How Can I Use Online Discussions to Engage and Assess Students?
For Blended Learning Teachers

Choosing Between Face-to-Face and Online Discussions

Blended learning combines the best of face-to-face and online learning. When choosing whether to conduct a discussion online or in person, ask yourself these questions:

Am I trying to build interest or excitement about a topic?

If so, try a face-to-face discussion.

Am I trying to build consensus and cohesion?

Do I want students to think deeply before contributing?

If so, try an online discussion.

Am I trying to develop students’ technological skills?

Do I want students to develop or assessing students’ oral skills?

Is it important for students to learn how to react appropriately?

Am I trying to assess students’ writing skills?

Is it important to know what everyone thinks, not just a few?

If so, try an online discussion.

Is it important for students to learn how to react appropriately?

Am I trying to develop students’ technological skills?

Do I want students to question and reflect on others’ work?

Am I trying to build interest or excitement about a topic?

What Blended Learning Teachers Say

“The discussion tool has had the most profound effect on my instruction. This tool has allowed many students, who would not usually volunteer their ideas, to share what they think with their peers. Moreover, by having the students evaluate and provide constructive criticism to others, they are made to think critically and judge the information they are taking in.”
Using Online Discussions to Engage and Assess Students

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Components of a Good Online Discussion

Although there are exceptions, good online discussions often have common components. **Ask yourself these questions about your online discussions:**

- Do they start with an open-ended question which has multiple possible or correct answers?
- Do they clearly identify what students are to produce (e.g., response type or length; number of paragraphs, words, points, or sources)?
- Do they encourage students to demonstrate knowledge, critical or creative thinking, communication, and/or application of knowledge?
- Do they let students show responsibility, initiative, organization, collaboration, self-regulation, and/or independent work habits?
- Will students be assessed? If so, how, when, and with what instrument? Is this assessment for, of, or as learning?

Sample Discussion Question

**Grade 8 Science and Technology**

What are three pros and three cons of drinking bottled water? Should bottled water be banned?

As you formulate your answer, consider the health food buff who has had her tap water tested and knows that the bottled water is better quality; the environmentalists who are concerned about the plastic bottles; the owners of the water-bottling plant who have made large investments in equipment; and their workers who would lose their jobs. What might be a solution that would make everybody happy?

Read your classmates’ postings and respond to two of them. Is there anything you disagree with? If yes, why? Do you have any questions or comments? Is there anything else that you can add or that you want to know about?

Using the Discussions Tool to Assess Student Achievement

Face-to-face and online discussions can and should be assessed. In fact, *Growing Success* states that evidence of student learning should be derived from at least three sources: products, observations, and conversations. The discussions tool helps you assess student achievement because it allows you to:

- Observe student skills and behaviours, and converse with students about their products and ideas.
- Create, clarify, and post learning goals for students.
- View student work over a term or year; this ability lets you, students, and parents see how students’ knowledge and skills are developing. Students can return and refer to previous work whenever they wish.
- Provide descriptive feedback to students.
- Encourage students to view each other’s work, reflect on their own work, and provide feedback to each other.
- Permit students to use text, images, links, charts, audio, and video to express themselves.

Remember: although all discussions do not need to be assessed, all discussions you assess must be related to one or more expectations!