

# Fostering Critical Engagement in Online Discussions: The Washington State University Study

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Woody Allen once said that 99 percent of success is just showing up. That certainly seemed to apply to “sit-and-git” classes centered on textbooks and lectures. But with online learning there’s no place to hide. Or so we used to think. The signature tool of online learning—the asynchronous, threaded discussion—has often been praised for increased student participation rates, measured in terms of sheer numbers: numbers of students participating and numbers of contributions per student. In online discussions, students participate by posting, or they are conspicuously absent.

But quantitative participation rates don’t tell the whole story. As more courses incorporate online discussion components, and as more institutions develop distance-learning programs, we are finding that students may participate in threaded discussions, but they may not be critically engaged. Students may make only the minimal number of required postings, and then those postings will often be prosaic or monologic. Typically, these students will make their contributions and never return to the discussion. Contrary to conventional wisdom, then, it is indeed possible to hide out online.

While students’ prior educational experience and expectations certainly play a role in how they engage in online discussions, I want to focus on the relationship between online pedagogy and critical engagement. “Critical engagement” differs from simply “student engagement,” which is variously defined as student interest, time-on-task and class preparedness, or intellectual challenge (Light, 2001). By critical engagement, I mean all these definitions of student engagement, plus critical thinking, as outlined by the Critical Thinking Rubric developed at Washington State University (WSU). This rubric also plays a defining role in getting students to engage online, a point I will return to in just a moment.

What pedagogical factors foster critical engagement? That is the central research question of a qualitative study on threaded discussions recently launched at WSU. Although early findings are not yet conclusive, three factors have already emerged as crucial: assignment prompt; facilitation, and evaluation criteria.

## **Assignment**

The assignment or discussion prompt that seeds a threaded discussion needs to be open-

ended, or what Joanne Kurfiss (1988) calls “an ill-structured problem.” While the well-structured problem has a right answer, an ill-structured problem does not, generating instead arguable propositions that need to be defended, elaborated on, modified, and so forth. Students have to combine declarative knowledge (the “facts” or foundational knowledge of a discipline) and procedural knowledge, which requires applying declarative knowledge to a problem. This kind of application motivates learners because it shows them why declarative knowledge is important.

A well-structured problem, say, in a course on Nazi Germany, might ask students to discuss why the Weimer Republic failed in pre-Nazi Germany, leading to the rise of Nazism. An ill-structured problem, on the other hand, would ask students to decide if democracy could fail again, leading to a rise in nationalistic politics and imperialistic policies in the United States or elsewhere in the world today. The two assignments will elicit very different responses online. For the first, students are being asked to show they know the material in the textbook—declarative knowledge—and they will likely respond with long, content-rich but monologic posts, not unlike the kind of

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answer they might produce on a paper test in an on-site course. For the second assignment prompt, however, students will have to think critically, selecting information from the textbook that might be relevant to their arguments, even as they make connections between then and now. Further, they will have to modify and elaborate on their positions as the discussion proceeds. With the open-ended, ill-structured problem, students can't just do their homework and be done with it. They have to attend to their words for the duration of the discussion. Recursiveness and interactivity are thus built into the assignment.

### Facilitation

Facilitation is also crucial to students' critical engagement online. The role of facilitator may be played by either the instructor or a student, although the default should always be the instructor. Facilitation must also be of a certain kind. "Capping" (summing up) or evaluating students' responses can kill discussion just as surely as not participating at all. Often, instructors' postings sound suspiciously like end comments they might write at the end of students' papers, with praise, criticism, and a parting pat on the back: "Good post!" Such postings shut down discussion, as students read these comments as final evaluations. Rhetorical touches—such as differentiated subject lines, playful sarcasm, repositioning the assignment prompt—invite student engagement, if not always critical engagement. Asking questions, seeking elaboration, drawing different connections, digging up implicit assumptions—these are facilitation strategies that foster increased interaction, requiring students to think again and to think more deeply.

### Evaluation Criteria

Early findings from the WSU Threaded Discussion Study also suggest that evaluation criteria need to assess students' contributions qualitatively, not quantitatively. The typical directions for online threaded discussions—"make one initial post and two replies to others' initial posts"—actually hinder critical engagement. The common practice of requiring all students to make initial posts invites redundancy and banality; it also starts too many parallel conversations, dispersing the discussion and multiplying the information on-screen needlessly. And insofar as a course seeks students' critical engagement, the Critical Thinking Rubric developed at WSU, or versions thereof, would be most appropriate. The directions for participating and the criteria used for evaluating should be distinctly different, but at the same time, they work together to support critical engagement.

Here is an example from my own policy statement that I use for my own courses, both hybrid and distance:

### Expectations for Threaded Discussion Participation

We collaborate and construct knowledge together to achieve the course objectives primarily through Threaded Discussions (TD) based on selected readings and keyed into the course's line of inquiry. Although these are not evaluated quantitatively, the expectation is that each of us will make several postings for each TD, which will be open and active for one week. Here are some tips for making these discussions highly interactive, intellectually stimulating, and, ultimately, critically engaging:

- Post in a timely fashion. Read and post every day over the week or two that a discussion is in progress.
- When you post, start a new thread if your topic or point is indeed a new topic or point. If it isn't, post your remarks within another person's thread that is similar to your original point. Don't just agree, however; go ahead and extend, elaborate, give examples, draw comparisons, make connection to your own lived experiences.
- For each posting—including a Reply—write a new Subject Line which captures the gist of what you want to say. You may also want to make your Subject Lines catchy or humorous, although you don't have to.
- Indicate paragraphing by skipping a line between ideas. Avoid excessively large "chunks" of text online for the sake of readability. At the same time, don't break up your text willy-nilly. Your paragraphing should reflect breaks in ideas or represents sub-points.
- Don't be afraid to disagree and to challenge each other, but always be civil. Don't insult others or dismiss their views. When you realize that you heartily disagree, a good strategy is to be an active listener: that is, summarize what you "hear" others saying—without being sarcastic.
- Use emoticons (little smiley faces and versions thereof) if you think your remarks will be taken the wrong way—that is, in a hurtful, dismissive, or insulting way.

## Evaluation of Threaded Discussion

I will grade only two TDs all semester, each worth 15 points each. Which two is a mystery, although the later ones, rather than the early ones, will more likely be graded. How will you know if you're doing well enough on these TDs before I grade one? Follow my lead. I'll be participating in the same way that I expect you to.

The *evaluation criteria* (adapted from WSU's Critical Thinking Rubric <http://wsuctproject.wsu.edu/ctr.htm>) has three dimensions (see box at right):

Of the three pedagogical features crucial to critical engagement, the last—evaluation criteria—may prove to be the most important. Of course, getting students to critically engage in a course is not just a problem we encounter online. It is one we confront in every writing assignment, in every oral class discussion, in every student project. Certainly, prior schooling experiences have conditioned students' expectations of how and what they are supposed to be learning, and we are not going to change those expectations overnight. But we can begin by making our own expectations, as well as our evaluation criteria, explicit. Then we have to practice what we preach, modeling civil, civic, and critical engagement as a habit of mind, not a matter of facts.

### References

The Critical Thinking Rubric. Washington State University, <http://wsuctproject.wsu.edu/ctr.htm>, Retrieved May 21, 2003.

Kurfiss, Joanne. *Critical Thinking: Theory, Research, Practice, and Possibilities*. ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report No. 2. Washington, D.C.: Association for the Study of Higher Education, 1988.

Light, Richard J. *Making the most of college: Students speak their minds*. Harvard University Press, 2001.

### 1. Makes substantive contribution to the discussion

*substantial* = 3

- encourages further interaction by challenging, offering, or requesting further elaboration
- offers thoughtful and substantive analysis of the issue and/or other posts
- identifies the main issue and subsidiary, embedded, or implicit aspects of the issue
- identifies not only the basic issue, but recognizes the nuances of the issue

*scant* = 1

- tends to consist of non-substantive comments such as "I agree"
- summarizes rather than analyzes source material and/or other posts
- is confused or identifies a different or irrelevant issue
- misrepresents the issue or other posts

### 2. Presents the STUDENT'S OWN perspective and position relative to OTHER salient perspectives and positions

*substantial* = 3

- includes references to other posts
- demonstrates a willingness to listen to and consider other viewpoints
- identifies and explains one's own position and/or choices to the problem, drawing from experience and information not available from assigned sources
- draws explicit critical distinctions among perspectives and positions

*scant* = 1

- is self-contained with little or no reference to other posts or sources
- tends to espouse personal opinions and does not demonstrate a willingness to engage in a critical examination of alternative views
- addresses a single source or view of the argument and fails to clarify the established or presented position relative to one's own
- fails to establish other critical distinctions among perspectives and positions

### 3. Identifies and assesses the quality of supporting data/evidence and provides additional data/evidence related to the issue.

*substantial* = 3

- examines the evidence and its source; questions its accuracy, precision, relevance, completeness
- recognizes cause and effect and addresses existing or potential consequences or implications that may logically follow
- surfaces value judgments embedded in assertions and supporting data/evidence

*scant* = 1

- merely repeats information provided, taking it as truth, or denies evidence without adequate justification
- confuses associations and correlations with cause and effect or make other logical fallacies; fails to surface value judgments embedded in assertions and supporting data/evidence