Effective and Inclusive Online Discussions:
## A Focus on Preparation, Presence, Preferences, and Privacy

Preparation

Before you introduce discussion into your online course ask yourself: **what** are my learning goals and **why** is discussion the best way to meet these goals? Write these out and share them with your students.

Be transparent with your students about how discussion works and why it's important. Consider the possibility that they may not have ever seen a truly productive discussion in their academic career, let alone one online! Show them an example in a short video / screen cast or describe a great discussion you've been a part of in a brief note. Also share your grading criteria (if applicable) well before the first discussion and give students low-stakes opportunities to practice.
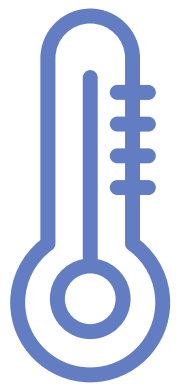
Set **community norms** with your students. We recognize that this can be uncomfortable and time-consuming. However, taking some time before your first discussion to agree on how to take the "temperature" in the community, productively handle microaggressions, request a time out when needed, and / or determine what roles students will be expected to take will save time and (likely) trauma in the long term. Find out more about setting community norms in online courses at the link below.

Presence

Be present in online discussion in ways that are both **sustainable** and **supportive.**

To be a **sustainable** presence, be transparent with students about the extent of your engagement in their discussions. Use signaling phrases like, "you will hear feedback from me x times per week" or "I will be posting x number of video discussion prompts per unit" on your syllabus and as you send email or LMS updates.

Being **supportive** means showing a genuine interest in what students say, learn, and offer to the conversation. In synchronous discussion, this might mean modeling synthesis by saying, "I appreciate how student X said this and student Y said this. How might those two comments be combined?" In asynchronous discussion, it might mean adding a comment to a student's post acknowledging their learning or linking them to another post that challenges their ideas.

Presence is also cultivated through **visual cues**. Consider adding an avatar or profile pic to your LMS account, producing short, authentic "check in" videos to accompany new discussions, and / or hosting synchronous office hours if your class is primarily asynchronous.

Preferences

Give students choices for how to show their learning in your online course discussions. Meaningful choices are associated with improved student learning, persistence, and satisfaction with the course, especially for minoritized students. Encouraging student choice and preference may mean:

- Making sure students can access the discussion in both web and mobile formats, which might mean limiting high-bandwidth discussion media like Zoom;
- Inviting students to participate in, for example, only 2 of 3 discussion threads based on what interests them over the course of a unit, rather than in every thread;
- Offering options for synchronous or asynchronous engagement for each discussion opportunity, with no penalty for either student choice; and / or
- Letting students co-develop discussion leadership roles and grading policies that meet the learning goals and play to their strengths and values.

Privacy

To **protect student privacy**, please do:
-Let your students know if you plan to record the synchronous online discussion, how and where it will be used, and when it will be deleted.
-Allow students to opt-out of appearing on video. There may be bandwidth, access, well-being, location, or safety concerns you know nothing about.
-Offer students alternatives to synchronous discussion, especially in cases where topics are sensitive or could disrupt a student's home life. Virtual polling, the chat feature, or an asynchronous parallel discussion are all good options.

Please don't:
-Assume that your students know their privacy rights or options online. Be clear about what you are doing to protect them and what they should do to protect themselves.

FMI: HTTPS://BIT.LY/DISCUSSIONONLINE