

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES WITH STUDENTS ONLINE: DISCUSSIONS IN SELF-PACED COURSES

INTRODUCTION

Because students in self-paced courses can be in different lessons of the course, discussions need to be used selectively. Topic-related group discussions that semester-based courses commonly use are impractical, if not impossible, but you can still offer your students a way to practice their discussion skills, benefit from social learning, and overcome the feeling of isolation that oftentimes comes with online learning and asynchronous online learning in particular.

A caveat: Since discussion forums are public and accessible to everyone in your class, encouraging posts from students increases the possibility of exchanges that could compromise academic honesty and the integrity of assignments and exams. You may need to monitor posts closely and intervene as necessary.

A CLOSER LOOK

Student-Instructor Communication: “Ask the Instructor”

Consider using the discussion area for one-on-one student-instructor communication and invite your students to leave questions or comments for you there. If you use this feature, keep in mind that it will be important to manage student expectations: be sure to let them know when they can expect responses from you, and to manage the workload effectively, check in regularly to monitor submissions and post responses.

A related option is the virtual office hour: post your hours and then be available to answer questions in real-time.

Student-Student Communication: Bulletin Boards

Encourage student-student interaction and provide your students a place to engage with the course topics in a looser and more social format. Consider using topic-specific bulletin boards for students to talk about the following:

- Real-world applications of course content
- Personal experiences or hobbies related to course content
- Current events related to course content

Real-World Discussions and Role Plays

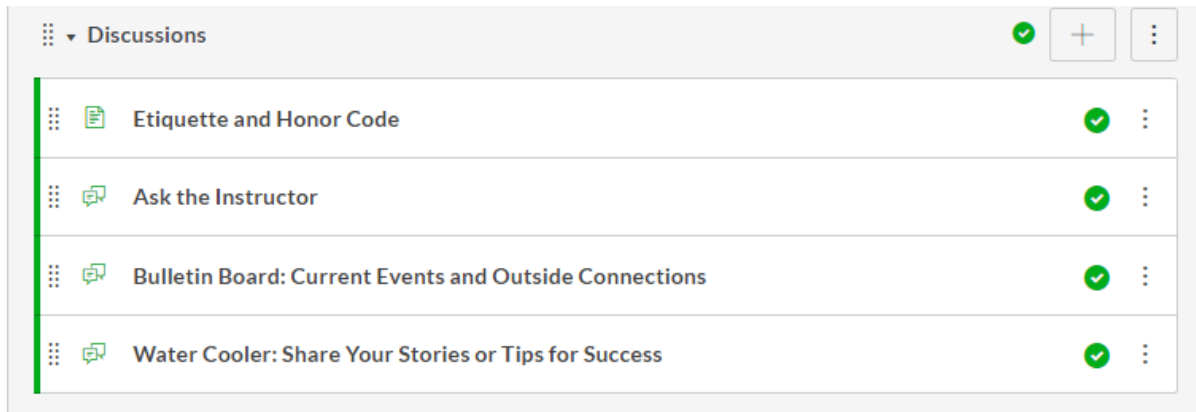
Another way to incorporate a discussion component in self-paced courses is to have students conduct a discussion or role-play outside of class and post a reflection as a graded assignment. Possible conversation partners could be friends, coworkers, classmates, or community members. Although students might not interact with their fellow online classmates, this type of assignment would still give them the benefits associated with group work. Provide discussion guidelines and parameters.



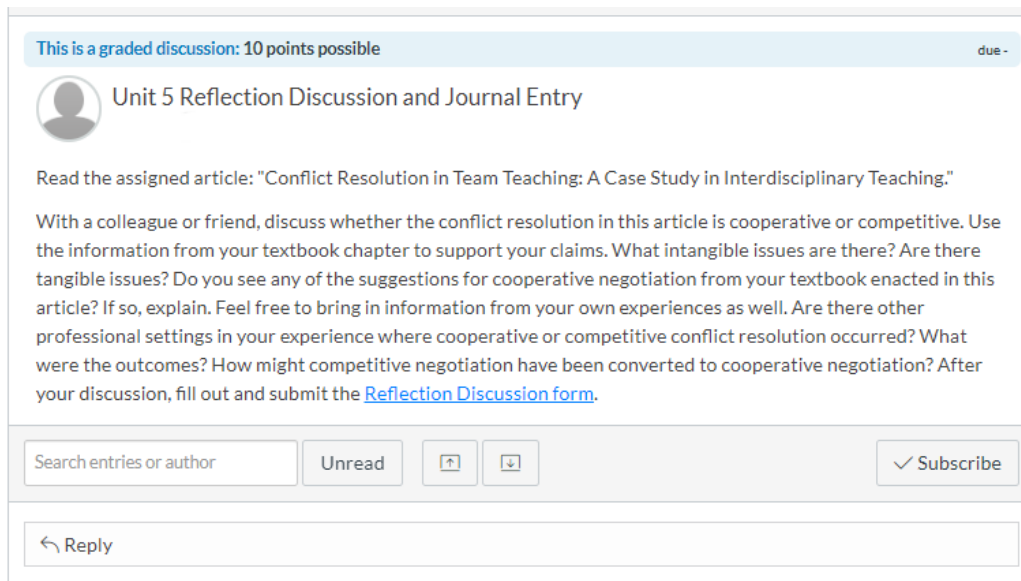
Quick Tips for Student Communication:

- Manage expectations.
- Check in regularly.
- Offer virtual office hours.

EXAMPLES



Here's an example of a real-world, role-play type of discussion. In a course on conflict management, the lesson on negotiation used the following assignment. (Note that detailed instructions for completing reflection assignments and the rubric are given in the Course Information area, the syllabus, or both, and the form mentioned at the end of the assignment provides a framework for focusing the discussion.)



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [How to Write Engaging Questions for Online Discussion Forums](#) by Jason Rhode, PhD
- [Online Discussion Board Activity Planning Worksheet](#) by the University of Calgary
- [You're Asking the Wrong Question](#) by Faculty Focus