

TIPS FOR ONLINE LEARNING

Using Discussion Boards to Enhance Your Online Learning

TIP ONE: CONTRIBUTING TO DISCUSSION BOARDS

Cohort-based online courses often include a **Discussion Board**. This part of the course is only as valuable as the contributions made by the participants! Participants can interact in a Discussion Board by sharing what they have learned, expressing how they will apply the information, reacting to other participants' posts, and asking questions.

Three examples of contributions participants can make on a Discussion Board are:

1. Content. Statements that are focused on course content and originated by the participant making the post.
 - a) Example:
 1. Answering the question posed by the course facilitator on the course site (discussion board suggestion)
 2. Creating a new idea or discussion topic, related to the course material, which the participant would like others to respond to.
2. Responsive. Tend to be brief comments that keep the discussion moving and help the other participants know you are reading their posts. (Similar to a “like” on Facebook or favoring a tweet on Twitter) Responses are supportive and/or connecting in nature.
 - a) Example:
 1. Supportive: “Great idea, John”, “Thanks for making that contribution”, “Very interesting point of view, I hadn’t thought about it like that before”, “Ditto!”
 2. Connecting: Response that ties together two comments that were made by different participants. “Interesting point, Isabella. Your idea relates to what Thomas was writing about yesterday when he commented that...”
3. Initiating comments. An introductory remark to a “new” subject or thought. Most discussion boards provide ideas of what content to respond to, but participants can also initiate conversations.
 - a) Example:
 1. “This discussion has been very helpful, and it is reminding me of another topic that I’d like to hear others thoughts on....”

TIP TWO: BUILDING COMMUNITY ONLINE

Many people really enjoy online learning but miss the sense of community that can develop in person. By following a few simple tips, participants can build rapport with classmates:

- Profile: Create a profile in Moodle and upload a photo. The photo will appear next to all posts, helping others connect ideas with other participant's faces.
- Participant names: Use other people's names in discussion board posts. This shows that participants are paying attention to what other people have to say and makes the whole discussion more conversational.
- Emoticons: Emojis aren't just for texting! 😊😊😊 Moodle comes with built-in emoticons on their text editor for discussion boards. While many people don't use a smiley face in professional communication, it can help convey tone (for instance, humor) so often missed in text-based settings.
- Personal examples: Use personal examples to help illustrate points. Adults learn best by sharing their own experiences and helping put information in to personal contexts.
- Multimedia: Consider appropriate use of multimedia in posts: photos from a county program, links to articles, or online videos. Media can increase the richness of the experience.



TIP THREE: BLOCKING TIME TO PARTICIPATE

Cohort-based courses are designed to have the participants work through the *same content* at the *same time* in order to provide deeper learning through sharing and applying together. However, there is flexibility on WHEN participants complete course activities during the designated timeframe (often a week). **It is recommended that participants block time in their calendar for course participation.** The following diagram is an example of what a participant’s calendar week may look like while taking a 4-6 hour/week online course. Yellow represents time designated to the online course, “Green” is lunch and “Blue” represents time in other work. Note that there are a **minimum of five “check-in’s”** through the week which range from ½ hour to 2 hours. Other work can happen while taking an online course... but intentional blocks of time will prevent the participant from falling behind in course activities.

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
		8:00 – 8:30 Online Course: Read Discussion Board		
9:00 – 10:30 Online Course: Watch Presentation, Read handouts	8:00 – 10:00 Meeting		8:00 – 12:00 Meeting	9:00 – 10:00 Online course: Read/Respond to Discussion Board, Finish Module Activities
	10:00 – 10:30 Online Course: Write/Read Discussion Board	10:00 – 11:00 Meeting		
11:00 – 12:00 Meeting				
Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch
	1:00 – 2:30 Meeting		1:00 – 5:00 Meeting	
2:00 – 3:30 Meeting	3:00 – 4:00 Online Course: Read/Respond to Discussion Board	1:30 – 2:30 Online Course: Work on Module Activity		2:00 – 3:30 Meeting

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Sources:

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