

Ensure Students Are Learning: Faculty Descriptions of Innovative Teaching Practices

Finding Opportunity, Not Limitations, in Online Discussion Format

Innovative Teaching Practice Description:

Online discussion forums offer an opportunity for students to practice academic thinking and writing. In an art history class, the instructor reinvents traditional online discussion boards by requiring responses to include multimedia content. For example, an assignment asks students to answer this prompt: “Using multimedia content to support your textual analysis, what are five differences between the Christian Byzantine and Proto Renaissance styles?” Students first use their course texts and other credible sources to research the topic; then they must find multimedia content, compose their response, and properly cite their sources.

Using multimedia documents as evidence to support analysis can put an innovative spin on traditional discussion boards. Pictures, videos, and other forms of media provide specificity to an argument, enabling students to participate on a more comprehensive level, as compared to using words alone. Another prompt example asks students to branch out beyond the course texts: “Without using examples available in course texts, provide concrete examples of how humanism impacted 14th century art. Your evidence should be pictures of the artwork and your written analysis should reference the chosen artwork.”

By actively monitoring and moderating student activity and offering immediate feedback to student responses, the instructor not only actively engages students in dialogue but also models expectations for respectful discussion. Additionally, students are more likely to engage if the instructor is participating alongside them. A rubric outlining the requirements for online responses can help students meet clearly identified expectations. Rubric items to consider include the relevance of the response to the prompt, the number of sources used, the length of the posting, the courtesy of the wording, the response’s significance to the overall discussion, and the depth and breadth of the response.

Since there are fewer time constraints restricting web-based dialogue, instructors can hold students to higher expectations than they can with in-person conversations. This instructor embedded development sessions aimed at building academic skills throughout the curriculum to prepare students to meet the requirements of college-level writing and thinking. One session teaches students to use college library tools to find and identify credible sources appropriate for academic settings. Another, centered on argument building, focuses on the foundational skills of creating, supporting, and writing collegiate-level reasoning.