

CIDR Teaching and Learning Bulletin

Information for People who Teach at the University of Washington

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Engaging Students in Discussion Online

CIDR and Catalyst have worked together with UW instructors to plan and assess the use of the EPost online threaded discussion tool in their classes. In interviews with students and consultations with instructors, we have learned that many instructors value online discussion because it encourages more students to participate and engage more deeply with course material. We have also identified key questions to help instructors take the most advantage of online discussions to promote student learning.

Setting Expectations for Online Discussions

What are your goals for asking students to participate in online discussion? For example:

- Prepare for in-class discussion (by posting questions for students to respond to prior to class)
- Identify key concepts in course readings
- Extend and apply issues introduced in course materials
- Continue in-class discussion outside of class time

To communicate your goals to students, you can:

- Include goals as part of the discussion board layout so that students see them when they log on.
- Post goals in a message to the board yourself.
- Put goals in the course syllabus or web site.
- Include specific goals in online discussion assignments.

If these expectations are not communicated to students, it's possible that they won't see the purpose of participating:

"I'm not sure what I'm supposed to be learning. A lot of postings are just post random stuff ..." (student comment)

Getting Online Discussions Started

Provide guiding questions or discussion topics, based on your goals for the online discussion, to remind students:

- *Why* you want them to use online discussion (explore new ideas, review concepts, compare experiences ...)
- *What* you want them to base their discussion on (readings, in-class discussion, personal opinion ...)
- *How* you expect them to use it (when, how often, types of postings: original vs. response ...)

Without your questions to guide the discussion, students may not be able to get a constructive discussion going:

"We need more guidance in the discussion. Most people (including myself) don't know what to write about." (student comment)

Keeping Online Discussions Going

Let students know your role in discussions. For example, will your main role be to ask questions? Actively participate? Provide summaries, in-class or online? Consider whether you want to:

- Respond to individual postings, or periodically respond to main themes in the discussion.
- Bring ideas from online discussions into class meetings.
- Ask students to provide daily or weekly summaries
- Provide examples of good and poor postings for students.
- Provide evaluative responses to student postings.

Then, make clear to students how you will participate in the discussion. For example, when will you check the board, and what kinds of responses can students expect from you?

Instructors' ongoing input can help students see the value of the discussion, which can keep them from losing interest or wondering what they're expected to learn in the discussion.

"I learned a lot from other students' postings, but the professor's involvement helped me sort out what was a valid point and what was just wrong." (student comment)

Assessing Online Discussions

What indicators can you identify in the online discussions that will tell you what students are learning, and whether or not the discussion is accomplishing what you want it to?

What feedback can you collect from students to tell you if students think online discussions are helping them learn?

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How can CIDR help?

CIDR and Catalyst have developed the *EPost Teaching Guide*:

<http://depts.washington.edu/cidrweb/EPostGuide.html>

To view a WebEd presentation on *EPost* user experience see:

<http://depts.washington.edu/webed/presentations.html>

At CIDR we can help you plan and implement your use of online discussion, and also help you assess how well it is contributing to your goals for the course. Call or e-mail to arrange an appointment with a CIDR consultant.

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This issue of the *Bulletin* was developed by Bonnie O'Dell at CIDR, with assistance from Mark Farrelly at Catalyst and Kim Emmons, Debby Hatch, and Margy Lawrence at CIDR. Italicized quotes are based on UW student comments.

To set up your own EPost discussion board, go to the Catalyst Web site at <http://catalyst.washington.edu>

The *Bulletin* provides people who teach at the University of Washington with *brief* descriptions of current topics related to teaching and learning in higher education. Previous issues include:

- Developing a Teaching Portfolio
- Classroom Assessment of Teaching and Learning
- Preparing for the First Day of Class
- Classroom Observation
- Designing a Course
- TA Preparation Reconsidered
- Teaching through Discussion
- Transforming a Course
- Helping Student Writers Succeed
- Teaching a Service Learning Course
- Teaching Freshman Interest Groups
- Information Literacy: The Library Connection
- More and Better Class Participation
- Teaching, Learning, and Technology in a UW Classroom
- Helping Students Read Well
- Mentoring
- What Helps Students Learn?
- Inclusive Teaching
- Talking with Colleagues about Teaching
- How Do We Change the Way We Teach?
- Problem Solving in Groups

Issues of the *Bulletin* are available at: <http://depts.washington.edu/cidrweb/TeachingLearningBulletin.html>

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Questions for CIDR?

If you have questions about teaching and learning, or you would like to find out more about working with CIDR, you can call us at 543-6588, send a message to info@cidr.washington.edu, or visit our web site: <http://depts.washington.edu/cidrweb/>



- Would you like to be notified by e-mail when future issues of the *Bulletin* are posted to the CIDR web site?
- Do you have questions about teaching that you would like to see addressed in a future *Bulletin*?
- Has this issue of the *Bulletin* been helpful for you?



Please let us know by sending a message to info@cidr.washington.edu