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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Using Instructional Prompts for Online Learning

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The greatest potential of the online learning environment is its capacity to foster high levels of interactive learning that lead to “deep understanding.” The instructor’s role is critical to making this happen. The manner and frequency of the instructor’s response to students in the discussion forums is what tends to determine the quality of the learning experience.

Instructional Responses

Your ability to provide effective instructional feedback on your courses discussion forums will be the key to successful student learning. For effectiveness, instructors should minimize non-instructional responses and maximize instructional prompts. While your instructional prompts will be in response to an individual student’s post, it should serve the purpose of moving the discussion along for the class as a whole.

Pay close attention to your student’s posts. If a student’s response is correct, give a short, overt affirmation. If a student’s FORMAT in responding is incorrect, say so and allow the student to correct the post. If a student’s CONTENT response is incorrect (factually wrong, reflects a misunderstanding), provide corrective feedback.

When reviewing your students’ responses, judge critically. Look for correct responses and expected incorrect response and use them as opportunities for instructional prompts. Allow time for students to think about and compose responses to complex questions. Use student responses as opportunities to refer the class members to readings or instructional content.

INSTRUCTIONAL PROMPTS

Instructional prompts are those instructor responses that help the students move toward “deep understanding” of the course concepts. Here are eight types of instructional prompts you can use when responding to student posts online. These prompts are directly correlated to facets of critical thinking.

Critical Thinking Prompts

Why do you say so? Where else might that idea apply? Is that your opinion, or did you overhear that? What might be the consequences of that action? What might someone else say about that? What would that take? How did you arrive at that opinion?

Elaboration Prompts

Could you go into that in more detail? I would expand that idea by saying Who can expand on that idea from your own context/experience? I’m not sure now that applies. Can you build on that idea more?

Clarification Prompts

What exactly do you mean? Do I understand you to mean . . . ? Please provide an example to help us understand your point of view. Can you provide a short definition for how you are using that term?

Comparison Prompts

That’s an interesting statement. How does that compare with what was previously said? With what the author of the text claimed? I might compare that with Do you think that’s a fair comparison? I see the following similarities in the ideas presented so far What others do you see?

Contrasting Prompts

How would you contrast your idea to the one that (name of other) gave previously? In contrast to your statement, I think I see that idea as different from his/her’s in these ways How does your interpretation contrast with the author’s (with another student)? Can you offer a contrasting view of opinion?

Justification Prompts

How would you defend that statement against . . . ? What assumptions are you basing that on? Tell me why you think that idea/solution would work.

Evaluation Prompts

What is your reaction to that idea? My reaction to that/your idea is What do you think of that idea? Tell me why you think your idea/solution is better.

While these prompts also work in the classroom environment, the immediacy of the classroom discussion and the limitations of time constraints make it a challenge for a teacher to engage in deep learning dialogue. The online environment provides the instructor with the luxury of analyzing student responses, identifying the best feedback-prompt to use, and formulating the response to help the student, and the class, move toward deeper learning.

Using a hybrid format, an instructor can determine which course components may be best to move to the online discussion forum to allow for more process and discussion so the instructor can be more effective in the use of instructional prompts for deeper learning.

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