



2021 CAL Online Bulletin

Faculty Office Hours:

CAL Online Faculty Office hours are held via [Zoom](#). Faculty can make appointments for **30 minute private help sessions** or you can use the **drop-in hours** to get help, chat, share ideas, etc. Click link for [Zoom](#) site or use **Meeting ID 909 537 7104 Password: Spring2021**. Visit [Cal Online Teaching Resources](#) for other bulletins, videos & resources.

Drop-In Faculty Hours : Monday 12-1

Private Help Sessions: Send an email to tnelson@csusb.edu

What is the purpose of your online discussions?

When teaching face-to-face, it is fairly easy to ask students to work in groups and to discuss a topic with their classmates. Online discussion forums are also designed to give students a space where interactions can occur. But are your online discussions accomplishing your course goals?

A 2006 article in the [Journal of Computer Assisted Learning](#) describes four different reasons for online discussions:

- To check ideas and make sure that answers are correct
- To acquire ideas by seeing what others think
- To develop ideas by expanding upon the ideas of others
- To challenge ideas and beliefs (one's own and those of others)

Each of these reasons has a purpose that can enhance learning. But have you thought about how the structure of your prompt (question) and student responses set the stage for learning?

Here are some approaches to consider:

- If the purpose of the activity is to make sure that students' answers are correct, do you need a Discussion Forum? A [Journal](#) might be a better assignment type. Journals in Blackboard can be set to private which means that only the Instructor(s) and student have access to the responses. You can ask students to **Create New Entry** for each prompt.
- If the purpose of the idea is to acquire ideas by seeing what others think, how will you check to see that this has been accomplished? This task really has two parts: (1) generating ideas to share and (2) selecting ideas from others that you find useful. If you ask students to [Rate Posts](#), they can select between 1-5 stars for the responses provided by their classmates. You can create the criteria for these stars or ask students to do so as a class. The average number of stars will be visible to all. To enable this feature, choose **Allow Members to Rate Posts** in the forum settings.
- If you want students to develop their ideas by expanding upon those of others, then there are a few possibilities;
 - A. Use the generate ideas with post ratings as described above. Then ask students to rewrite their own response by incorporating or responding to the ideas of at least [number of] classmates. This assignment could be in the form of a text submission, a journal entry, or a new discussion forum. If you choose the discussion forum option, remember to ask yourself why this assignment is public. What should others be doing with their classmates' responses? Why?
 - B. Ask students to work together on a group response to the prompt. Google docs is a great tool for this kind of work because it allows you to use Version History to see the contributions of each group member. Be sure to have clear criteria for what you expect (and how students will be graded).
- Note that none of the above asks students to respond to other students' posts (with the exception of rating the posts) because the assignment purpose was not to discuss an idea with anyone other than the instructor. If you want students to engage in a discussion with one another, then the prompt needs to be written in a way that encourages the exchange of ideas. I've found that first teaching students the [Hierarchy of Disagreement](#) can help them to understand the ways in which we can productively disagree with others. Try having them practice name-calling, ad hominem attacks, responding to tone- if done in a fun & humorous (silly) way, it can help to break the ice. Then work on each of the higher levels of responses. These are harder and take more work so practice is key. For example, provide sample responses and have students identify the type (per the hierarchy). Then have them write their own (and rate their classmates). Pretty soon, you may find that the "Respond to 3 classmates' posts" becomes the engaging debate that you'd hoped for.