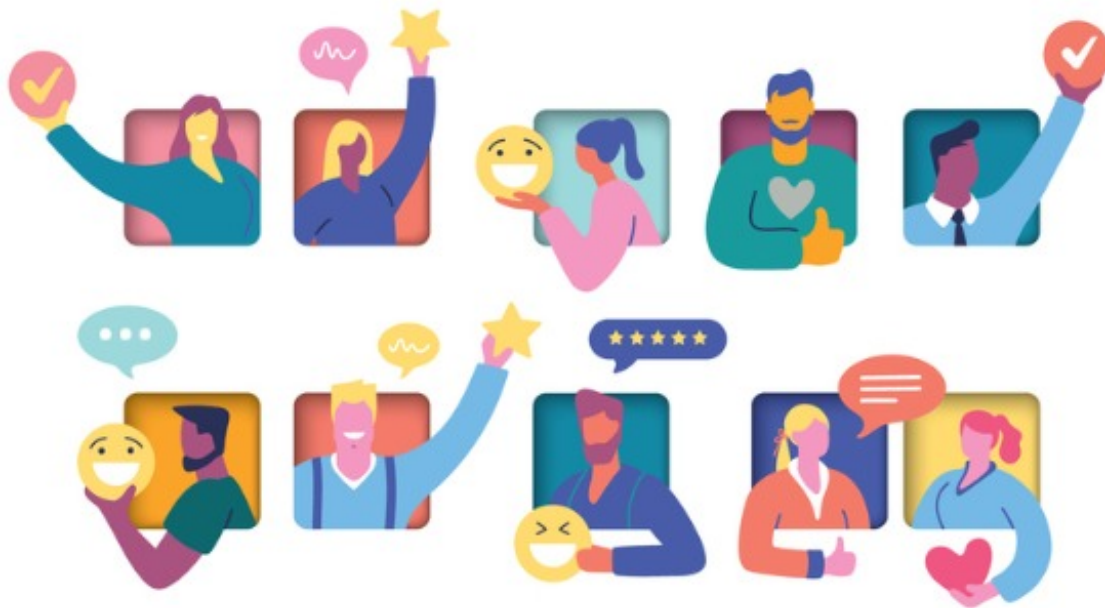


Five Ways to Promote Student Autonomy in Online Discussions

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“Write an initial post and then reply to two of your classmates.” These are the standard requirements for students participating in online course discussions. Discussions in an online course play a vital role in creating substantive interactions, aiming to capture the spirit of discourse in face-to-face settings. This, however, can look and feel like busy work, making the purpose of online discussions unclear to students.

The standard blueprint is safe but has been exhausted. “Initial posts” can be counterintuitive—in essence, they require students to complete small writing assignments individually before giving other students feedback on their work (Lieberman, 2019). How can we think outside of the box of posting and replying when it comes to these discussions? One way is to use online discussions as an opportunity to promote student autonomy and ask students to be active participants not only in how they respond to class discussions, but how they initiate them. Here are five considerations for promoting student autonomy while also breaking the online discussion mold:

1. Ask your students to help shape discussion requirements.

Your syllabus should outline the importance of discussions in your online course and the learning objectives they align with. You could ask your students to offer feedback (perhaps using the survey tool in the course LMS or during an initial synchronous session) on this area of the syllabus and allow them to contribute to what class discussions will look like and what the requirements will be.

Here are some questions you can ask yourself to help guide your thinking: Are your students comfortable knowing they've met specific requirements (like posting once and replying twice)? Do your students feel confident in their ability to know when they've contributed to class discussions in a meaningful way? Would students like discussions to include the entire class or would it be helpful to break discussions down into smaller groups? What criteria do they think needs to be met for a discussion post (and replies) to count as an exemplary post? Discussing with your students the ways they will interact with course material and their classmates, as well as what standards of performance they should be held to, is a worthwhile way to promote student autonomy.

2. Offer choice in discussion prompts.

Students are “more likely to pursue their work (and find meaning in it) when they are tracking down the questions that interest them, rather than the ones you have set for them” (Darby & Lang, 2019, p. 161). Another way to promote student autonomy through your online discussions is to give your students multiple prompts to choose from, and ask them to respond to one. This way, students won't feel forced to write about something they aren't interested in, and they can identify the material and ideas that interest them most. Offering multiple prompts can also prevent the discussion from becoming an echo chamber (depending on the size of your class, there might only be so much ground to cover in response to a single question). To take this method further, you might ask students to submit their own questions and then select a handful to use every week. Provide students with examples of purposeful questions to model along with a guide or rubric.

3. Let students choose how to reply.

Move away from standard written replies and allow your students to engage in discussions by recording audio replies, video replies, or short multimedia presentations. For example, Canvas has a built-in feature which allows students to record or upload media directly in discussion replies, and there are other external tools, like VoiceThread, that allow students to center the discussion around digital media and artifacts. This approach brings autonomy to the forefront, allowing students to draw on their strengths by responding in a way that suits them best. Video discussions have also been shown to foster higher levels of social presence more than text-based discussions (Clark, Strudler, & Grove, 2015).

4. Give students an option between synchronous and asynchronous discussions.

While your synchronous class meetings might not be mandatory for online students, you could consider giving students a choice between replying to discussions asynchronously or attending a synchronous web conferencing session (e.g., Zoom or Blackboard Collaborate). This is a great way to cater to students who like the spontaneity and organic nature of face-to-face discussions. You could also record the session and then share it with the rest of the class so no one is left out of the learning opportunities these sessions provide.

5. Offer alternatives to online discussions.

Discuss with your students whether they are interested in alternative methods of interaction. This could include something like collaborating on annotations using a tool like Hypothesis, or creating a Google Doc of shared notes. You could also give students the opportunity to request discussion areas in the LMS where they can talk about readings or pose questions without the constraints of a formal discussion or the pressure of being graded.

Being open to student input in how online discussions are driven will help you promote student autonomy while encouraging students to engage with the course material and their classmates in meaningful (dare we say authentic?) ways. By working to give students more choices when it comes to online discussions, we can move past the repetitive “I agree” to more deliberate and purposeful interaction.

Bios:

Cassandra Sardo is an instructional designer in the Office of Digital Learning at the New Jersey Institute of Technology.

Justin York, PhD, is an instructional design coordinator in the Center for Innovation in Teaching & Learning at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

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