

How Do I Create Engaging Threaded Discussion Questions?

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John Orlando:

Hello, and welcome to this 20-Minute Mentor Presentation on how to lead online discussion. I'm John Orlando. For the next 20 minutes we're going to talk about creating online discussion questions and leading online discussion. So let's get started.

I've discovered, in training online instructors, that discussion is one of the hardest parts of online education for a new instructor to learn. Online discussion requires giving up control of the classroom, allowing the classroom to move from instructor to student. That is, the center of gravity moves away from the teaching aspect to the learning aspect.

Discussion moves out into the class. This is a major shift in the thinking of education. For the longest time, education is built on what we might call the vessel theory of learning. That means that educators or instructors believe that they were transferring knowledge from their mind to the mind of the students. So they stood up in front of the classroom, and they lectured to the students, every once in a while making comments on a chalkboard that the students would write down. The idea is they're trying to transfer the knowledge in their head to the students, and at the end of the class, they test the students on how well that transfer occurred.

But we now know that that's not how learning occurs. We now have developed the constructivist or connectionist theory of learning; we've learned that students learn not by simply absorbing information, but by connecting it to something they already know. The best way of doing that is to discuss concepts with our students, hear about how they understand concepts and allows the students to apply their concepts to their own experience. This is how they understand, by literally constructing the knowledge in their own heads rather than simply absorbing it from the outside.

Now, this requires, in an online environment, having good discussion questions. I have found it's very difficult to develop very good discussion questions. Number one, students tend to be taught to be passive in a classroom environment. In the traditional face-to-face environment, they're taught to listen. In fact, when they talk to each other, they get scolded. So you have to break them of the tendency to not want to talk in class. You must bring them into the class and have them bring certain a part of themselves or their experience or their beliefs and opinions into the class. You must allow them to connect with prior knowledge and develop new forms of knowledge.

I'm going to go through a number of types of good questions and bad questions and give you tips on what questions to develop and what questions to avoid.

First off, we start with: avoid repeat-back questions. This is something that I see very often from online instructors. For instance, they might say something like, “What are the three parts of a business impact analysis?” Note, what they’re asking is for the students to simply repeat back the information that they got from the class, whether it from the instructor’s lecture or from the readings or something else.

This is not a discussion question. Really, this is an essay question, and that’s a very common mistake – mistaking discussion questions with essay questions. All the answers to this question are, in principle, the same. There’s some right answer– what the three parts of a business impact analysis are. The student isn’t going to contribute anything. So what you’re going to find is the first student will answer the question, and the other students are going to wonder what they are supposed to do. What are they supposed to talk about?

Instead, use application questions where students are asked to apply something that they’ve learned in class. For instance, going back to the point I mentioned before – “What are some of the challenges to doing a business impact analysis in the workplace?” Now, a business impact analysis is related to business continuity and involved examining the kinds of threats or dangers to a work environment – fire, weather, terrorist attack – and examining how they would affect a company. So the instructor will first talk about how a business impact analysis is done and then ask the students, “What are some of the challenges that you see in doing a business impact analysis in your own workplace?”

The first student might say, “Well, it’s really hard to tell what the major threats are. How do you know what the chance of a terrorist attack is?” Another student may say, “I agree, but you can know at least some threats. For instance, if you live in an earthquake environment, you know that earthquakes are a greater threat than say some other threat,” and so on and so forth. So students can start talking about how these apply to an actual environment. Hopefully, this example uses adult students – something that they’ve experienced so they can start talking about what they’ve run into when they’ve tried a business impact analysis. Notice that this question doesn’t ask them to repeat back information. It asks them to apply it, and especially – how does this apply to their own experience?

Second: avoid obvious answers. These are what I might call “cupcake questions.” For instance, “Laptops don’t need to be closely guarded; they are perfectly safe being left out in an empty office. Do you agree or disagree?” Well, obviously, whoever wrote that is looking for the answer: “No, they’re not perfectly safe. We know laptops are routinely stolen.”

Students are going to look at that and groan “Okay, the instructor obviously wants that answer, ‘No, they’re not perfectly safe,’” and they

give the obvious reason, that they're valuable, they're easy to pick up and so on and so forth. Really not much of a discussion question – it's not going to engage the students. They're not going to find it interesting. They're not going to find much to apply or really think about. One way to avoid these obvious questions is to create controversy, and this is something I really enjoy doing. Come up with a question that allows reasonable debate or positions on both sides of an issue.

So for instance, "Companies should instruct workers to take their laptops with them when they hear a fire alarm so that they can work elsewhere if they cannot return to work. Do you agree?" Now, you can see the kind of controversy this kind of question can create, and I've used it in discussion. Immediately, you have people on both sides. Some students say, "Yes, employees should take the laptops with them; it's the best way to continue working elsewhere if they cannot return to work." Others will say immediately, "No, the delay is a danger, and people are always more valuable than equipment."

You get even heated discussion – I've done this discussion question, and I get very heated responses on either side. People get very much into it. Note that this connects to something in their own experience – fire alarms at work. But it also asks a question that they can have a real stake on. That is – we could be talking about individual safety and what that means. So you get genuine controversy. You get positions on both sides.

Notice that this question is stated first as a statement and then says, "Do you agree?" So you can present a statement that you yourself don't agree with. Just present it out there and say, "Do you agree or disagree?" Controversy is always a good way of generating discussion.

Avoid too much research. Many instructors ask questions that require a lot of research. For instance, "What are the major interpretation of Hamlet's motivations, and where do you stand on them?" Now, this is an important issue, of course, in the question on Hamlet. However, major interpretations of Hamlet's motivations require research, and that's best left to a research paper. Discussion, while students *can* do research, and they can bring research into a discussion, it really stifles it when you expect them to go out and do research because then they're starting to present other's views.

They start having to cite things, footnote things – in fact, you even get into issues of plagiarism and copyright in discussion because copyright can raise plagiarism issues – the kind of issues you get into in professional papers.

What you'd rather see is students simply discussing immediately. They see a question; they immediately are able to talk about what they view in

that question. They're able to immediately lend some of themselves rather than having to go out, research and return. So don't ask something that requires too much research.

What I do is I simply make research optional in the discussion in my classes. You should also force students to think about the material. For instance, instead of the prior question, something like this: "Did Hamlet's odd behavior help or hurt his cause and why?" That is, do they believe that his strange behavior caused him to have more difficulties in trying to succeed or not succeed? Note that all they need to understand is the story itself, what they presumably should have read. Then they can interpret it and they can think about what Shakespeare may have been thinking about in presenting Hamlet in a certain way. They can immediately start applying what they feel relates to Hamlet's motivation. So this is a discussion question that really forces students to think about the material.

Also, avoid strictly personal questions. Now, I think what happens is instructors want to have students bring some of themselves and their own experiences into discussion, and they mistakenly do it by asking something that's a strictly personal question. For instance, this question says, "Describe a time when you were faced with a decision like the one Tom Sawyer faced with Jim?" That involves just asking purely a personal experience. You know, "When I was a young boy, I had the problem of whether to turn in a friend," or something like that, "who did something." People may not feel comfortable with that, and it's really a very individual thing; they're not really adding to other's knowledge so much in answering the question.

You should ask students to challenge the material. That is, very often even challenge the author, or, ideally, even challenge yourself as lecturer. For instance, "Is the author right that a parent should always make medical decisions for a minor?" They can start talking about, "Well, maybe there are times in which a minor – a 16- or 17-year-old – should be consulted on medical decisions concerning their own health." They can talk about what are the reasons for or against this. But you notice what they're doing. You're asking them to actually question what an author says – something that you've read. That's a good thing because you force the students to read actively and to think about the material in class. Again, if you feel really comfortable with yourself, you can even ask them to challenge what you say. "Do you agree with my view that. . ." and see what students say.

Another thing you should do is lead discussion into general points. For instance, "What lessons was Mark Twain trying to teach with Tom Sawyer's decision about Jim?" That is, when Tom Sawyer faced a decision about whether to turn in Jim, what lesson was Mark Twain trying to show in bringing that decision? That is, what can we gather from this particular experience that applies to a wide range of experiences?

So you're using a very particular point, a very particular issue, or a very particular point in a story and trying to elicit general knowledge or general principles out of it, and that's a good way to get discussion going. Start with some particular case and then expand.

Avoid complex questions. For instance, "What are the most important information security policies for an organization? How do you teach people these policies? What are some obstacles to getting people to follow information security policies?" Note that there are really three separate questions here or at least a question in three separate parts.

Complex questions become difficult because some people answer all the various parts, some people answer parts of the question, and you get threads that tend to be broken up for that reason. It's best that if you have a complex question, simply break it up into very different threads so that people start with the atomic single question and then they can branch that off in different areas, and they're not mixing different types of answers with one another. Make your questions simple; ask only one thing. You'll find students digging deeper and oftentimes carrying these in other directions, but they're easier to understand. The thread is much easier to follow.

Here's an example of focusing on a simple topic. "Why is it hard to get people to follow information security policies?" And they can just start saying, "People have a hard time following them because they consider them an annoyance," or "it slows down productivity," or something like that. Now, finding good discussion questions – how do you develop good discussion questions? Well, first ask how can a topic or might a topic be relevant to your students? How might they apply the topic in their own situation?

Also, ask how a particular topic could be a launching pad for exploration of new topics? In other words, how can discussion allow your students to create new knowledge or new understanding?

Look for cases, and I think this is a wonderful way to start a discussion, using either a real or a hypothetical case. Here's an example that I use in a medical ethics class that I teach. Now, this is a real case.

About 20 years ago, in Loma Linda [CA] a surgeon was doing a hysterectomy on an older woman. During the procedure, he nicked an artery or a vein, and the woman started bleeding. At that point, the surgeon said, "Okay, I'm going to repair this, but give her blood until then." At that point, the nurse said, "Uh, uh, uh, this woman is a Jehovah's Witness, and she strictly forbid giving any blood." The surgeon replied, "She's not dying on my table! Give her blood," at which point they gave her blood. They sewed her up, and she lived.

The question afterwards was, “Do they tell the woman that they gave her blood?” I ask that question to my students in my medical ethics class, and you can imagine the reaction it gets. Students get very interested in taking positions on one side or the other. This is certainly something that they can experience as future nurses, and doctors, and even if you’re not going to be in the medical profession, you can certainly sympathize with the doctor, and the nurses and the woman. Also notice that while this is a particular case, the answer – either they should tell her or shouldn’t tell her – will lead to more general points. For instance, they might say, “They need to tell her because she has a right to know what happened to her body,” which is a more general principle.

Also, you can move from this case into deeper issues. For instance, I ask students, “Well, what should have been done to make sure that this didn’t happen in the first place? It sounds like the surgeon was not made aware that the woman was a Jehovah’s Witness ahead of time. So it sounds like that information should have been gathered.” We go on to say, “Was that surgeon put in a bad position by the woman’s demand? Did it undermine his own integrity as a surgeon who had to essentially stand back and let the woman bleed to death?”

So there are a lot of interesting questions – this one case – straightforward case with a very simple question – “tell her or not tell her?” – can lead to a variety of very interesting issues that can apply to a whole range of different topics, all using a simple case – in this case, a real one, or it could be hypothetical.

Now, moderating discussion. The important point in moderating discussion is to be engaged in the discussion without monopolizing it. Don’t feel the need to answer every post. This is your student’s discussion. If you answer every post, they’re going to start talking to you. You want them talking to one another.

You want them to suggest new directions, but don’t fixate on a preconceived direction. Let the discussion go in different directions. The students, because there’s no time limit to an online class, have time to explain different concepts. So allow them time to do that eventually bringing them back. But don’t immediately jump on digressions as you might with a face-to-face course where you have a certain amount of content to cover in a certain amount of time.

Also, add your own insights. Interestingly, one mistake instructors tend to make is they become like a cheerleader. They want to be very encouraging, which is good, but they start just saying “good point” to everything. In fact, once I had students in my online course actually call me “a wimp” because they said I tend to say to my students that every point is a good point. They said, “We can’t possibly be making good

points with everything we say. Sometimes we're probably saying something dumb; tell us!" Well, I don't want to say, "It's dumb," but by saying "good point" to every point you water down the feedback. It becomes just monotone feedback, and it doesn't really show exceptionally good points.

So be judicious; when you say, "These are good points," be willing to express your own views. Many instructors aren't willing to express their own views; they're worried that they're going to neutralize discussion when students find what their views are and the students will feed them their own views. But if done correctly, you can really push your students into saying more than they would have otherwise. They may challenge you.

And challenge your students: "how would you respond to" – in other words, if you want to say you disagree with them, you might say, "How would you respond to someone who says that?" Or you might say, "But wouldn't your suggestion cause . . ." So be willing to challenge your students a little bit. Don't be an easy, simple moderator; really be willing to push your students a bit.

Well, thank you for your time today, and I hope you've learned a little bit about how to create and monitor discussion in your online classes. Thank you.

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