

Provide Feedback Strategically in Online Discussions

Striking a balance between too much and too little feedback in discussion forums can be challenging. Some instructors feel that jumping in too early with comments, observations, and other feedback dominates and skews the dialogue. Other instructors share that it is hard to know just what to say, when, and to whom. Here are some typical questions instructors have about providing feedback in discussion forums:

- How early in the week should I make comments about student postings?
- How expansive should comments be early in the week? Later in the week?
- Should I respond to individual students' posts or to the group as a whole?
- How do I coach and mentor students, but not jump in too quickly?

In making these decisions, consider the purpose and timing of your feedback (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016). Although there are no definitively right or wrong answers to these questions, below are some basic guidelines.

Purpose of feedback	Examples
<p>Acknowledge and encourage. Early in the discussion forum, acknowledge the first few replies and encourage others. Simple acknowledgments communicate that you are present and following the conversation. An occasional question or comment can also be reassuring. Consider using emoticons for head nodding or saying “uh-huh” or “keep going.”</p>	<p><i>“Scott, thanks for getting us started this week!”</i></p> <p><i>“Bruno, your comment on the speaker’s position is taking us down an interesting path. I look forward to seeing where it takes us!”</i></p> <p><i>“Christi, thank you for stating your position so clearly!”</i></p>
<p>Prompt and confirm deeper engagement and thinking. The goal of instructors’ feedback in the midst of a discussion forum is to both ensure the accuracy with which students understand the core concepts and encourage the application of those core concepts to a variety of contexts. This is, therefore, a good time for instructors to question, to challenge, to suggest patterns, and to ask follow-up questions. You can use the announcement function to provide feedback to the full group that summarizes some of the discussion’s themes, to ask questions that prompt deeper thinking, and to remind students of upcoming discussion board deadlines. You can</p>	<p><i>“Rena, your insights on the challenges of leadership in business suggest we might see similar patterns in other professions. Could you expand on your thinking in this area?”</i></p> <p><i>“Thank you for a thought-provoking discussion so far! Several of you have commented that you disagree with the author’s claim that managers should only spend a few minutes each day with their direct reports. I’d like to hear more about what managerial strategies you think would be more effective and why.”</i></p>

<p>also post feedback to individual students or create a new thread and invite responses from the whole group.</p>	
<p>Prompt student-to-student interaction. Instructors’ feedback can help to foster a dynamic learning community by encouraging students to reflect and comment on similarities and contrasts in the thinking or experiences of others.</p>	<p><i>“Andrew, have you thought about how your experience might relate to Ming’s post?”</i></p> <p><i>“José, how would you compare your interpretation of young Scout’s behavior in To Kill a Mockingbird with Neela’s interpretation? What do you think the author intended and why?”</i></p> <p><i>“Julie, as you have noted, MaryAnn’s perspective on this issue is quite different than yours. Are there any elements in her perspective with which you might agree?”</i></p>
<p>Provide expertise. When students begin to use the discussion forum, allow time for reflection and the exploration of ideas. Toward the middle or near the end of the discussion forum, students need to hear an expert voice that confirms their thinking and helps them to integrate core concepts and understandings. Offer that direct feedback to the full group via an announcement, a new discussion thread, or an email.</p>	<p><i>“Our readings from the last week have highlighted the many new applications of DNA analysis, including tracking down poachers using rare-animal DNA. These research techniques are being applied in many other fields. Your discussion posts indicate that you understand the processes for extracting DNA and analyzing it. I encourage you to read my blog post about the newest applications of this technique.”</i></p>
<p>Wrap up the forum and bridge to the next. Instructors should close out a discussion forum with a post. It serves two purposes: (a) to wrap up and to summarize the thoughts and ideas generated by the group and (b) to provide a bridge and transition to the next set of learning experiences. Instructors should direct their feedback to the full group via an announcement, a new discussion thread, or an email.</p>	<p><i>“We have explored a number of models of technology adoption. Some technologies survive, others don’t, and others evolve. Let’s take those principles and models forward next week as we examine potential future technologies using AI.”</i></p>

Reference

Boettcher, J. V., & Conrad, R.-M. (2016). *The online teaching survival guide: Simple and practical pedagogical tips* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.