

## **Rubrics, Roles, and Successful Online Discussions**

By Janet D. Stemwedel, Ph. D.

Online discussions can help students grapple with difficult readings and concepts, but take a large enough enrollment of students who are less than fully motivated and discussion threads can become a lifeless sequence of uninspired posts.

Not only does this rob students of the pedagogical benefits of a properly functioning discussion, but it also wears on the instructor who has to read and evaluate the discussion thread. It's in the best interests of students and instructors to deploy strategies that keep discussion threads lively rather than monotonous.

### **Pros and cons of rubrics**

Requiring discussion participation is often essential to generate critical mass for online discussions in the first place. Making discussion participation a graded component of the course pushes the students to make high-quality contributions.

Many instructors use rubrics, not only to evaluate student participation consistently, but also to communicate expectations clearly to students. For online discussions of reading assignments, my rubric identifies five areas I value (engagement with the reading, critical thinking, recognition of the larger meaning or significance, engagement with other discussants, and quality of writing). While this rubric conveys a sense of what I think makes for high-quality participation, as well as speeding the process of evaluating student contributions, it doesn't by itself lead to optimal discussions.

One could use the rubric to imagine the ideal discussant, whose every post presented a relevant quotation from the reading, gave a critical analysis of the quote, and explained its larger significance. If others had already posted to the discussion thread, this discussant would point out how the quotation and its analysis connect to a point raised by another discussant upthread.

The problem is that a discussion completely populated by this "ideal" type would be boring and unproductive. It would not identify the difficulties students are encountering with the reading or with its implications, nor address them. Yet, students often assume that they ought to make themselves look like this ideal

type in their posts, and this leads them to adopt the veneer of understanding when they, and their fellow discussants, would be better off if they identified the items that didn't make sense.

Despite what they might infer from rubric descriptions of "perfect" participation, students need to hear that there is not a single uniform model of participation to which they should strive to conform.

### **Different ways to participate well**

How do you get students to move beyond the rubric in their understanding of what makes for a good online discussion? One approach is to present them with a rogues' gallery of "roles" that can populate a discussion. These include discussants who offer important facts from the reading and bring the discussion back to the text at crucial points (the "by the book" role); who recast claims from other discussants to be sure these claims, and their implications, are clear (the "clarifier" role); who synthesize the contributions of different discussants to bring out points of agreement and disagreement (the "uniter/divider" role); who contribute real-life or fanciful examples with which to probe the ideas being discussed (the "it's kind of like . . ." role); or who fit the issues being discussed into the broader context (the "big picture" role). There isn't a canonical set of discussion roles in the pantheon, and the roles we identify are often a function of the outstanding student discussants we have seen. The fact that some of these discussants have not appreciated their own contributions to the discussions (because they didn't fully understand the reading at first or had to keep asking others in the discussion to re-express their points, for example) is all the more reason to communicate to our students the diversity of roles that, working together, make a discussion productive.

It can also be useful to point out roles that good discussants should not emulate: the minimalist who contributes only superficial comments on the reading, raising no further questions, drawing no connections, and paying no attention to other posts in the discussion; the seconder who expresses agreement with what others have posted but contributes no insight or analysis to push the discussion forward; or the text-quoter who puts out facts without any suggestion of why they matter or how they bear on the discussion that is unfolding. It seems obvious to the instructor that a string of sentences does not in itself constitute a contribution to the discussion, but sometimes students need reminding.

Describing for students the variety of roles that they might play in an online discussion helps them to see the discussion as a group undertaking whose goal is improved understanding for all the discussants. Rather than choosing an individual strategy geared only at maximizing their scores on the rubric, they start to think about how, given the roles that others in the discussion are playing, they can move the discussion forward. Moreover, they can draw on the roles to

identify useful ways of contributing to the discussion that fit with their strengths, their levels of understanding or confusion, and their conversational styles.

### **Group mechanics, not mob dynamics**

It is not enough to give students a repertoire of discussion roles; they also need a situation in which they can try different roles and see how well they work.

Practically, this means setting up online discussions with few enough students that each student can feel the effect of his or her contributions on the discussion as a whole. For a class of 40, this rules out a single discussion thread in which all must participate. (In such a mega-thread, the likelihood that the 40th student to post would carefully read the posts of the preceding 39, let alone respond to them thoughtfully, would be extremely low, thus increasing repetitive comments in the postings—not a happy situation for the instructor evaluating the thread!) Instead, dividing the class into groups of five to eight discussants makes it reasonable to expect that each discussant in a group will seriously engage with the contributions of others, and that each discussant's posts will be dealt with by the group. At the same time, in a group of this size, each discussant assumes a significant share of the responsibility for making the discussion successful.

To provide more structure for the discussion groups, I also identify distinct discussion thread duties and ask the students to take turns at them. These include kicking off the discussion and providing a summation as the discussion draws to a close, keeping track of the questions raised during the discussion and pressing the group to find ways to answer them, bringing in details from the texts that bear on the discussion, and proposing objections to arguments and claims advanced in the discussion. Assuming specific duties within the discussion makes discussants more aware of what the group is trying to accomplish, helping them better coordinate their individual contributions to accomplish this goal.

Seeing online discussions as group labors rather than individual assignments helps students participate in ways that enhance everyone's learning—and that are more enjoyable to evaluate!