Crowdsourcing the Discussion Board

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The online discussion board has long been ubiquitous in synchronous and asynchronous education, so much so that it is notoriously dull. It can be all too easy for discussion board posts to become a regurgitative learning task. When learners find themselves summarizing reading assignments, they often consign the discussion board to mere "busy work" designed to micromanage their progress. Yet through a "crowdsourcing" model, the medium offers an opportunity for learners to become content creators, adding to the knowledge base for the course out of their experience, expertise, and exposure to a variety of content sources.

The discussion board has great potential for creativity, playfulness, and student-centered learning. Once we break free from the temptation to check up on whether the assigned reading has been accomplished, a discussion board can be a location for practicing key curricular goals such as critical thinking or theological reflection on the material or topic at hand. Freed from enforcing compliance, it can be easier to break open the multimedia capacity present in a good Learning Management System. I encourage students to engage the subject matter by curating a weekly journal of images, music, or video that reflect their thoughts on the topic at hand. While some still prefer to write their thoughts for a post, the ability to record a video, post artwork, or share music and poetry appeals to a broader range of students. The variety of ways

of engaging makes for a lively discussion as students respond to one another's offerings. To encourage this, I avoid requiring a certain quantity of replies to co-learners' posts but instead include an "asynchronous participation grade" in my syllabus that specifies how much time per week each learner should spend reading and interacting with discussion board(s).

Crowdsourcing learners' experiences and media exposure for cultural analysis can further encourage learners to act as experts in their own cultural contexts. When I teach my Biblical Families elective, I use this method to contrast ancient and modern ideas around family and related topics. I provide content on ancient context through reading assignments while learners post and respond to case studies on the same topic either from the media or their ministry contexts (I ask for their posts to be equally distributed between the two over the course of the semester) in which they name the cultural constructions implicitly communicated in the conversation or media item. Some hilarity inevitably ensues as we comment together on commercials and experiences alike. It leads to a broader variety of contexts than I alone would be able to provide and increases learner investment in the project of cultural analysis.

The increased prevalence of asynchronous courses and virtual presence can make community building a challenge as casual hallway conversations become less frequent if not impossible. One key element of learner formation is the mutually supportive community they can be to one another. A discussion board can be a helpful place to model this by making the steps toward a long-term project both public and collaborative. For this model, I create a "topic" within the forum under each student's name. They can then crowdsource questions and ideas about their projects, not just with me but with their co-learners, receiving more responses and resources and having the opportunity to exhibit their expertise as adult learners. In my introductory Educational Ministry course I also have students post a weekly quote from the assigned reading that speaks to their educational philosophy, creating a running vision board that they can use when they write their theology of teaching and learning at the end of the semester. When teaching about the religiously unaffiliated, learners took on a "spiritual-but-not-religious discipline" and journaled the experience on the discussion board so that they could respond to and encourage one another throughout the semester.

Crowdsourcing the discussion board requires a degree of trust that learners have prepared for their asynchronous participation well enough to critically engage and add to rather than prove that they have received content. This model opens up the possibility for participants to bring creativity and imagination to their posts and communicates that each learner's cultural context is essential to the course, not a distraction from it. Learners become co-creators of multimedia course content, bringing their experience, expertise, and exposure into the virtual classroom. As such, they practice collaborative learning and experience how they can become a resource to one another in and outside of class.

https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2022/09/crowdsourcing-the-discussion-board/