Discussion Board
Online Discussions for Blended Learning

The online discussion board can be a great way improve student learning in a blended learning[1] environment. Discussing topics online, asynchronously, can be just as beneficial (if not more) as traditional, synchronous, in-class discussion. In the online environment, students can thoughtfully add to a discussion, and cogitate on other student contributions – something that may not be possible in the traditional classroom. Think about some of the "rapid-fire" discussion that might go on in the traditional classroom – all students probably do not have the opportunity to contribute. Research has shown that online students can feel isolated, so it's critical that opportunities for social networking and community building be provided.

To achieve a higher level of student learning on the online discussion board, three areas should be considered: 1) cognitive presence, 2) social presence, and 3) teaching presence[2].
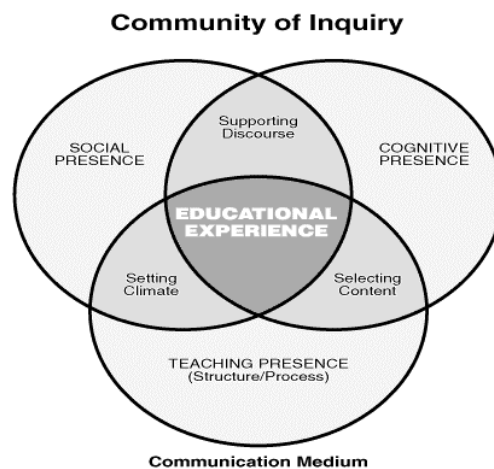

Figure 1: The community of Inquiry model.
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[1] Blended learning is defined as the meaningful integration of classroom learning (face-to-face experiences) with activity experienced online. "Blended learning" takes place in a hybrid class.

[2] Garrison D.R., Kanuka H., 2003, Community of Inquiry model, in *Blended learning: Uncovering its transformative potential in higher education*, Internet and Higher Education 7 95–105, Elsevier.

Cognitive Presence

"… the extent to which the participants in any particular configuration of a community of inquiry are able to construct meaning through sustained communication." (Garrison, 2003)
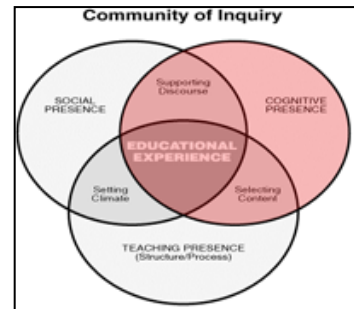
SacCT Discussion Board *(cognitive presence)*

Questions to ask yourself:
- Do you gage the effectiveness of your Discussion Board by quality of discourse or by quantity?
- Is student interaction purposeful?
- Is the discussion structured and cohesive?
- Do your in-class discussions integrate meaningfully with your online discussions?

Techniques:
- Spend time developing *quality* discussion topics.
  - If a topic has been started in class, create a discussion topic that moves the discussion to a higher level (from "exploration" to "integration", for example, or from "integration" to "resolution")[3].
  - If starting a topic online, consider creating a topic that would encourage progressive discussion (from "exploration" to "resolution").
  - Try to come up with engaging topics
- Be extremely mindful of your *teaching presence* on the discussion board.
  - As an instructor, your facilitation and guidance is important. It is your job to move a discussion stuck in an "exploration" stage to the next level – one that in which students can engage in a deep level of learning.
  - Challenge ideas, encourage students to test and research ideas. Ask engaging questions.
  - Don't overdo it. Your students should carry the discussion – you are the "guide".
- Provide *clear* requirements for participation. Requirements should address length or quantity of posts, expectations for content (quality, relevance of posts), and timeliness.
  - Create a "Discussion Board Guidelines" document for students to refer to. This document can contain guidelines that are applicable to all discussion assignments and should include an etiquette statement.
  - Provide additional requirements for each topic within each topic description, if needed, or remind your students to review discussion board guidelines within your topic description.
  - Include topic assignment due dates within the title or description for the topic.
  - *Grade* your discussion topics following the guidelines you have created.

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[3] Garrison D.R., Cleveland M., 2005, *Facilitating Cognitive Presence in Online Learning Interaction Is Not Enough*, American Journal of Distance Ed., *19*(3), 133–148, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Survival techniques for large classrooms:

- Don't reply to every student post. Doing so may "kill" a discussion anyway. You should serve as a facilitator.
- Develop a *Grading Form* (aka "rubric") to use to grade discussion posts; address *quality of posts* as one of the criteria.
- Have the student send you a self-assessment (using a rubric) of their discussion, which can include 1 or 2 their posts
- Create student groups (no more than 10 students per group). Creating smaller groups for discussion facilitates better quality of interaction (and helps establish *social presence*).
  - To create discussion groups from the SacCT Group Manager,
    1. Using the Group Manager, create your groups.
    2. After groups have been created, select them.
    3. From the **Create Group Activity** menu at the bottom of the Group Manager page, select **Discussion Topic**, then click the green arrow.
    4. Proceed to create your discussion topic. The topic you create will be replicated once for each group, with each member in the group only having access to the topic designated for his or her group.
  - To provide additional structure to your discussion groups, assign a *student facilitator* to each group who would be in charge of leading the discussion and posting the final resolution for the group to a main discussion area for the entire class.

Sample topics:

Figure 2: Topic requirements & prompt(s). This information is included in the topic *description*.

Figure 3: Group topic with assigned student facilitator; topic prompt not included here.

Social Presence

"… the ability of learners to project their personal characteristics into the community of inquiry, thereby presenting themselves as 'real people.'"
(Garrison, 2003)
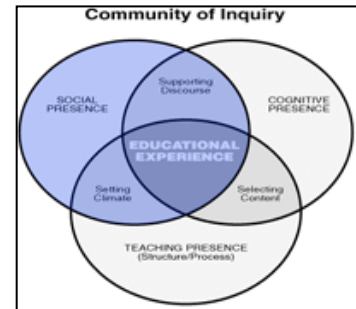
SacCT Discussion Board *(social presence)*

Questions to ask yourself:
- Do you or your students feel a "sense of community" with regard to your online discussion board?
- Are your students freely discussing, deliberating, and negotiating with each other online? If not, do you think it's because they don't feel comfortable enough with each other?
- What kind of discussion guidelines do you have in place, with regard to social presence? Are you explicitly telling students what you expect? Do you grade students on two-word responses? How many discussions posts are students required to make per topic?

Techniques:
- Create an "Introductions" topic on your discussion board. During the first or second week of class, require that students post to this topic, following your discussions guidelines.
  - Conduct preliminary introductions, in-class, to help students place names with faces.
    - Require that your students also post their picture on SacCT using the *Roster* tool. To do this, the tool first must be enabled by the instructor, from **Manage Course** > **Tools**. Students would then need to edit their profile in the Roster tool in order to upload their photo.
  - Require that your students answer five or six questions about themselves (perhaps some optional, some required). Questions could be related to occupation, hobbies, learning goals, course expectations, etc.
  - Consider using the "Blog Topic" Discussion Board option instead of the traditional threaded discussion for your "Introduction" topic. The blog format tends to be a little less formal and more suited to this type of activity.
  - Model what you expect from your students! Be the first to post an introduction, because it's important to build a student-faculty relationship as well.
- Create a "cyber café" discussion topic, which could serve as an open space for students to talk about things unrelated to the course.
- Create a "tech help" or "general help" discussion topic that student can use to post technical questions to. Posts to a topic can be set to be anonymous, if needed.

Survival techniques for large classrooms:

- As with *cognitive presence*, consider creating student groups, with no more than 15 students per group. Creating smaller groups for discussion helps establish *social presence*). Students may not feel as "lost" in a smaller group, and thus, would connect better to classmates. Review the large classroom information regarding group discussions from the last section (cognitive presence).
- During the first week of class, engage with as many students as possible on the discussion board, greeting students by name individually or by several in one posting, but after that, don't respond to every posting. Establish your social presence early on, thus, setting the stage for the rest of the semester.

Sample topics:

Our Community Blogs
This discussion category simulates the use of blogs. It is for building our community, both online and face-to-face. It is open to all students in the course and the instructor.

Introductions   (19 Messages / **4 New**)
Type an introduction of yourself here. Include any professional, academic, and personal interests you feel will help us get to know you.

Networking   (20 Messages)
This blog is for networking - an important aspect of our online community. Use it to share professional leads, personal needs and annoucments, plan social events: anything outside of regular classroom activities.

Tech Help   (47 Messages)
This blog is for posting technology questions and tips. It is a student moderated space - please check here on a regular bases and attempt to assist your peers whenever possible. I will also watch the blog and provide tech assistance when needed.

Figure 4: Sample Blogs, intended to develop community (social presence).

Introductions
Description (click to expand)
Create Message   View Drafts
Select All | Deselect All   Sort by: **Date** ⇩ Author

☐ **Subject:** Introduction to the Community of EDTE 284 Bloggers
Author: _____
Date: February 3, 2008 5:36 PM

Hello all. I am a final semester student and it is my goal to be an instructor of nursing or nursing related subjects one day soon. I am very excited about participating in this class. I am an ED nurse (now for 8 yrs) at Kaiser Vallejo. I was attracted to nursing primarily due to the roles that that I saw teaching play in the science and art of nursing. My focus is the CNS concentration (Acute Care Nursing), however, I do believe that this class can provide some of the requisite tools and mental pedagogical discipline that is commensurate with teaching excellence. I must confess that I do have some amount of trepidation as, like others, I find the current "world" of strategic information processing and strategic learning quite intimidating. It is a challenge to keep abreast of changes as these changes are constantly evolving and they present unique problems. Hopefully, by the end of the class, I will acquire skills and knowledge that will enable me to understand the processes of these changes and the means to resolve the related problems.

Comments | Forward
(0 Comments / **1 New**)

☐ **Subject:** Introduction
**Author:** _____
Date: February 1, 2008 10:37 PM

Hi everyone,
I just started at UCD working with newly diagnosed breast cancer patients. I love my job.
I have three children ages 18 (daughter), 16 (daughter) and 13 (son). My 18 year old just happens to have the name Gina. I love that name.....
I am trying to finish up the education track. I am looking forward to the class and hope that I can grasp everything that will be taught.

Comments | Forward
(1 Comments / **1 New**)

Figure 5: "Introduction" Blog in an online class.

Teaching Presence

"… the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educational worthwhile learning outcomes." (Garrison, 2003)
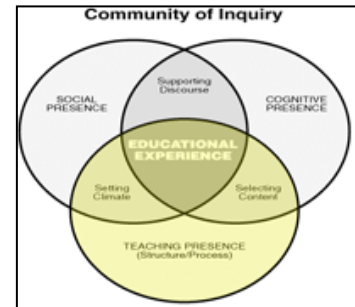
SacCT Discussion Board *(teaching presence)*

Questions to ask yourself:
- Are you encouraging *active learning* on your discussion board?
- Are you encouraging cooperation and reciprocity from your students?
- Are you communicating high expectations for your students?
- Do you give prompt feedback?
- Do you respect and acknowledge different ways of student learning?

Techniques:
- *Grade* your discussion topics. Some research argues that up the 40% of the course grade should be attributed to course discussion/participation, although as little as 10% of a course grade for online discussion participation can produce results.
- As the instructor, you are the *facilitator* of course discussion[4].
  - Aim to establish the *climate* for learning.
  - Draw in participants – prompt discussion and interaction between students.
  - Ask questions to help guide the discussion or to trigger deeper thinking.
  - Help the discussion along by identifying areas of agreement and disagreement.
  - Assist your student in reaching a consensus and understanding.
  - At the end of a discussion, *summarize* postings (see additional information below, for summarizing discussions in large classrooms).
- Provide *clear* requirements for participation, in terms of *netiquette*, and *time parameters*. See the techniques section for *cognitive presence* for additional information on developing guidelines.

Survival techniques for large classrooms:
- Develop a *Grading Form* for discussion topics. Grading forms is also something that can be used to address *cognitive presence*.
- Create a Frequently Asked Questions page to post student questions/answers to
- Refer all student technical issues to the University Help Desk and to online student technical resources
- It is especially important to the success of the discussion board in the large classroom that you establish your teaching presence right away.
- Plan response strategies and amounts of instructor responses prior to delivering the course; explain to your students the types of responses that they can expect[5].

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[4] Picket, Alexandra. 2001. *Understanding Teaching Presence Online* (http://www.slideshare.net/alexandrapickett/teaching-presence). SUNY Learning Network.

- Summarize postings – summarizing postings for a topic is one way to show teaching presence, provide feedback and prompt additional thought from your students. Creating a quick summary can be done by reading through postings for a topic while taking brief notes on trends that you see. Then use those notes to create a single posting that is used to explain trends, clarify confusing points, and to offer additional information based on responses (from *Managing the Discussion Board*).
  - Summarizing a topic is also a great way to wind down a discussion that has exceeded the number of reasonable postings or that has gotten out-of-hand, so make sure that the topic is finished before posting a summary.
- Lurking might be a good strategy sometimes. Tell students that you will lurk during a particular discussion - explain that you will be reading all posts, but that you won't be posting responses.
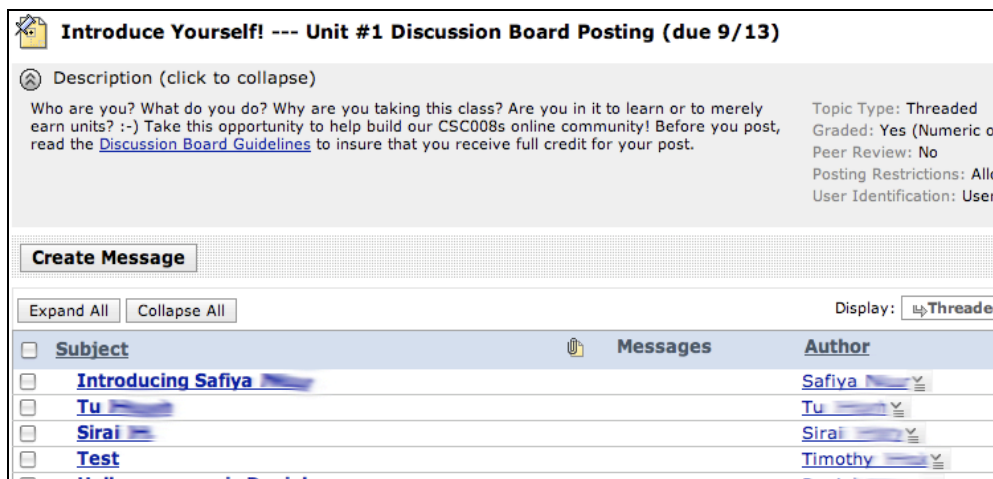
Sample topics:

Figure 6: "Introduction" topic; reference to Discussion Board Guidelines included in topic prompt.
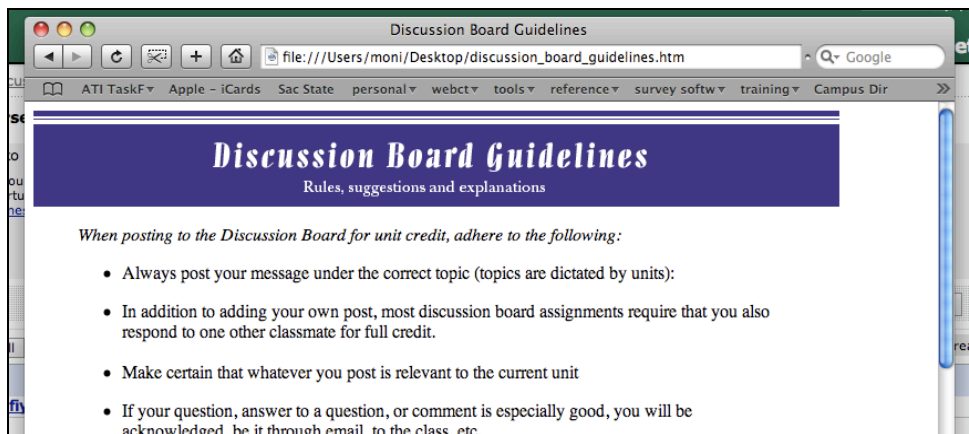

Figure 7: Sample Guidelines document referenced in topic prompt above.

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[5] Texas Woman's University Distance Education, *Managing the Discussion Board for Large Sections*, (http://twuid.pbworks.com/Managing-the-Discussion-Board-for-Large-Sections)

RESOURCES

Some of the strategies noted in this handout have been adapted from articles listed below.

- *10 Tips for Managing Larger Classes Online in Blackboard* (http://www.onlinelearning.net/InstructorCommunity/tips_feb2001.html?s=122.q040 q691b.025g421y41). OnlineLearning.net.
- Garrison D.R., Kanuka H., 2003, Community of Inquiry model, in Blended learning: Uncovering its transformative potential in higher education, Internet and Higher Education 7 95–105, Elsevier.
- Garrison D.R., Cleveland M., 2005, *Facilitating Cognitive Presence in Online Learning Interaction Is Not Enough*, American Journal of Distance Ed., *19*(3), 133–148, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Legacy Jane. 2005. *Planning and Facilitating Academic Discourse in Discussion Boards*. Online Cl@ssroom.
- Picket, Alexandra. 2001. *Understanding Teaching Presence Online* (http://www.slideshare.net/alexandrapickett/teaching-presence). SUNY Learning Network.
- Rovai, Alfred. 2002. *Building Sense of Community at a Distance*. International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning. Vol. 3, No. 1.
- SacCT Discussion Tool: Blogs – How-To (http://www.csus.edu/webct/faculty/blogs-how-to-guide.pdf)
- SacCT Discussion Tool: Journals – How-To (http://www.csus.edu/webct/faculty/journals-how-to-guide.pdf)
- SacCT documentation (http://www.csus.edu/webct/faculty/docs.stm)
- SacCT Grading Forms – How-To (http://www.csus.edu/webct/faculty/gradingform-how-to-guide.pdf)
- Stemwedel, Janet D. 2005. *Rubrics, Roles, and Successful Online Discussions*. Online Cl@ssroom.
- Vanderpool, Lucia. 2005. *Motivating Participation in Online Discussion*. Online Cl@ssroom.
- *Working with Small Groups in an Online Classroom* (http://www.onlinelearning.net/InstructorCommunity/workingwithgroups.html?s=226 .q050q695b.095g321y41). OnlineLearning.net

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