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How Many Faculty Discussion Posts Each Week? A Simply Delicious Answer

By Cheryl Hayek, EdD

One of the most frequently asked questions from veteran and novice online faculty alike is, "How many weekly discussion posts should I contribute?" The reality is, there is an intricate balancing act to achieve the coveted "guide on the side" role in discussion forum facilitation.

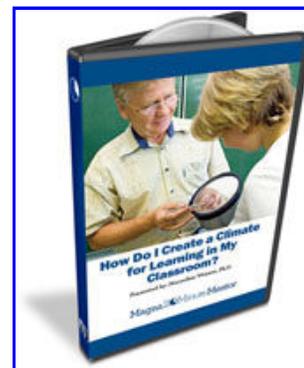
At the onset of weekly discussion, outstanding online instructors wait cautiously to ensure that peer interactions and student self-discovery have the time to flourish. Then, at precisely the right point, they add several probing responses, invoking relevance and scholarship into the discussion. Concomitantly, they vigilantly strive to avoid omniscient, overbearing, or evaluative posts that inhibit future participation. This professional dialogue continues in this way throughout the length of the discussion, where sustained interaction becomes a rich environment for critical thinking to flourish.

This weekly unrehearsed exchange of timely, purposefully worded interaction is an art that faculty leadership needs to teach and develop in instructors, particularly if they are new to teaching. There is a distinct competency in creating and sustaining student to instructor and peer to peer discourse. We are remiss if we assume all faculty members are cognizant of the many educational values of online discussion and how to facilitate those forums in such a way to elevate discussion to a superlative learning tool. When we consider that discussion forums are one of the few unique places in an online course where all three pertinent levels of interaction occur: student to student, student to content, and student to instructor, we know we must promote their success.

Unquestionably, successful online forum facilitation is a daunting and complicated equilibrium that, if unbalanced, can inhibit learning. In today's highly regulated postsecondary environments, we hold faculty accountable for substantive interaction that promotes learning. However, we do not often give them straightforward instructions on how to create and foster the setting for this to occur. Online adjuncts are often professionals in their fields and are entering education as a secondary or supplementary occupation. They do not have the foundational educational, behavioral, or other developmental knowledge to always intuitively handle forums appropriately. Leadership needs to aid faculty in answering their frequently posed question, "How many discussion forum posts?" Now, we can simply tell them with confidence, "The answer is as simple as a dinner party."

But how? By using a centuries-old teaching tool: schema and analogy.

Discussion forums are like dinner parties, and the instructor is the host. Personally welcoming each student into this new and unfamiliar place and making them feel like they belong in that environment is a necessity to help integrate them socially and academically into the course; key elements in all retention research. We know that retention is heavily reliant on that integration and students' related satisfaction.



Creating a Positive Classroom Environment

Climate is important in any classroom. Without a healthy environment for teaching and learning, neither faculty nor students can derive much satisfaction from the experience.

Keeping the classroom climate positive is the responsibility of both sides ... that's the message in the 20 Minute Mentor video presentation, **How Do I Create a Climate for Learning in My Classroom?**

In this presentation, Dr. Maryellen Weimer, editor of *The Teaching Professor* explains:

- How positive classroom climates are created.
- Who creates them.
- How they're maintained.
- Specific ways you can contribute.
- How you can help your students contribute.
- The pet peeves of both faculty and students, and how to overcome them.
- What constitutes a memorable, positive experience for students and faculty alike.

This program comes as a CD with the

Using the dinner party analogy simplifies the complex nature of discussion forum facilitation into a much simpler, relevant analogy because everyone has experienced it either as guest or host. When we give faculty this connection, it removes the guesswork by activating their own schema to understand how to facilitate in a way that promotes learning through substantive interaction.

The Dinner Party: The Host's Actions...

- Welcome EVERYONE personally at the door. (Online forum)
- Make sure every person feels comfortable in the new environment. (Tone)
- Don't ignore anyone. (Reply to each student throughout the course)
- Disagreements are phrased professionally.
- No one should be silent, including the host! (Be present in forums)
- Serve them something delicious. (Content!)
- Invite them back! (To weekly forums, to the next assignment even if they've faltered on the previous one, to the university if they've finished your course)
- Proportionate time with every guest. (Don't reply to the same students every time)
- Spend extra time with needy guests. (Struggling students)
- Don't talk all at once, spread the conversation throughout the party. (Post on various days, keeping the volume consistent)
- Start up a new conversation when one is stale! (Add a relevant link to a current event to discuss)
- Hosts are visible, immediately attend to guests' needs, personable, and proactively plan for a great evening!

Faculty leadership should use the same strategies to teach professors as we preach to use with students: Activate schema, provide an analogy as a teachable tool, and motivate throughout. Discussion forum dialogue has the potential to be the most valuable learning opportunity in online environments. Let's help faculty to make every course deliciously successful.

Dr. Cheryl Hayek is the associate provost at Grantham University.

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Podcasts have surged in popularity because developing and distributing them doesn't require advanced technology skills. Presenter Dr. Charles Morgan, chair of the Mathematics Department at Lock Haven University, will guide you through the podcasting process, including:

- Reviewing student learning outcomes to find the right podcast topic

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- Exploring your topic in brief podcasts
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