Western Centre for Teaching and Learning

Fostering Participation in Online Discussions

This resource was designed to offer TAs some guidelines and suggestions for facilitating equitable and productive participation in your online tutorial or class.

Set the Tone

Participation Rubrics

A participation rubric can provide useful clarification for students on the role of participation in your classroom, and the qualities of useful participation. Always check with the primary instructor before creating a participation rubric, as they may have specific ideas about how they would like participation evaluated and that will significantly inform your rubric design. If they don't yet have specific ideas about how they would like participation evaluated, consulting them on a participation rubric can be a great way to start the discussion about the role participation plays in the class.

Questions to ask when creating a participation rubric

- Quantity:
    - How frequently do I want students to participate?
    - Are there multiple ways in which students can participate (eg. written, oral, public, private)? Do I expect students to participate in more than one way?
- Quality:
    - What level of preparation do I expect from my students?
    - What kind of understanding do I expect students to demonstrate?
    - How far off-topic can conversation go before it is no longer considered useful participation?
- Tone:
    - How do I expect students to show respect for one another's thoughts and experiences?

Sample participation rubrics:

[Sample Rubric – Class Participation Performance Elements & Levels Inadequate](from SMU)

[Rubric for Assessing Student Participation](from Eberly Centre)

Community Agreements or Group Contracts

Explore creating Community Agreements to guide participation.
Community agreements, sometimes called group contracts, are guidelines for participation and the classroom environment that are created collectively with your students. They often cover what both students and instructors will do their best to do to ensure a productive and safe classroom environment. For example:

- Students will do their best to complete the weekly readings before class.

- The instructor will strive to upload all necessary readings at least one week prior to the class for which students will need to read them.
- The instructor will provide students with at least one week's notice if an assigned reading requires content warnings, so that students can make whatever preparations they feel necessary to engage with the material
- Students are allowed to disagree with concepts discussed in class and with arguments presented by their classmates, but will do their best to ground their critiques in evidence and reason, and to critique the argument rather than critiquing the person presenting the argument.
- Students will not engage in hate speech, personal attacks, or offensive language either in our synchronous meetings or in or online discussion forum.
- The instructor will actively moderate the online discussion board to ensure any personal attacks or offensive language are taken down promptly.

Creating these rules in collaboration with students can increase student "buy in" and encourage students to voice what they need – or what they imagine others may need – to fully participate in the class. As such, community agreements can be an excellent opportunity to begin discussing how equitable participation might work in your course. It can also be a platform for students to identify potential access barriers in their course material. Questions to discuss as a class might include:

- How do we want to "call in" someone who is taking up space such that others are unable to participate?
- Is there a preferred method for asking questions anonymously?

Use the Tools

Discussion Boards

Discussion boards and similar forms of asynchronous discussion can be used in a variety of ways, ranging from a place to post formal, graded reflections on readings or class topics to a place to pose quick questions about course content. Each board will require a different kind of instructor presence. For example, providing encouraging and public feedback to some of the early posts in a discussion board where students write formal, graded reflections, can help model the tone you are looking for in posts and encourage students to participate early. On the other end of the discussion spectrum, if you have set up a Q&A board for your tutorial with the goal of getting students to answer one another's questions and thus become more self-directed learners, you will want to keep an eye on the board to correct any misinformation, but for the most part you will be playing a background role. A final consideration in setting up and moderating asynchronous discussion boards is if and how you can allow for multiple modes of participation. Do contributions have to be written or can they be verbal, using a tool like VoiceThread.

- How to Create Forums and Topics within Owl
- Tips for Mastering Online Discussion Board Facilitation*

*Page 4 of this resource contains a helpful table for building discussion board questions that align with each phase of Bloom's taxonomy of learning and page 13 outlines common pitfalls of online discussion boards and how to address them

Breakout Groups

When holding synchronous sessions, breakout rooms can provide space for students to work through exercises or discuss topics in small groups, without the pressure of speaking in front of the whole class. This helps ensure that all your students reap the benefits of active learning, not just those who are comfortable speaking in public. Ways to help keep your breakout rooms on track can include providing students with a digital handout to fill in as they discuss, or a collaborative online document to record their ideas to. You may also want to use the "broadcast messages to breakout rooms" feature in Zoom to tell students how much time they have left or to suggest what part of the activity they should be working on at the halfway point. Randomly generated breakout rooms can help expose students to the ideas of peers they might not otherwise interact with one on one, and so can be a great tool for quick small group discussions, while assigned breakout rooms (where you control who is in each group) can be a space for students to collaborate on longer-term group work in class.

- How to create and use [Breakout Groups in Blackboard Collaborate](#)
- How to create and use [Breakout Groups in Zoom](#)

Western Supported Polling Apps

With a bit of planning, polls can be a quick way of gauging student engagement and understanding without taking up too much class time. They can be synchronous (in your Zoom session using the Zoom poll feature or similar Western supported polling apps) or asynchronous (built into your OWL site). Consider whether you want your poll to be anonymous, to give you a sense of the class's understanding as a whole, or whether you want names linked to answers so you can follow up with students individually or in small groups.

[Polls Tool - OWL - Western University](#)

[iClicker Cloud - iClicker Cloud](#)

Tips from other TAs

One way to foster participation in distance learning is to provide some social presence by creating avenues by which you can get to know students and students can get to know each other.

An interdisciplinary group of teaching assistants was asked to provide one or two questions they thought would be useful to ask students in an introductory discussion board or "get to know you quiz". Below are the questions they came up with. Note how they range from finding out what students might already know about the course content or what misconceptions they may have, to finding out how to best engage students by relating materials to their daily lives, to asking students to diagnose how they

best learn.

Discipline	Questions
Sociolinguistics	1. Tell me something you remember learning about "good" English grammar 2. What, if any, kind of value judgements do you recall attaching to "good" v. "bad" grammar
Theatre	1. Which, if any, plays did you have to read in secondary school? 2. Tell me about an assignment you've had to do (for any course) that was particularly memorable. What made it an especially good or bad experience?
English	1. Tell me about an assignment you really enjoyed doing or that you were particularly proud of?
Psychology	1. Tell me one thing you've learned about psychology from pop culture. 2. Do you think this is based in science or pseudoscience (is it a real scientific finding)?
Biology	1. What is your favorite organism and why? 2. What was your favorite topic you studied in high school biology/chemistry?
Linguistic/Cultural Anthropology	1. Tell us one instance in which you've noticed a cultural boundary in group communication. 2. If you like, while introducing yourself, share something about the meaning of your name in your linguistic and cultural background or about the meaning of your name for you personally.
Geography	1. Where is your favourite place/space and why?
Philosophy	1. Have you taken a philosophy course before? 2. What do you think is an example of a philosophical question? Come up with your own philosophical question as an example!
Kinesiology	1. What is an example of a health behaviour you have tried changing before? 2. What is your favorite sport or favorite kind of activity? What aspect of that activity do you enjoy the best?
Medical Biophysics	1. What was your favourite experiment you've seen in physics in high school? 2. Do you like the "bio" or "physics" part of biophysics?
Social Work	1. In your opinion, what does it mean to "help people"? 2. What are examples of how Social Work has (or hasn't) "helped people"?
Statistics	1. What do you initially think of when you heard the word "statistics"? 2. What are some common stats that you've read or heard about in the past (e.g., newspaper, social media, television, etc.)?