sometimes reply to a comment, suggest another book to read, or offer another way of looking at a question or an answer — but I intervene relatively little. In the last Study period, 14% of the postings in my unit's discussions were by me (70 out of 500).*

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# Assessing STUDENT PARTICIPATION

*What part will the discussions play in the course?*

*What is to be assessed in the course?*

*What graduate capabilities are you developing?*

*What are the needs, characteristics and situations of the learners?*

Learning activities that use discussion can be assessed although, as with all assessment, you need to be explicit about the learning aims and your expectations about their contributions. You can decide to allocate marks to students for participation in discussions if it meets your objectives.

Reasons commonly stated for assessing

- participation include:
- Recognising the workload and time commitment
- that the discussion requires;
- Encouraging students to participate; and
- Ensuring the students complete the required learning activities associated with the discussion.

If your students know their efforts in discussions will be assessed and go towards their final mark, this can encourage greater participation. There are a number of considerations, however. Are you allocating marks for attendance; for taking part in the conversation; or for the quality of a student's contribution? If the aim is to provide a forum for brainstorming and discussing ideas, then assessing for quality may stilt the discussion. On the other hand, an assessment of the quality of the contribution may act to raise the standard of the discussion. One way that can be useful is to allocate marks for any contribution early in the semester, then place more emphasis on quality as the semester progresses.

## Online – quality versus quantity

In a discussion participants should acknowledge previous points of view and provide constructive follow-on comments that will leave the discussion open. When online contributions are being assessed for quantity, not quality, there is the danger that participants will simply make their own unconnected statements or start a new thread without reference to previous inputs. To overcome this, you can set a requirement that students contribute a specific number of postings of which some have to be follow-on comments, while others could be a new idea that would begin a new thread.

## General guidelines

Assessment strategies may include:

- Provide clear guidelines and assessment criteria and involve students in setting assessment criteria if possible;
- Be sure that the activity being assessed is a component of the products or processes being developed in the course;
- Make explicit to the learners the relationship between this assessment activity, other assessment activities and the learning outcomes or competencies;
- Link assessment criteria for participation to the completion of other assessed or non-assessed activities such as the synthesis of ideas from readings;
- Incorporate peer assessment if appropriate; and
- Design a system for categorising responses according to how closely they approximate the desired or expected responses.

*Examples of activities used for online discussion/ interactions and assessment include asking students to:*



- comment critically on a limited number of topics over a period of time;
- post a thoughtful piece of work and then respond to other learners' questions and comments on it;
- incorporate their reflections on the issues debated online into assessed written assignments; and
- use evidence from the online contributions in order to illustrate course issues.

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## If you want to know more

- For information on using the assessment features of Blackboard discussions, have a look at the Learning and Teaching Centre site:  
<http://www.mq.edu.au/learningandteachingcentre/>
- The Australian National Training Authority's [flexiblelearning.net](http://flexiblelearning.net) presents ideas about assessing online discussions, some of which may be useful for in-class discussions:  
[http://www.flexiblelearning.net.au/community/TeachingTrainingLearners/content/article\\_6959.htm](http://www.flexiblelearning.net.au/community/TeachingTrainingLearners/content/article_6959.htm)
- Another Australian site on assessment is at <http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/assessinglearning>
- For a discussion on the interaction between assessment and learning, see: Gibbs, G. & Simpson, C. (2005). Conditions under which assessment supports students' learning. *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education 1*, pp. 3–31.

### Li-Ann Wong

#### BCOM-ACCG/LLB STUDENT

*It's important to manage the time that people talk (in **small group discussions**) so they don't get off topic. Tutors should monitor this. The type of room and table arrangements can also affect the quality of discussions (e.g. one room we use where tables are arranged in hexagons). Maybe more rooms could be arranged like this, instead of rows all facing the front.*

### Jon Tse

#### BCOM-ACCG/LLB STUDENT

*In terms of **Peer Assisted Learning**, discussions can be fantastic — if the students can say the right things at the right times because sometimes difficulties arise when you are trying to facilitate the right level of discussion about the right things. From the perspective of a student, again discussions are valuable as long as it stays on track and it is up to tutors to manage this. Sometimes discussions are hard to facilitate because it is easy for students to fall behind and thus not feel confident to contribute and that effectively prevents thorough discussion.*



## MEENA CHAVAN

BUSINESS DEPARTMENT, EFS

### Why I use group discussions — a case study

- Because I find that I can keep the students engaged and active in class and not passive and inert.
- Because it enables me to give students knowledge and information over and above the textbook which can be applied to real-world professional situations and students can also evaluate their own skills.

Students come from varied backgrounds and cultures with varied educational preparations and very diverse learning styles. **Discussions and group work** could sound a bit daunting at the start, but experience over the past years has assisted me to find some practices that have made this an enjoyable experience in interacting for both the students and myself.

In the first week I explain the objectives of the experiential teaching methodology and what is expected of students; this makes it clear how to achieve the goals. I also give them a piece of paper folded into a placard with their names in bold which they need to bring along to all classes and place on their desks, at least in the first 3–4 weeks until everyone knows each other's names. Everyone is introduced to one another in the first class. Knowing each other's names is vital for discussion classes.

The first activity is to stand up and walk about in 2 circles, one inward and one outward, and get yourself introduced to the class. This way everyone makes an effort to know their classmates.

In the beginning silence is common and I need to give them time to think before they can talk. A good ice-breaker is to start off the lecture with a personality of the week, someone who has contributed to international business and who is also from one of the countries of origin of someone in the group. Another way is to encourage students to bring in current affairs of international business and multinational corporations relevant to their country to class every week, which we then discuss.

I make it clear in the very first lecture that no answer is a wrong answer and that every one has a different perspective. I emphasise that we shall look at all the alternative options put forth by different groups and come to a common consensus as to the best-practice solution for a case or a simulation.

This assists them in partaking in the discussions without feeling overwhelmed. On some occasions a vote is undertaken if there is no consensus.

Another technique I use is that I constantly move and sit among the students in class. I am at the lectern only during the PowerPoint presentations for an hour. During simulations we need to move chairs and make group seating arrangements, and during case studies we move the chairs to make the class into a semicircle. Adjusting the seating helps a lot with everyone getting a chance to participate and no-one can hide. It is vital that a few students do not dominate the discussions.

By the fourth week the discussions are in full swing and students have learned to debate and challenge each other, which takes on an interesting turn. Networking and friendships are built among the students and they get to acknowledge each other's contributions by working in teams. The majority of them say they feel supported and happy conducting the group activities.

### Disadvantages of discussions and group work

- Preparation time for such courses is more than double that of normal courses, as I have to decide and acquire simulations, problems, quizzes and case studies and work out all their solutions long before the semester starts.
- Overall teaching satisfaction has increased, but many also say, "too much work in this unit". Well, they also say "too boring, too many PowerPoints," when we do a traditional lecture class. So we cannot please all the people all of the time.
- A small number of students have problems in participating due to language problems.
- A few students were of the opinion that some students in groups did not contribute sufficiently.



Want to help your students develop communication graduate capabilities?  
Need a few ideas on how to get your students talking?  
Ever used speed dating in your classes?  
Want to engage your students online?  
Want some hints on assessing student participation?

## Don't know where to start? Then this guide is for you!

This booklet is one of a series produced for the Learning Excellence and Development (LEAD) program. The program brings together as a team a multi-disciplinary group of university staff — general staff as well as academics — each working on a separate but related project to enhance student learning. The projects use an action research approach to nurture a research-based and responsive teaching culture.

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