

Design Strategies: Discussion Topic

eLearning research strongly identifies participation as a positive variable. However, an online instructor must negotiate the balance between being responsive and managing time effectively. Therefore, writing sound discussion questions—based on objectives—s one way to invite and increase participation and maximize the time element.

The discussion questions should be based on the performance objectives verbs—from the lowest level knowledge (remembering) to the highest level creating. These levels build upon each other as the student gains knowledge and expertise; therefore, leading the student to complex understandings and knowledge. Using complex, higher-order questions will not only force the student to flex intellectual muscles when responding, but will also lead the student to more understanding and less recitation. Depending on the performance, objectives will provide a starting place for designing appropriate discussion questions.

Knowledge (Remembering) – The student must be able to recall information, such as dates, events, places, ideas, definitions, formulas, theories, etc.

Example of discussion questions:

- Who was the first president of the United States?
- What is the definition of a mammal?
- When was the Declaration of Independence signed?
- Where did the first battle of the Civil War occur?

Comprehension (Understanding) – The student must be able to grasp the meaning of the information, express it in his/her own words, and/or cite examples.

- In history, who ruled as a dictator?
- What is an example of an adjective?
- Where does democracy differ from a dictatorship?
- When has one man been able to change history?

Application (Applying) – The student must be able to use information or apply knowledge or skills to new situations. The student must be able to use information and knowledge to solve a problem, answer a question, or perform another task.

- How does the law of supply and demand explain the current increase in the price of fruit?
- Examine the graph and state how many trees were cut down to produce paper.
- Which events led to the start of the Civil War?

Analysis – The student must be able to break down knowledge into parts and show or explain the relationships among the parts.

- What is the relationship between probability and statistical analysis?
- Why did the recession occur?
- How does . . . apply to . . . ?
- Why does . . . work?
- How does . . . relate to . . . ?
- What distinctions can be made about . . . and . . . ?

Synthesis (Caring) – The student must be able to pull together parts of knowledge to form a new whole and build relationships for new situations.

- What would happen if . . . ?
- How can we improve . . . ?
- How can we solve . . . ?
- How many ways can you . . . ?
- How do the data support . . . ?
- What hypotheses can you develop based on the data?
- Why?

Evaluating – The student must be able to judge or assess the value of the material and methods for a given purpose.

- How well does . . . meet the criteria for . . . ?
- What judgments can you make about . . . ?
- Compare and contrast . . . criteria for . . . ?
- Is there a better solution to . . . ?
- How would you have handled . . . ?
- What changes to . . . would you recommend?
- Does . . . ?
- Why?

Types of Discussion Questions

- **Textbook-Based** – The most convenient type would be derived from assigned reading in the textbook, as everyone will have the book and has read the assigned readings.
- **Literature-Based** – These questions are derived from supplemental readings. The students are instructed to prove or disprove, agree or disagree, or expand upon the concept being discussed.
 - **Example:** In the article you read on link resolvers and federated searching, the author provides advantages and disadvantages for both. Do you agree or disagree with his assessment of the good and bad points of these new library technologies?
- **Activity-Based** – These questions are similar to literature questions, except they are derived for a learning activity.
- **Experimental Element** – Students bring a lifetime of experience to the lesson, and they create their own meaning based on their prior experiences.
 - **Example:** In the article you read on link resolvers and federated searching, the author provides various advantages and disadvantages for both. Relying on your experience of searching these types of technologies, do you agree or disagree with his assessment of the good and bad points of these new library technologies? Why or why not? Can you think of any other advantages and disadvantages that he did not address in this article?
- **Post-Building** – Throughout the module, discussion questions can be built on previous discussion questions used earlier in the module.

- **Example:**
 - **Discussion Question 1:** Identify what is, in your opinion, the most significant advantage to using link resolvers. Explain why you think it is an advantage.
 - **Discussion Question 2:** Compare the advantage you identified with some of the disadvantages your classmates identified. Reflect on whether your opinion about the most significant advantage has changed.

Discussion Development Guidelines

Set Word Ranges:

- An example of a question with a word range would be: “In 100 to 150 words, please describe the role intelligence-gathering played in battle strategy of the generals at the Battle of Gettysburg.”
- Setting word ranges reduces the “ditto effect” or the case where students just agree with earlier postings with a simple, “I agree with so-and-so.” Placing a limit will cause students to reflect more and flex their critical-thinking skills.

Provide Guiding Criteria

Instructional designers should review the performance objectives of the module and, when developing discussion questions, should provide guiding criteria to focus student learning. If you want students to gain understanding in a certain area of the content, use directed questions to point them in that direction.

If you want students to consider specific areas of the module content, using guiding criteria in the questions will help direct students to focus on those specific areas. In the Civil War example above, here’s an example of how to use guiding criteria in a module:

- In 100 to 150 words, describe Pickett’s charge factoring in the troop strength of both sides of the combat, topography of the field at Gettysburg, and disadvantages of the rebel forces.

Discussion Questions Using Images

Using photos, paintings, and other pictures as the basis for discussion is a good method for engaging students. Of all the things you can do with images, by far the easiest to organize are discussion questions. Examples of questions that can be used with most images are given below.

- What time of day is it?
- What is the temperature and weather like?
- What is that person’s job?
- Why is that person in that place?
- This picture was very controversial when it was first shown. Why do you think that was? Would it have the same effect nowadays?
- How big do you imagine the image is in real life? How is the experience of really seeing it different from looking at this copy (in your experience or just your imagination)?
- Role-play a conversation between two people in the picture. How does it make you feel?
- If this were a still from a film, what kind of film would it be? What part of the film would this image come from? What would the rest of the film be about?
- What is outside the frame of the picture?

Discussion Facilitation Strategies

The students need to be made aware of the expectations of their participation.

Instructions:

1. Answer the discussion question(s) assigned. You should answer the question(s) that precedes your name.
2. Suggested length is a response approximately equivalent to 150 words. While your initial response to the question should be brief, it should also be written within accepted conventions of Standard English. The follow-up discussion may take on a more relaxed and conversational tone, but the initial response should reflect appropriate scholarship.
3. Submit your response by the date on the course calendar, so we have time to discuss the implications of your response.
4. You should do the reading assignment for the week before you answer your discussion question. You are encouraged to refer to the articles in your response, if appropriate.
5. Write out the question before you write your answer in your posting. This will help us focus on the content and keep things in order.
6. Review the responses of your fellow classmates and post your comments and reactions as appropriate. You are NOT expected to comment on EVERYONE's postings—only those that interest you (but a minimum of 3).