

Online Discussion Strategies

How to Ask Online Discussion Questions

Discussing questions online will help students develop a deeper understanding of the course topics. Online discussions, however, are only as effective as the questions asked. It might be difficult to come up with good questions. To get started, below are some general guidelines to help you formulate questions.

At the beginning of the course, structured discussions will help immerse students into the subject matter. Later, a conversational or more informal discussion of course topics can encourage higher and more complex levels of thinking and learning. These questions can come from the instructor or from the participants.

Although it is a good idea to prepare questions to ensure variety and movement during online discussion, it is also important to be able to readily change plans as the actual discussion proceeds in order to keep discussion going in directions that are satisfying and useful for everyone.

Discussion questioning is defined as instructional cues or stimuli that convey to online participants the content necessary to be a learner and directions for what they are to do and how it is to be done. Structured discussion questions help organize students' reading and prepare for the discussion at the beginning of the module by structuring questions around reading assignments. Following are types of questions:

Exploratory Questions
Encourage learning of facts and development of basic knowledge. For example, "What research evidence supports the theory that effective programs impose structure and limit learner control?"
Challenge Questions
Examine assumptions, conclusions, and interpretations. For example, "How else might we account for the findings of this research?"
Relational Questions
Prompt comparisons of themes, ideas or issues. For example, "Compare the benefits and challenges of asynchronous and synchronous learning. Which type of learning do you think promotes more effective group learning?"
Hypothetical Questions
Ask participants to consider how changing the circumstances of a case might alter the outcome. This requires participants to draw on their knowledge and experience to come up with plausible scenarios. For example, "How might this course have been more effective if it used video conferencing instead of audio conferencing?"

Cause-and-Effect Questions

Provoke participants to explore cause-and-effect linkages between ideas, actions or events. These kinds of questions encourage participants to investigate conventional wisdom and are fundamental to developing critical thinking. For example, "If Internet access were free, would we have a digital divide?"

Summary and Synthesis Questions

Invite participants to summarize or synthesize what has been discussed. These questions call on participants to identify key ideas from the discussion and think about them in ways that will aid recall. For example, "What are the one or two most important ideas that emerged from this discussion?" "What do you understand better as a result of this module's discussion?"

Thought-Provoking Questions

Ask participants to read the assigned text and to develop one or two questions prompted by omissions, contradictions, ambiguities, unsupported assumptions, or unacknowledged ethical dilemmas. For example, "Do you think that women have more challenges with distance education technology than men? Why or why not?"

Other discussion strategies include:

Illustrative Quotes

Participants are asked to find one or two brief quotes that they think illustrate the main thesis of the reading. Participants can also choose as quotes passages that they found difficult to understand and ask other participants for their interpretations.

Opening Statements

Start discussion with a strongly worded statement, one that is likely to challenge others' assumptions. The goal is to understand the reasoning and circumstances that frame the statement. Why would someone hold these views? What grounds can you advance to support the making of such an argument? You are asked to play devil's advocate and come up with evidence and rationales that are outside your usual frame of reference.

Opinions

Making an evaluation based on one's own opinion and justifying that opinion based on research or the text. Ask participants to express the relationships among things, or ask them to justify or support their opinions.

This are just a few ideas to get you started. You will come up with your own unique question and discussion strategies that will result in instructive, meaningful, and sometimes provocative online conversations. Enjoy!

Written by Karen Skibba