

Writing Matters



“But I Don’t Have Anything to Say.”

More often than not, faculty members teach the classes they do because that field or area is interesting to them. We dig into our chosen fields because they hold our attention. We lecture about, plan about, and write about the content of our courses because we choose to do so. Our students, on the other hand, might not possess that same level of interest in the subjects covered in their classes. For many students, your/my class may simply be a means to an end, a mere bump in the road on the way to receiving a degree or diploma. However, we all know that learning—true learning—increases as student engagement (interest) increases. The level of interest in your subject that comes naturally to you must be created and fostered in your students. If you simply ask them to respond to content that does not inherently interest them, they will either stare blankly at you or reply with honesty that they have nothing to say. Help them have something to say by creating engagement and interest in your classes’ content!

Using Discussion Boards

One technique to create and foster student engagement in your class content is to create an online discussion board. Even if your class is seat-based and traditional, the technique of using Blackboard to create a discussion through writing can be useful.

The Student’s Perspective

Students who may be timid or unwilling to speak up in class may very well feel more comfortable expressing their thoughts online. While it isn’t an anonymous venue, it does give these students a chance to think through, revise, and edit their contributions

before submitting them.

For all students, it gives them an opportunity to work completely through their thoughts. The act of writing challenges students to put definite, concrete words to the more abstract, fluid thoughts they have. Through this process, they truly learn the material in a way that simply talking about it cannot provide.

Through an online discussion board where everyone is required to participate and all posts are made public, students can gain a better sense of each other. This situation can create a sense of community and understanding that may

not emerge in a classroom where a few students continually dominate discussion times.

The Teacher’s Perspective

In setting up a discussion board, keep in mind that many of our students are comfortable in an electronic environment. However, there are those who are still intimidated by the world of computers. Be sure to walk students through the necessary steps to participate in the discussion.

In the practical walk through, you can also create a model for the discussion response you want to see from students.

Be clear on your expectations as you create this model in front of the students. Let them know how they will be graded on their discussion submissions. Does spelling matter? Grammar? Word count? Complete sentences and paragraphing? Show students what you want to see.

A final practical consideration is to require all students to respond. For example, if you present the initial query to begin the thread, you could require all students to respond to the initial question. Then, you can add one more step and require students to respond to at least one other student’s comments. This can help

**Man’s mind - stretched to a new idea - never goes back to its original dimensions.
—Oliver Wendell Holmes**

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MAKE THE ANNOUNCEMENT! FOURTH ANNUAL WAC ESSAY AWARDS

Your students could win cash for the essays they write for your classes!

Any essay written by an SCC student in an SCC class (Summer 2011-Spring 2012) is eligible! Research and non-research categories are offered.

CASH PRIZES in each category! 1st = \$200, 2nd = \$100, 3rd = \$50

See the WAC website for entry forms and complete rules: www.southwesterncc.edu/wac

Using Discussion Boards (cont'd)

forge that sense of community mentioned earlier; the discussion board becomes a shared learning experience.

Finally, participate in the discussion yourself! Respond to student comments, present your own questions and thoughts. By becoming an active member of the discussion board, you

model to students the processes and the critical thinking that you want them to undertake.

The ultimate goal is that, with the help of an online discussion board, we will be able to create in our students a deeper level of interest and engagement in our class content. With that kind of motivation, our students can truly learn.



A screen shot of a sample discussion on Blackboard showing the initial query at the top and responses descending below it.

Learning without thought is labor lost.
—Confucius