Best Practices in Online Teaching - During Teaching - Assess Messages in Online Discussions*

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Abstract

This module focuses on how to assess student messages in an online discussion forum when teaching in an online environment. This module is part of the Best Practices in Online Teaching Course created by Penn State University World Campus as a guide for faculty who are new to teaching in an online environment.

1 What to Do?

Assessing students' messages in online discussions encourages their participation and hopefully helps improve the quality of discussion as well. Set specific assessment criteria and make the criteria available to students in the beginning of the course.

2 How to Do It?

- Include the assessment criteria for online discussions within one or more locations (See Example (Example 1: Example - Referring to Assessment Criterion)):
  - The course syllabus
  - A course announcement prior to the first online discussion task
  - The instructions for the discussion task
- Make sure the assessment criteria measure both the quantity and quality of the online messages.
- When designing a rubric for assessing online discussions, consider assigning some points to encourage posting.
- Make use of sample rubrics from literature:
  - **Edelstein & Edwards' (2002) Assessing Effectiveness of Student Participation in Online Discussions**. This rubric considers five categories that are important for building a learning community: promptness and initiative, delivery of post, relevance of post, expression within the post, and contribution to the learning community.

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- **Garrison's, et al. (2001) Cognitive Processing Categories**. May be useful when assessing the quality of postings: (1) triggering (questioning); (2) exploration (information seeking and sharing), (3) integration (providing solution), and (4) solution (testing solutions)
- **Kleinman's (2005) Grading Rubric for Online Discussion Participation**. Provides detailed grading criteria.
- **Dringus & Ellis' (2005) Assessment of Student Progress in Forums**

- For more information about facilitating online discussions, please see Ten Tips for Generating Engaged Online Discussions[1] by Donna Reiss.

Example 1: Example - Referring to Assessment Criterion
Message Board Discussions

How it works: * Midnight Sunday through midnight Friday
I will post a question by midnight Sunday. Your tasks are to:

1. Post a thoughtful, unique answer to the instructor's question in 300 words or less (your answer should not be the same as someone who has already posted). You should build an informed response between Sunday night (when the question is posted) and Friday night (when your response is due).
2. You will be graded on the quality of your responses–not quantity. Be thoughtful rather than verbose. Due midnight Friday. Each student will be graded on an individual basis (max score is 10)

The grading criteria used includes:

- Your ability to synthesize different aspects of the posted question, particularly with reference to the articles in the course packet. The more detailed your explanation of specific points from the articles, the better the quality of your response.
- Your skill in posting a response with specific and unique examples that showcase your understanding of the salient points of the posted question, as well as your understanding of different aspects of the course materials (such as course packet articles, lecture notes, and textbook readings).
- Your ability to build a final, thoughtful response based on prior postings. This requires you to respond more than once to the instructor's post. Your final response should be structured around your previous postings, and you will attempt to integrate your different thoughts and opinions.

3 Why Do It?

When instructors grade discussions in an online course, students tend to participate in the discussions actively and thus have higher levels of sense of community (Rovai, 2003). However, too much emphasis on solely quantitative analysis of postings/messages can only result in coerced participation, poor quality of learning and student contributions to the online discussion (Garrison & Anderson, 2003).

Thomas (2002) suggests that three factors account for the lack of "normal discussion" that is necessary for learning to take place: "isolated mode of participation, the structural organization of messages, and the conflict between the written form and oral function of technology-mediated interpersonal communication" (p.362); good facilitation by a tutor or moderator is important to creating coherent online discussions.

[1] http://www.wordsworth2.net/activelearning/ecacdiscustips.htm

4 References:

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[2] http://www.westga.edu/∼distance/ojdla/spring51/edelstein51.html