

# Making Online Discussions Meaningful

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As the education world continues to plan for digital learning options, online discussions may be one of the most important elements for maintaining a meaningful classroom environment through dialogue. Yet it is most often overlooked.

This is because, as generations of teachers who have taken online classes where the standard for discussions includes a “post your response and then reply to two of your peers” protocol, ineffective discussion practices continue to be perpetuated. The result is a group of students who believe that discussions are intended as “make-work” and a group of teachers who think discussions are not a valuable part of their online classroom.

## Thinking Differently

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This does not have to be the case. Studies have shown that online discussions can be extremely valuable as an instructional tool, but more importantly, as a way to even the playing field for English language learners, students with verbal processing disorders, and students who traditionally do not participate in a traditional classroom discussion due to anxiety or reluctance to speak in front of a group.

It can be difficult for an educator to make the transition from traditional classroom discussions to online class discussions. Fortunately, several online discussion protocols have been developed that can encourage quality online discussions.

## **The Crux of the Matter**

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To keep discussion protocols from becoming mundane or irrelevant, it is important for an instructor to use a protocol that fits the objective for the discussion. For example, if an English teacher has asked her students to do a first read of a text, the teacher might use the Crux of the Matter protocol.

This protocol uses four threads where students post significant sentences, phrases, words, and insights from the reading including why they think it is significant. Student posts must be unique, so it encourages early reading and posting. During a second read of the same text, a teacher might use the Final Word Protocol, having students post a single phrase they believe is the most significant in the text without saying why.

All students discuss why the original poster may have believed that phrase was significant, whether they agree or disagree, and why. After a designated amount of time has passed to give all students an opportunity to respond, the original poster posts a reply to their own thread revealing why they originally thought the phrase was significant and how their thinking has changed or remained the same as a result of reading the posts from their peers. In this post, the student would be required to use evidence from their peers' feedback.

When using more than one protocol in this way, students can see the logical transition of learning. They can view their original discussion as the beginning of their learning journey, then watch their own understanding progress to mastery.

Teachers may develop summative reflections which are driven by the student learning in the discussions of the course to determine whether students have achieved mastery of the desired objectives. In this manner, discussions become an integral part of the learning process, as well as having the possibility of being used for assessment.

## **The What If Protocol**

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In the interests of both valuable discussion and differentiation, another valuable protocol is the What If protocol. This harkens back to a time when our students were assigned to be the line leader in kindergarten.

For each discussion in an online class, one student is assigned to be the What If. This student is exempt from all the other requirements of that discussion. Their job is to read every post and add a “what if” or “yes, but” question or statement to each one. The original poster is required to respond to this prompt. Even though the What If student has been exempted from the requirements of the discussion prompt, they will get the benefit of learning as they read and think about each prompt. This can be especially empowering to students for whom the original discussion prompt may have been overwhelming, or who need fewer instructions to be successful.

Discussion protocols can be adapted from tried and true, familiar classroom protocols. When this happens, the benefits of longstanding best practices can be realized in the online classroom. As educators adjust to the increasing demand for digital learning, the first step toward being effective is to understand how many practices can be translated from the traditional classroom into the digital classroom. Discussion protocols are easy to plan, but reap great benefits when used effectively.

## **Getting Adjusted**

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It may take students some time to adjust to the new protocols. Being consistent and holding students to the standards required in the protocol is important. For example, if the Timely Discussion protocol is used and a student claims to be finished with it in one day, they obviously have not complied with the

expectations of the protocol, which requires students to wait a period of time between posts so that their thinking can deepen their understanding of the content before they post their responses.

Next time you see “post your response, then thoughtfully respond to two of your peers,” think about a protocol that will work best for your objective and change the prompt. As you work with discussion protocols, you will find your own mastery of meaningful online discussions increasing as you think of new protocols on your own!

Do you use a valuable discussion protocol in your online class? Share it with us!

## **Resources**

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Discussion Protocols mentioned in this article:

### **Crux of the Matter**

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This protocol is a great way to introduce a new concept and activate prior knowledge. Because students are asked to choose unique concepts, larger classes may need to be divided into smaller groups and given their own group discussion board. If this is done, the Insights discussion thread should be a whole-group thread.

1. Instructor sets up four new threads: Sentences, Phrases, Words, and Insights.
2. Each student posts a sentence from the reading that they feel is significant. Each post has to be unique, so students are encouraged to post early.
3. Each student posts a phrase that they feel is significant. Again, these should be unique.
4. Each student posts the word they feel is significant. As with the other posts, these should be unique.
5. The students all go to the Insights thread and post what they understand about the reading based on what everyone else in their group posted.

### **Final Word**

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With this protocol, students are able to explore their own thinking. It also helps students to feel more connected to the conversation. It shifts ownership of the discussion to the students involved, rather than the instructor. It encourages

critical thinking skills as students develop the ability to consider feedback and develop strong, evidence-based arguments.

1. Each student identifies what they think is a significant idea from a reading without saying why they think it is significant.
2. Each student starts a new thread by posting the quote or excerpt from the text that represents the point.
3. Other students in the class reply to the thread with their thoughts on the quote and why they might find it significant or not.
4. The original student then posts a comment to reveal their initial thoughts on why the quote was significant and how their thoughts have been validated or changed because of the comments of their peers. The original student is not allowed to add their thoughts until after the commenting period has ended.

### **What If**

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This protocol should weave through the body of discussions throughout a course. In this protocol, a teacher assigns a specific student to be the “what-if” for a particular discussion. That student is exempt from the rest of the assigned protocol for that discussion and is solely tasked with commenting frequently with thought-provoking “what if” statements or “yes, but” statements.

### **Timely Discussion**

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Use of this protocol is best when approaching a topic that students may have initial thoughts about then develop different or deeper ideas after time/learning. It is similar to the Final Word Protocol, with a stronger emphasis on evidence and reasoning. This protocol strengthens student understanding of how to state a position and use evidence to support and defend it, as well as introducing the idea of changing one’s mind because of evidence provided by others. In some cases, this could result in new assignments or discussions about the quality and reliability of evidence.

1. The instructor prepares a prompt for students to think about.
2. Students create a thread with their initial thoughts, including their reasoning and evidence to support their reasoning. In a science class, this may be an opportunity for students to make predictions.

3. Students do not respond to any peers for a period of time (usually two-three days). It is important that the instructor have a deadline for everyone to post their initial post.
4. After the initial posts are due, students return to the discussion and read ALL the posts of their peers.
5. Students post a response to the peers they disagree with, including evidence and reasoning. (If the class size is large, determine a number of students they will need to post to. This may get tricky because what if there are not that many who they disagree with?) Again, the teacher needs to establish a deadline to get this step done.
6. After the responses are due, students return to the discussion and read the posts that disagree with their position.
7. Students post a new comment on their own, original post, that restates their position or introduces their new position, citing evidence from the comments they read on theirs (and other's posts). Use of informal citation, such as "As George stated on Lucy's post, "quote quote quote," is encouraged.

For a curated list which includes these and others, download the **Discussion Protocols** document.

*Photo by Volodymyr Hryshchenko on Unsplash*

