

## **Revolutionizing Teaching via Electronic Discussion**

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Electronic Discussions can transform teaching by extending class interaction throughout the week. No longer must students and teacher be in the same place. Advantages of distance learning can be combined with the traditional benefits of classroom lecture and discussion.

- . Students can participate at their convenience—at any time, any place.
- . Shy, quiet students can think about what to contribute, without rushing or competing to get attention.
- . Students can check their statements for spelling or grammar before posting them to the discussion. This encourages students for whom English is a second language. It also relieves teachers from the chore of proofreading, freeing them to concentrate on critiquing content.
- . Student can consult dictionaries or thesauruses, to be sure they have chosen the right word or phrase to convey their thoughts clearly and effectively.
- . Students can relate new ideas from class or outside reading to past research and experience—and point out how the new discoveries apply to their lives.
- . Students can display their talents—and stretch themselves to learn in new ways.
- . Students can get more individual feedback on their progress, not only from the teacher, but also from classmates. Mutual encouragement builds esprit de corps.
- . Typing thoughts into the computer helps students to organize their insights. This also reinforces learning.
- . Sharing ideas and responding to one another sharpens thinking and deepens understanding.
- . Electronic discussion bypasses distractions like seating arrangements, volume of voices, and ethnic or gender bias. The playing field is more level.
- . Some students learn best by seeing, others by hearing, others by doing. What can they do?
- . Students can add graphics as well as links to other relevant websites. Since most computers now have sound, music and voice commentaries can be added to text.
- . Students can review texts, handouts, java applets, audio clips, discussions as they wish.
- . Students can work in groups without being in the same place at the same time.
- . Reading other students' input triggers new ideas, associations, memories, and creativity.
- . "Threading" replies enables students to build on one another's input and experience.
- . Students in groups are readier to disagree with one another and the instructor.
- . Discussion groups encourage more frequent participation and further research.
- . Instructors can build on email and discussion group ideas and questions during class time.

Experience in a broad variety of courses at the University of San Francisco shows excellent results in all fields of arts and sciences, business and nursing, graduate and

undergraduate. Better communication builds deeper community; working together can form friendships for life.

The University of San Francisco provides free access for faculty and students to Blackboard. This Educational Technology provides tutorials for its many features: a discussion board which keeps track of who read and replied to each intervention; statistics of when and how many times each student accessed the site during the semester; email to individuals and groups; announcements; assignments; syllabi; bibliographies; links to other websites; course images; Powerpoint additions; many other useful details. Faculty do not have to avail themselves of everything at once, but can gradually ease into what they find comfortable.

There is a downside, of course. Reading and replying to student discussions can take as much as twenty hours each week per course. Students must be taught principles of Internet courtesy. They need some guidance on how much to post, how often, and the quality expected by the teacher. Warnings about plagiarism are essential. More important, they need encouragement to experiment with this new form of learning.

Dedicated teachers will be delighted with the results.