Online Teaching - Leading discussions

This guide is intended to help you adapt class discussions to an online-teaching environment.

Online discussions help students by increasing engagement with course content, creating a sense of community, and providing structure and accountability.

However, we cannot assume (nor ask whether) students are in an ideal learning environment throughout this crisis. While Zoom can be a useful tool for class discussions, we must acknowledge that synchronous online teaching poses challenges for many students, especially those with unreliable internet and computer access, anyone living in a different time zone, and students with children.

Therefore, as our recommended option, we are also presenting a guide to Canvas, which many instructors have used to generate productive discussions, especially in larger classes. We are also presenting Zoom, which can still be a great tool for one-on-one meetings, office hours, or small group break-out sessions, even if it may not work for the entire class.

The basics

- Tutorial - Canvas: Setting up discussion boards
- Tutorial - Zoom: Videoconferencing

Add-ons

- Tutorial – Zoom: Share a virtual whiteboard. This tool allows you to share your screen in a Zoom video meeting and take notes on a shared virtual whiteboard. All participants can contribute to the whiteboard.
- Tutorial – Zoom: Breakout rooms. In Zoom, instructors can break a class out into smaller groups for further discussion. You can pre-assign students to breakout rooms (you must do this through the Zoom web portal, not Canvas) or allow Zoom to split the class at random. Note that you must enable breakout rooms in your Zoom meeting settings before scheduling the meeting.
- Tutorial - Zoom: Polling. Add polls to a meeting in Zoom to get instant feedback on a question.
- Considerations - Zoom: Security. Overview of available settings to ensure your meetings and classes are secure and to prevent “zoom bombing” from malicious bots.

Pedagogical tips

- Instead of the traditional discussion board assignment, consider requiring students to post informational videos, podcasts, infographics, etc. Remind students to make sure their posts are accessible (add screen-reader accessible image descriptions and ensure videos have closed captioning).
- Consider formats other than Canvas, such as an online blog or wiki, where students are encouraged to write longer, research-based posts while still having the ability to comment on their peers’ work. We recommend using Blogger by Google for blogs and
Consider staggering discussion-board start times to give students with constrained schedules or in other time-zones chances to be ‘first to the discussion.’ Make the discussion board more engaging by having students write their posts one day and wait to reply to each other until the following day. For larger classes, consider breaking students into smaller groups to encourage more thoughtful and interactive discussions.

Use part of your scheduled class time for online discussions or group work on Canvas or Zoom chat to encourage active, real-time participation.

Stories from the trenches

“Effective online discussions require at least as much scaffolding as those in a face-to-face environment. Providing prompts will require students to use their higher-order thinking skills, apply information to a new context, identify patterns, draw conclusions, make comparisons, uncover hidden meanings, assess the value of various interpretations, or prove or disprove an argument… Create spaces where small groups of students can brainstorm, role play, debate, or analyze a document, video clip, image, map, chart, or other piece of historical evidence. Students might interact synchronously or asynchronously by using platforms like Google Hangouts, Google Docs, Google Slides, or Microsoft Teams.”

- Steven Mintz, "Transitioning to Online Teaching: A How-To Guide," Perspectives on History

“Teaching an online course can actually be an opportunity to create a more engaging, interactive experience for your students if you take full advantage of the available technology. While you cannot replicate the in-person back-and-forth of a classroom, encouraging students to utilize social media channels or set up virtual discussion groups to work together can help mimic that collaborative environment. This will motivate students to succeed -- and allow them to turn to each other as they work through the material… Encourage students to ask questions, or even establish opportunities for them to take charge of their learning by including student-led seminars.”

- Satesh Bidaisee, "Take My Advice," Inside Higher Ed

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Source URL: https://history.washington.edu/online-teaching-leading-discussions