Online Discussion Boards & Professor's Presence
10 Principles & 51 Strategies

Adapted from *The Professor's Manual* by Victoria Nesnick, Ed.D.

*"Discussion boards are often viewed as the heart of online courses, and for good reason;
the students can interact with one another 24/7, sharing, debating, and offering ideas, insights
suggestions, and information that stimulate the learning process."* ~Errol Craig Sull

*"Establishing presence is the first order of business in an online class,
and the ability of the instructor to do so effectively,
as well as to be able to encourage its development among the students,
is one measure of instructor excellence online."* ~Rena M. Palloff & Keith Pratt

The following research-based guiding principles and strategies can help you create and maintain A) your "presence in class" and, B) a relevant and enriching discussion board in which students participate thoughtfully and frequently.

DISCUSSION BOARD BENEFITS

1. **The Discussion Board Principle:**
   An effective discussion board provides opportunities for participants to:
   A) learn independently and collaboratively within a community;
   B) be actively, rather than passively engaged in their learning;
   C) communicate with each other, to have a voice, be "heard" on every assigned topic, and test out ideas;
   D) teach and learn from each other;
   E) develop critical thinking skills;
   F) formulate and articulate well developed responses prior to sharing them;
   G) develop written skills;
   H) develop leadership skills;
   I) put their thoughts, efforts, and results in perspective with peers;
   J) practice educational setting netiquette (Internet etiquette), which can differ in social settings;
   K) reflect and share a synthesis of their learning and its value;
   L) build consensus, come to an agreement on a topic; and
   M) work together to create a product.

   Strategy #1: Establish guidelines and monitor them regularly.
   Strategy #2: Contact students privately regarding inappropriate responses.
   Strategy #3: Implement Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning and Knowing.
   Strategy #4: Create interesting, perhaps controversial, questions that encourage varied perspectives. Avoid asking over-whelming questions.

   Strategy #5: Incorporate digital tools that require students to be active, rather than passive, learners.
   Strategy #6: Keep topics open for continued discussion to avoid students seeking a final answer early on.

CHALLENGES

2. **The Expectation Principle:** Student learning and achievement are enhanced, and their learning anxiety reduced, when they know what is expected of them, what they can expect from each other, and what they can expect from you.
   Strategy #7: Make expectations explicit, perhaps via a scoring rubric, regarding:
   A) the length of a post (word count);
   B) level of formality (informal but not colloquial is customary);
   C) the frequency of responses; and
   D) required number of references.
   Strategy #8: Provide sample responses; include justification for your viewpoint.
   Strategy #9: Provide naming conventions, topic/subject lines to help manage messages.
   Strategy #10: Tell students the days of the week you will participate in the discussion board.
   Strategy #11: If appropriate, assure students that you read every post, but may not respond to each one.
   Strategy #12: Inform students of your virtual office hours, if available.

3. **The Emulate Principle:** Through imitation, we strive to match or surpass the behavior of others.
   Strategy #13: If you want your students to end their post with a summary statement and/or advancing question, inform them of such and construct your

   post in that manner. This will help reduce possible writing anxiety.

4. **The Immediate Response Principle:** Responding immediately to students' posts can stifle the discussion. Students will likely wait for your reply instead of responding to one another.
   Strategy #14: Post your reply only after the first few students have posted theirs.
   Strategy #15: Remember: "An overly active facilitator can discourage and squelch student participation."
   **Strategy #16:** Avoid dominating, or constantly hovering over the discussion.

5. **The Side Conversation Principle:** Discussion topics should fortify the core/primary topic of the lesson. Permitting students to digress diminishes its impact. Derailed discussions can detract from the intended learning and have a negative impact on the discussion and potentially the entire course.
   Strategy #17: When veering off-topic, redirect it with, "Let's get back on topic."
   Strategy #18: Create a virtual student lounge for students to post their non-related discussions.
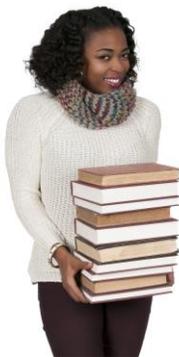
THE PROFESSOR'S PRESENCE

6. The Professor's Presence Principle: *Online professor's presence* is defined as his/her responsiveness to students who are separated by time and space. It's the professor's high degree of visibility, connectedness, and engagement in meaningful dialogue and interaction with students. In other words, students feel that their professor is paying attention to them and to their learning needs.

Research indicates that a professor's positive presence in a course, is a strong, positive determinant in students':
   A) motivation to learn,
   B) discussion board participation,
   C) satisfaction with the course,
   D) level of productivity,
   E) success in the course, and
   F) retention in the course.

7. The Lack of Presence Principle: Students who don't feel their professor is present in the course, will likely disengage.
Strategy #19: Make your presence known throughout your course, via the following guiding principles and strategies.

8. The Self-Introduction Principle: Beginning a course with self-introductions helps to create a sense of presence and community.
Strategy #20: Model the self-introduction process by sharing pertinent information about yourself, e.g., your academic background and professional goals. Ask students to share specific, as well as optional, information about themselves.
Strategy #21: Humanize/Personalize your self-introduction by providing opportunities for students to see and hear you, e.g. post a 2-minute welcome, self-introduction, and/or a recent photo of you engaging in your favorite hobby. Ask student to post their photos.

Strategy #22: Connect with each student by responding to his/her self-introduction, and perhaps ask specific, engaging questions.
Strategy #23: Encourage students to respond to one another's introductions.
Strategy #24: Infuse purposeful audios and videos throughout your course so students become accustomed to your voice and personality.
Strategy #25: Personalize your responses via live weekly chats (Adobe Connect software), where students submit typewritten questions and you respond via a microphone.
Strategy #26: Create a brief podcast, e.g., Audacity, which is free software to record voice presentations.
Strategy #27: Add narration to your PowerPoint Presentations.
Strategy #28: Send out a weekly, Monday morning e-mail.
Strategy #29: Send out weekly Friday announcements or e-mails summarizing the week's work/activity.
Strategy #30: Consistently monitor the discussion board; respond to questions and acknowledge, confirm, or correct students' postings.
Strategy #31: Include sincere support and encouragement, especially at the start of the semester.
Strategy #32: Ask for, and respond to, student feedback about the course.

9. The Icebreaker Principle: Ice breakers, which are fun, informal, getting-to-know-you activities, help a class see one another as individuals with valuable experiences. Ice breakers help build a sense of community.
Strategy #33: Use ice breakers, (aka warm-ups) on the first day of class and as a lead-in to subsequent lessons.

DISCUSSION BOARD STRATEGIES

10. The Discussion Board Structure Principle: The way the discussion board is structured influence how and to what level students interact with each other and with their professor. Implementing specific strategies can empower students to advance the discussion.

Module Beginning

Strategy #34: At the beginning of the module/lesson, ask students to post the first two parts of the KWL Process: what they **k**now and what they **w**ant to learn about the topic. Remind them that at the

end of the module they will be asked to complete part three, what they **l**earned.
Strategy #35: Ask students to brainstorm the topic without evaluation.
Strategy #36: Ask students to pose topic related, thought-provoking questions
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Mid-Module

Strategy #37: Ask students to respond to questions by referencing the assigned or optional reading(s) or other resources.
Strategy #38: Ask students to share their topic-related experiences.
Strategy #39: Ask students to submit a role-playing post, written from the perspective of a specific current, historical or fictional character.
Strategy #40: Ask students to provide an alternative, or conflicting perspective that differs from the current dominating point of view.
Strategy #41: Ask students to suggest a Web field trip and accompany it with exploration guidelines.
Strategy #42: Engage the class in problem-solving.
Strategy #43: Engage the class in a case analysis.
Strategy #44: Ask the class to predict a different outcome for the case analysis, and list three situations that could have changed the results.
Strategy #45: Engage students in a class debate, followed by a class consensus building activity. Debates provide and encourage opportunities for students to think critically and to organize their thoughts clearly, cohesively and convincingly.
Strategy #46: Ask students to contribute to the course webliography (a bank of credible resources).
Strategy #47: Ask students to convert the webliography into an annotated webliography (includes usefulness).
Strategy #48: Create a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section and update throughout the course.
Strategy #49: Create a Focus on Current Events section, where students can read or listen to news stories then discuss their views.

Module Ending

Strategy #50: Ask students to complete their KWL post.
Strategy #51: Ask students to "Summarize to Internalize," which helps them convert their short-term to long-term memory.