

Using Discussion Boards with Undergraduate Students

If our goal is to engage students interactively – not just with the content but with each other, with us – what might be good strategies for undergrads? Well, there isn't really any one right way but here are some thoughts that might get you started. The trick is to figure out who your students are and find strategies that work with them.

So what might work for undergraduates? As an instructor, it's probably safe to say that undergrads and adults have some differences in terms of their overall development...

So let's generalize a bit about some of their characteristics:

- They are at a time in their lives where the relevant things are probably more social.
- Most have not yet fully developed higher level cognitive strategies like critical thinking.
- Peer opinion is important to them.
- They're maybe not so good working in groups.
- They're probably used to a more passive style of instruction.
- They tend to be focused on where school will get them.
- Emotionally, they tend to see issues in black and white.
- They like to challenge authority (you!).

If these are the general characteristics of undergrads, what can we do to engage them? Here are some strategies you might want to try for undergrads:

1. Try to make the discussion/content relevant

Integrate class content into what is happening in their lives today - current events, popular culture, daily experiences. Some discussion guides advocate using controversy. Be cautious about using this strategy as an issue like abortion may prove too explosive.

2. Allow for some ownership of the discussion – Find ways to let the students participate and feel like they are partially in charge. Only do this if you are comfortable with it and in ways that work for you. For example, you let them help set the ground rules for discussion or help set up forum rules, help choose a guest lecturer, facilitate discussions, choose topics, etc.

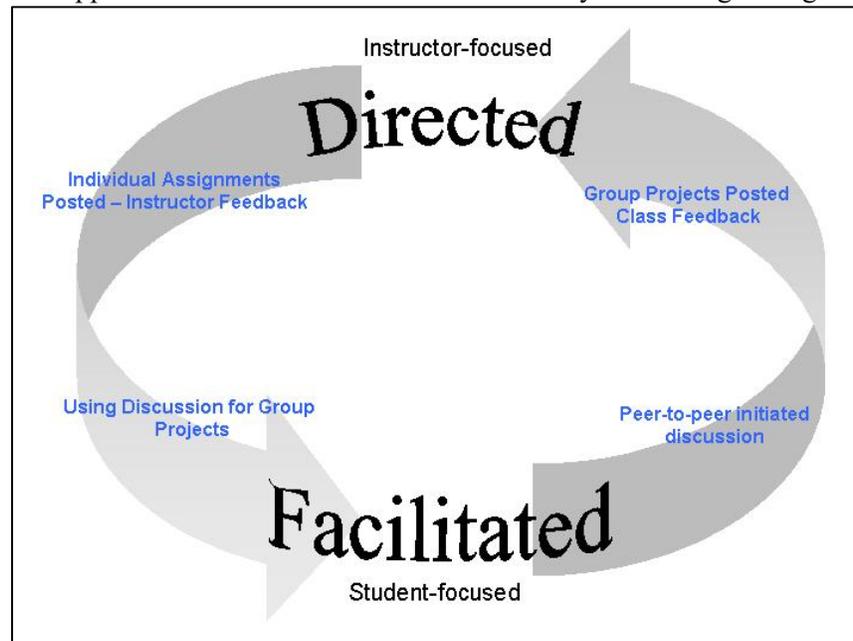
3. Start with more structured style discussion strategies and gradually lead up to a less structured, more open discussion as they become more confident and some trust has developed. Use group discussions rather than the 'big' discussion. You can do this by using small group discussions then have groups report out to larger discussion. Another idea is to start with small mini assignments until they understand the technology, then go on to more open-ended discussions. Kick things off but then be willing to try to let go a bit and let the students talk. Encourage them to talk to one another.

4. Set clear guidelines for the discussion – What is and isn't appropriate for posting, what is collaboration and what is cheating? What are appropriate ways to give feedback to each other? Make sure you tell them what your role will be, i.e., are they all talking to you or to each other. Let them know how they can expect from you in terms of responding/reading their posts. Think about what you will do if conflict arises.

5. **If you are comfortable with it, level the playing ground** – Try to be a participant as well as the leader. If you use ice-breakers, you participate in it. The aim here is to build group trust because group trust is critical for feeling comfortable and engaging in conversation. Trust must come before natural dialog, or risk-taking with opinions, etc. If you can read their small group discussions (you can), you might want to think about sharing that with them.

The point is to match the strategy with who you have in front of you. Aim to build group trust. Most importantly – do what works for you and for them.

The online discussion is a flexible communication tool that can be used in a variety of ways. The diagram below illustrates the application of online discussions for a variety of teaching strategies



Instructor-Focused vs. Student-Focused Facilitation

Example Uses of Discussion Boards

- Use it to submit, share and/or critique individual assignments (raises the overall quality of submissions).
- Invite guest lecturers to join the discussion.
- Peer-to-peer discussions around content.
- Post group projects/final projects.
- Discuss case studies.
- Use it to cut down on e-mail, i.e., ‘repeat’ questions by having a FAQ forum, then answer only once and all students can read the response.
- Student-facilitated discussion.
- Continue discussions started in class.
- Share information about other internet resources relating to class content.

Tips for Using Discussion Board

- Think twice before you post!!
- Set ground rules and guidelines ahead of time.

- Allow students to help set the guidelines and rules for the discussion.
- Encourage your students' participation.
- Listen...know when to take a back seat.
- Talk to students, not at them.*
- Start off with an ice-breaker or an easy assignment.
- Aim to make discussions relevant to student's interests.
- Set expected response times so students know when they should expect to hear from you – and when they won't hear from you.
- Start with smaller group discussions then use the larger discussion for group report-outs.
- Ask open-ended questions rather than 'yes' or 'no' questions.
- Set the tone; if you want conversation, be conversational.
- Redirect conversations to other students when appropriate.
- Discuss techniques for giving feedback with your students.
- Be sure your starter questions aren't actually assignments (unless that's what how you want to use the discussion).
- Remember that conflict is a natural byproduct of discussion and can be productive if managed and facilitated – be sure to be proactive.
- Check in with quieter students – encourage them.
- Try to foster and maintain the feeling of connectedness across the entire online course.
- Schedule a computer lab and have an orientation on discussion boards.
- Use emoticons and teach them to your students.
- Uphold the integrity of the group's trust (don't allow lurkers, etc.).*
- Consider using a rubric for grading discussions.
- Provide discussion examples to your students so they know what a substantial post looks like.

* White, Ken W. and Weight, Bob H., The Online Teaching Guide: A Handbook of Attitudes, Strategies, and Techniques for the Virtual Classroom. Allyn and Bacon 2000.

Suggested Resources

Landsberger, J. (2001). **Integrating a Web-based Bulletin Board into Your Class: A guide for Faculty**. TechTrends. Vol 45, Issue 5. pg 50-51.

Palloff, Rena M. and Pratt, Keith. **Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace: Effective Strategies for the Online Classroom**. Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1999.

Palloff, Rena M. and Pratt, Keith. **Lessons from the Cyberspace Classroom: The Realities of Online Teaching**. Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2001.

White, Ken W. and Weight, Bob H., **The Online Teaching Guide: A Handbook of Attitudes, Strategies, and Techniques for the Virtual Classroom**. Allyn and Bacon 2000.

Boettcher, Judith V. and Conrad, Rita-Marie, **Faculty Guide for Moving Teaching and Learning to the Web**. Leagues of Innovation in the Community College, 1999.

Richardson, Dr. Julie Ann, Turner, Anthony (2001). **Collaborative Learning in a Virtual Classroom: Lessons Learned and a New Set of Tutor Guidelines**. National Teaching and Learning Forum Online, Vol. 10. No. 2

Getting Help with Technology at the University of Hartford

Faculty Center for Learning Development (FCLD)

FCLD provides consulting and instructional support to faculty and staff who are using technology in teaching and learning. The FCLD Faculty Lab in Mortensen 203a is available for faculty support and use and is equipped with instructional technology- related equipment including: PCs, Macs, scanners, and projectors as well as support staff. Faculty and Staff needing support with Blackboard or other instructional technologies, should contact FCLD.

Phone: (860) 768-4661 **Email:** fcl@hartford.edu

Website: <http://www.hartford.edu/fcl>

Student Blackboard Support

The following is student support for Blackboard only. All other support technical support issues need to be addressed to the Office of Technology Services (below).

Phone: (860) 768-4636 **Email:** bbsupport@hartford.edu

FAQ/Submit a Ticket: <http://www.hartford.edu/studentbbsupport>

Information Technology Services (ITS) Help Desk

For general computer and Internet/network support questions (not directly related to the classroom but rather passwords, Internet/email problems, Banner/Self-Service, campus Facebook).

Phone: (860) 768-4357 **Email:** helpdesk@hartford.edu

Website: <http://hartford.edu/ots>

Media Technology Services (MTS)

Faculty should contact MTS for assistance scheduling or implementing classroom technology (2-Way interactive video classrooms, Smart Podiums, laptops, etc.), for setting up WebEx accounts, or for scheduling and instruction for a wide variety of media equipment and resources like LCD data projectors, CD/cassette players, TVs and VCRs, digital video, and more.

Phone: (860) 768-4357 **Website:** <http://www.hartford.edu/mts>