Best Practices in Online Learning Fall Forum: Blackboard and WebCT from the Trenches - "Pearls of Wisdom" (10/27/11)

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Five Discussion Forum Starter Threads

Following are five threads that can be used in most online discussion forums. I've provided a description of each thread along with an example of how I typically kick off the thread. The first subject line under each thread is called: Purpose of This Thread. Of course, everyone has his/her own teaching style and online voice but perhaps these examples will help you get started.

#1. Introduction and Roll Call: This thread is used for the professor to introduce himself/herself to the class and invite the rest of the class to get to know each other. Introductions help to establish a sense of online community as students begin to identify with each other and find commonalities (professional and personal).

Example: *Hello class. Please post a message to this thread to let me know you have made it into our WebCT classroom.*

Include your first and last name in the subject line. Within the body of the message, please introduce yourself by telling us 1) your name, where you are from, and what you do (e.g., full-time student, IT professional, retired), 2) what you expect to learn from this course, and 3) what you like to do in your spare time (hobbies, interests, etc.).

I'll start. My name is Dr. Marti Snyder ... [here you would give your introduction to kick off the thread. Aim to follow the model for the introduction that you present to your students].

I look forward to working with all of you this semester!

Dr. Snyder

#2. Announcements (or Weekly Updates): The purpose of this thread is to provide a space to post any announcement that you have for the class.

Example: *Good morning everyone! I hope you all had a wonderful weekend. This weekend I met with my doctoral students (Friday, Saturday, Sunday). I had 14 students in my class. They came from Florida, Texas, California, Connecticut, and even as far as Israel! We had a very productive face-to-face meeting.*

Now, here's an update on this class. First, I want to THANK YOU for your participation in the discussion about instructional design and how it applies to various contexts.

By now, you should have already read chapter 1 in the textbook and should begin reading chapter 13. Chapter 13 discusses the importance of . . .

There is nothing due this week; however, I would like you to continue to visit the discussion forum and participate. I also see that Dave posted an interesting question in the "Around the Water Cooler" thread. I am eager to learn what people have to say :-)

Have a productive week!

Dr. Snyder

#3. Ask the Professor (a.k.a., Ask Dr. Snyder): This is a dedicated thread for students to post questions that they want you to answer (as opposed to questions that other students might be able to answer). Of course, students can also send the professor a private email; however, this thread gives them an opportunity to post a question to the professor in a public forum.

Example: *Please use this thread to post questions you'd like me to answer. Alternatively, you may send me an email via WebCT if you feel your question is too personal. However, I've found that if you have a question about the course content and the assignments, it's likely that a couple of other students in the class have the same question so it helps if I can respond publicly to the rest of the class.*

Dr. Snyder

#4. Tips, Tools, and Resources: This thread can be used for posting articles, links to Web sites, videos, etc., conference announcements, etc. that are relevant to the course content.

Example: *As you progress through this class, you may stumble upon some great instructional design ideas, tools, tips and resources (e.g., web links, blogs, wikis, etc.) that would be valuable to others. If so, please share them here :-)*

Dr. Snyder

#5. Around the Water Cooler (a.k.a., Class Commons): This is a thread that can be used by the professor and students to have conversations that may be outside the realm of the course content. It's the virtual commons!

Example: *Hello. We don't see each other face-to-face so this is our virtual water cooler, break room, coffee nook...you get the idea? This is a social thread we can use to chat informally about anything that's on your mind (as long as it isn't crude, rude, or offensive).*

Dr. Snyder

Ten Discussion Forum Etiquette Guidelines

I post the following guidelines as one of the first announcements I make in WebCT/Blackboard.

#1. Lurk Before You Leap: Take some time to read what's already been posted in the discussion forum. Before you respond to a particular thread, make sure you've read all the messages in it to avoid duplicating what's already been posted.

#2. Use Descriptive Titles: Use a title that accurately describes the content of your message.

#3. Consider First Impressions: Your writing communicates who you are. Grammar, spelling, and punctuation do matter. If you are preparing a long message, consider typing it in a word processor first so that you can proof it and run the spell-checker. Then, copy/paste it into the forum.

#4. Think Before You Post: Make sure your message is clear and concise. It's helpful to chunk information into short paragraphs to improve readability. Read the entire message just before posting it.

#5. Keep it Relevant: Keep your post relevant to the topic of the thread. When replying, include parts of the original message that will help readers follow the discussion.

#6. Be Ethical and Respectful: Always treat others with dignity and respect. Before responding to a post, ask yourself, "Would I say this to him/her in person?" If not, rewrite it.

#7. Focus on Facts not People: It's okay to disagree with what's been written, but respect the opinions, suggestions, and opinions of others. If you want to argue a point, be objective and focus on the facts, not the person. Personal attacks are unacceptable.

#8. Give the Benefit of the Doubt: It's easy to misinterpret a message. If you are not sure you understand a message, or parts of it, ask the sender to clarify his/her meaning.

#9. Help Others Learn: Respect and welcome the newbies. When they make mistakes, be polite when you correct them. Depending on the circumstance, you may want to send private messages instead of correcting them in public.

#10. Be Vigilant: It is the responsibility of all of us to monitor this discussion forum to make sure people are being courteous, responsible, respectful, and ethical. If you read a message that you feel is inappropriate, out of line, or not conducive to the discussion, please contact the professor.

Five Tips for Setting up Effective Online Discussions

Following are time management ideas for facilitating large groups in discussion forums.

#1. Pre-Plan: A plan for how you will use the discussion forum to supplement a face-to-face course is critical. Why are you incorporating a discussion forum as part of your course? Do you want to use the forum to post general announcements, supplement in-class lectures and discussion, answer students' questions, or facilitate small group projects and case studies? Each is a viable opportunity to supplement face-to-face courses but it must be pre-planned.

#2. Divide into Smaller Discussion Groups: Use the functionality in WebCT to set up smaller discussion areas within the online forum. This can be done by setting up one thread per group and using the "manage members" feature to add students to each thread. You can include yourself in each group so you are able to read and participate in the individual groups as you see appropriate. Alternatively, you can have the discussion groups set up to be completely student-driven.

#3. Let Students Facilitate: Student-to-student interaction is often as important as professor-to-student interaction. You may want to use the discussion forum as an opportunity for students to lead small group discussions on a specific topic. If this is the case, you will need to outline clear instructions for the students on their roles and expectations for the activity.

#4. Assign Due Dates and Expectations for Participation: Make discussion forum participation a percentage of the student's course grade. If you post a thread focused on a specific topic, it is helpful to assign due dates for participation and identify specific requirements for participation (e.g., three posts, visit forum three times/week and post once, etc.).

#5. Use the Three-Sentence Rule or Postcard Metaphor: To help students understand the need for succinct yet meaningful posts, the three-sentence rule might help. The first sentence usually tends to acknowledge agreement, disagreement, or neutrality (e.g., "I agree with you..."). The second sentence includes the student's personal belief or opinions (e.g., I believe that ...). The third sentence might include more in-depth insight or signs of critical think about the topic by referencing the works of other experts in the field or providing additional resources in the form of web sites, attachments, and other media. You can also use the metaphor of a postcard in terms of how much to include in each post.

I hope you find these tips helpful. Feel free to contact me if you have other ideas, comments, or questions about how to use online discussion forums more effectively.

Thank you,

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