Fostering Student Engagement & Motivated Participation in Discussion Forums: Examples from Columbia University

Weds, November 15, 2017
2:45 PM to 3:30 PM

Matthea Marquart
OLC Accelerate Session 4253
Northern Hemisphere Foyer
FOSTERING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT & MOTIVATED PARTICIPATION IN DISCUSSION FORUMS: EXAMPLES FROM COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
Wednesday November 15, 2017 - 2:45 PM to 3:30 PM
Concurrent Session 3

BRIEF ABSTRACT

For new and experienced online instructors, or those who work with them, this session will share examples of high-participation discussion forum assignments from Columbia University, different ways to set up and facilitate discussion forums, sample grading rubrics for discussion forums, and strategies to plan for issues that may come up.
Columbia University School of Social Work’s Online Campus

http://socialwork.columbia.edu/the-student-experience/online-campus/

• Master’s of Science in Social Work
• Online & residential MSSW programs are integrated
• Primary model: Synchronous classes in Adobe Connect + asynchronous homework in Canvas
  – Courses have an instructional team: Instructor, associate/TA, live support specialist
  – Chapter describing early model: https://www.igi-global.com/chapter/instructional-strategies-for-synchronous-components-of-online-courses/148897
First graduates in May 2017

Source: Twitter #CSSW2017
### Example 1: Introductions at start of semester
- Due before the first class session, therefore need to communicate with students before the first class.
- Begin to build community, to encourage active participation throughout the semester.
- Relate to course topic.
- Consider asking students to share prior knowledge, motivations re: course.

### Example 2: Student-facilitated
“I chose student-facilitated group discussions as an assignment to encourage students to take ownership of their topic of choice by coming up with the questions and fully managing the questions and answers that keep the flow going, to encourage them to engage in critical analysis with one another and continue to bridge between synchronistic lecture and asynchronistic learning. Students really take the opportunity to use these boards to enhance their community building.” -- Elisabeth Counselman-Carpenter, LCSW, PhD

### Example 3: Application of course content to cases or problems
- Connect course content to the real world.
- Create questions that encourage sharing of relevant personal experiences.
- More interesting to read if there is no single correct answer.
- Consider student motivations, e.g. getting a job after graduation, applying course content with a future client.

### Example 4: Sharing about coursework
- Increase the audience for a final assignment, beyond only the instructor/TA.
- Satisfy student curiosity about how their colleagues approached / plan to approach the same assignment differently.
- Set clear guidelines for any peer feedback in responses; tie to course community agreements.
Sample Introductions: Building community by getting to know what we have in common

Course: Racial Identity Development (10 points)

Instructions
In this course, we are going to have some personal conversations, and we'll be coming from all sorts of different perspectives. Therefore, before we get into conversations about race, I'd like us to take a little time to connect with each other as human beings and colleagues. The goal is to start to build a supportive community.

In your discussion forum post, due on Tuesday at 11:59pm EST:
• Tell us where you're from and where you live now, and something you like about each place.
• Share 1-2 things that you care about or love, and why. This should be general enough that other people can relate.

By Wednesday at 11:59pm EST, reply to at least 3 of your classmates. In your replies:
• Share something that resonated with you about their post, or that you have in common.
• Engage with those who have responded to your post.
• Keep in mind that tone can be difficult to interpret online, so be extra careful to write your responses in a respectful tone.
Rubric: Building community by getting to know what we have in common

Course: Racial Identity Development (10 points)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Submitted your first post on time</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In your first post, answered the questions</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submitted your responses to three of your classmates on time</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In your responses, followed the instructions</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrated professionalism and a supportive tone in your language</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Points</strong></td>
<td><strong>10</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sample Student-Facilitated Discussion:

Course: Gender and Sexuality (10 points)
Instructor: Elisabeth Counselman-Carpenter

Instructions (part 1)

1. Each group should select an interesting article or multimedia resource related to their topic, and craft a discussion question (or two) to pose to the rest of the class. The questions should be aimed at helping the rest of the class critically examine your topic and prepare for the in-class presentation the following week. Design questions to encourage participants to think critically about clinical issues or skills that may influence their individual practice. Questions should be practical rather than intentionally combative or esoteric.
Instructions (part 1 continued)

Though there is no one "right way" to launch a discussion, some of the best questions meet these criteria:

- **They are open-ended:** questions that have yes/no answers ("do you agree with concept X?") or simply ask for a factual response ("what does the author say about concept X?") are not very interesting to discuss. Questions that start with "how" and "why" generally lead to more robust conversation.

- **They are critically thoughtful:** you want to get at the underlying debates and themes presented in the readings, so identifying questions that will lead to further debate is helpful. That said, please be aware of what you say and do not post discussions that are based on offensive premises, stereotypes or isms. This is a professional forum; be aware of your bias.
Sample Student-Facilitated Discussion:
Course: Gender and Sexuality (10 points)
Instructor: Elisabeth Counselman-Carpenter

Instructions (part 1 continued)

- **They encourage multiple viewpoints and lenses while allowing for some syntheses:** though you are allowed in this assignment to focus on only one reading if it inspires you in some way, I encourage you to think about the ways in which you can connect one reading to another through discussion ("how would Author A respond to the claims made by Author B?"). You may synthesize within or between weeks to help other students make connections.

- **They are relevant:** you all have a great deal of experience--from other classes, your field placements, and from other areas of life. Try to identify questions that allow your colleagues to make and share connections to their own experiences.

- **They encourage thoughtful examination of social work practices or skills.**
Sample Student-Facilitated Discussion:

Course: Gender and Sexuality (10 points)
Instructor: Elisabeth Counselman-Carpenter

Instructions (part 2)

2. **Lead the discussion around your question(s).**
   Everybody should engage in these discussions by the weekend before the live session. As your colleagues start posting in the forum, it is your responsibility to moderate responses to your question and facilitate further learning. Please note that comments that minimize, demean or lessen the voice of another participant, individual or groups of individuals are not acceptable.

I recognize that most of you have probably not facilitated an online discussion before, so here are some tips and tactics you might try:

- **Nudge toward the unknown and/or unexamined**: remember that learning happens as we explore things we don't already know. Otherwise we're just repeating ourselves. If the responses to your question(s) are didactic, encourage people to think about alternative perspectives or to provide additional illuminating examples.
- **Have back-up questions ready**: if people seem bored or unable to comment, try to dig deeper by taking the question(s) in a different direction.
- **Encourage relationships**: if you see two people who have similar or contrasting points of view, encourage them to read each others' responses and further the dialogue.
Sample Student-Facilitated Discussion:
Course: Gender and Sexuality (10 points)
Instructor: Elisabeth Counselman-Carpenter

Instructions (part 3)

3. Develop a synthesis.

Your final responsibility is to develop a brief synthesis of the discussion to share in the live session. You should integrate this synthesis into your presentation. You might include follow up discussion or an activity designed to help people extend the discussion they had prior to class.

Grading

Though you must participate each week, you will receive one individual grade based on the following criteria:

- The quality of your team’s discussion question: is it thoughtful and engaging? Does it encourage critical examination of the themes of this course?
- The facilitation of your team’s discussion: do you encourage participation and engagement?
- Participation in the other discussions: what is the quality (remember that quantity and quality are not the same thing) of the content of your participation?
Sample Application of Course Content: Job interview questions about your education
Course: Macro Community Practice (10 points)

Instructions, Part 1

Many first job interviews are now conducted via Skype. This week, you will practice answering questions for a webcam interview that apply and integrate this course’s learning. Remember that part of making a good impression via webcam is setting up your technology with good lighting, an eye-level angle, and a neutral background.

See pages 105-108 of the attached chapter for tips on setting up your webcam professionally. [attached]

Part 1: Video Post and Self-Reflection, due by Tuesday (11/22) at 11:59pm EST:

1. (In video) For step-by-step instructions on how to post a video, click HERE [linked]. Imagine that you are in a job interview (or other professional situation), and need to explain the value of your social work degree. How is your social work education relevant to the job you're seeking?
Sample Application of Course Content: Job interview questions about your education

Course: Macro Community Practice (10 points)

Instructions, Part 2

2. (In writing) Give us some context by describing the kind of job you're interested in. If you haven't decided on the type of job you'd like, you can let us know that as well. If you have a particular job in mind, you can share the job posting for extra-focused feedback.

3. (In writing) Watch your video, and reply to your post with a short self-reflection on your own video: 1st sentence: what things did you do well? (at least 2) 2nd sentence: what would you do differently? 3rd sentence: is there anything you would like feedback on from your peers? Is there anything you don't want feedback on?

Part 2: Peer Feedback, due by Saturday (11/26) at 11:59pm EST:

1. Watch the videos of at least 2 of your colleagues

2. Provide supportive feedback in bullet points. Note: you must post two bullet points of positive feedback for every one bullet point of constructive criticism.

3. Keep in mind that tone can be difficult to interpret online, so be extra careful to write your responses in a respectful tone. Remember that our community agreements include [listed].
# Rubric: Job interview questions about your education

*Course: Macro Community Practice (10 points)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Submitted your first post on time</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In your first post, shared a video of your sample job interview response, the type of job you’re interested in, and your self-reflection</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submitted your responses to two of your colleagues on time</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In your responses, shared at least twice as much positive, specific feedback as constructive criticism</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrated professionalism and community-minded supportiveness in your language</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Points</strong></td>
<td><strong>10</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sample Sharing About Coursework: Sharing and discussing executive summaries of your final papers

Course: Macro Community Practice (10 points)

Instructions

Congratulations on finishing your final papers! **This discussion forum is a chance to learn about your peers' projects.**

In your discussion forum post, due by Sunday (12/11) at 11:59pm EST:

- Attach your executive summary here, as well as any notes you'd like the class to know about your final assignment when they read your summary.

By Tuesday (12/13) at 11:59pm EST, reply to at least 2 of your classmates. In your replies:

- Share something that interested you or resonated with you, or that you liked, about their executive summary.
- Note: any feedback you give should be positive feedback - the time for constructive feedback is over.
- Engage with those who have responded to your posting.
- Keep in mind that tone can be difficult to interpret online, so be extra careful to write your responses in a respectful tone. Remember that our community agreements include [listed].
# Rubric: Sharing and discussing executive summaries of your final papers

*Course: Macro Community Practice (10 points)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Submitted your first post on time</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In your first post, attached your executive summary and any notes you’d like your readers to know before they read it</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submitted your responses to two of your classmates on time</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In your responses, shared something that interested you or resonated with you, or that you liked, about their executive summary</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrated professionalism and community-minded supportiveness in your language</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Points</strong></td>
<td><strong>10</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Contact info

Matthea Marquart, Director of Administration, Online Campus; Lecturer:
- msm2002@columbia.edu
- Twitter @MattheaMarquart

Columbia University School of Social Work:
- Twitter @ColumbiaSSW
- YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/user/columbiassw
- Livestream: https://livestream.com/columbiassw
- Online Campus: https://socialwork.columbia.edu/the-student-experience/online-campus/

http://socialwork.columbia.edu/ #OLCAccelerate
Reference:


Acknowledgements:

Columbia University’s School of Social Work, Kristin Garay, Elisabeth Counselman-Carpenter, Steven Schinke, Craig Schwalbe
Session Evaluations Contest

- Download and open OLC Conferences mobile app
- Navigate to specific session to evaluate
- Click “Evaluate Session” at the bottom of session details screen
- Complete session evaluation*

*Each session evaluation completed (limited to one per session) = one contest entry

**Five (5) $25 gift cards** will be awarded to five (5) individuals
Must submit evals using the OLC Conferences mobile app or website