



## Building a Brick-and-Mortar Framework for Online Discussion Boards

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## Author Biography

Dr. Melony Shemberger is associate professor of journalism and mass communication at Murray State University. She is faculty regent on the university's Board of Regents.

Shemberger was a 2019 Bluegrass Academic Leadership Academy Fellow, a 2017 Scripps Howard Academic Leadership Academy Fellow, and a 2014 Reynolds Journalism Institute Business Journalism Professors Seminar Fellow. At Murray State, she was a Faculty Teaching Fellow from 2015-17 and was interim director of the Faculty Development Center in 2016. She also teaches in the Governor's Scholars Program.

A lifetime member of The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi and chapter president, Shemberger served on the national board of directors from 2016-18.

Shemberger earned a Doctor of Education from Tennessee State University. She is pursuing a master's in instructional systems design at the University of Kentucky.

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## Building a Brick-and-Mortar Framework for Online Discussion Boards

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*Class discussions are helpful in building knowledge of complex material through peer- and instructor-led opportunities. To facilitate online learning, educators have used the discussion board as a learning tool. Although digital channels of communication have emerged and offer more connected interactivity among the content, students and the instructor, the online discussion board remains the primary tool to facilitate discussions. However, engaging students in the online platform can be challenging. Applying two theoretical frameworks that have served as the foundation for online education, this article discusses several tactics that can help the instructor to adapt the brick-and-mortar instructional approach of classroom discussions to create effective online discussions.*

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### Introduction

In the traditional face-to-face format, classroom discussions can guide learners toward building knowledge of complex material through peer- and instructor-led opportunities. This brick-and-mortar learning activity also is beneficial in establishing learning communities, giving discussion boards a social dimension that contributes to the learning experience. The number of online courses has increased at colleges and universities. Despite overall enrollments having declined at higher education institutions in the United States, online course enrollments have risen because of the convenience and flexibility that the online learning platform offers (Allen & Seaman, 2016).

In the past, one of the strongest criticisms of online teaching and learning pertained to the lack of communication and interaction. The most cited reason why learners are dissatisfied with online and hybrid courses is a perceived lack of interaction (Cole, Shelley, & Swartz, 2014). When online courses were emerging along with the internet, the content focuses on text, with discussion boards the dominant communication forum.

Discussions, either face-to-face or online, are a type of active learning that gets students involved in the learning process so that they are constructing meaning and collaborating with each other. Students should be engaged in activities that involve

reflection, assessment, and learning tasks associated with mastery of the material” (Weimer, 2013).

Online teaching has evolved, thanks to emerging instructional technologies, such as webinars, audio/video conferencing, virtual and augmented realities, social networking sites, email, and learning management systems (Canvas, Blackboard, D2L, Moodle, e.g.). These platforms provide synchronous (instructor and student communicating at the same time) and asynchronous (self-paced learning) online discussions. Greater attention to instructional design, such as “chunking” material into course modules and focused learning outcomes, also has elevated the opportunities that online courses can provide.

## **Theoretical Approaches**

Today, online discussions remain the primary tools to facilitate learning, but engaging students in the online platform is challenging. Two related theoretical frameworks help in this discussion. One guiding principle is the three types of interaction, which will help to inform discussion and application of the Community of Inquiry (CoI) Model, the second framework.

### ***Three types of interaction***

Moore (1989) identified three types of interaction in the early decades of distance education when scholars sought to determine the kind of interaction needed for effective learning. The three interactions are learner-content, learner-instructor, and learner-learner. Each is described briefly.

**Learner-content.** Moore described the learner-content interaction, which occurs between the learner and the content or topic of study, as “the defining characteristic of education” (p. 1). This type is the process in which a learner’s understanding changes after the learner intellectually interacts with the material, which can include text, video, audio and other digital tools.

**Learner-instructor.** The second type of interaction occurs between the learner and the instructor who prepared the materials and designed the instruction. Instructors present the material or demonstrate the skill, as well as provide encouragement and support to students.

**Learner-learner.** In this type of interaction, learners obtain new insights and perceptions from each other. This new knowledge then can enhance the learner-content interaction. Student presentations and group work are examples of the inter-learner dimension.

Active learning has a role to play in the online environment to create the learner interactions that Moore discussed. Building a blend of these three interaction types

has been shown to improve motivation, satisfaction and achievement in online courses (Mahle, 2011; Park & Choi, 2009). Some theories of distance education highly regarded student independence. The early work of Moore and Garrison, among others, focused on interpersonal communication between teacher and student. The second framework discussed below takes the interaction a step further to collaboration and construction.

### ***Community of Inquiry (Col) Model***

The Col Model is a process of creating a collaborative-constructivist learning experience through the development of three interdependent elements: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence, all of which are created through interpersonal communication. To be effective, all three presences must be developed in balance (Akyol & Garrison, 2008). Each is explained briefly.

**Social presence.** This phase is designed to support critical inquiry. Therefore, social presence means being in an online environment that supports and encourages questions and skepticism, as well as the expression and contribution of ideas. When social presence is established, collaboration and critical discourse is enhanced and sustained (Garrison & Akyol, n.d.).

**Cognitive presence.** At the nexus of a community of inquiry, this presence requires engaging students in all phases of practical inquiry. A moderator who can assess the nature of the discourse consistently is needed to advance the critical thinking component.

**Teaching presence.** This third dimension is the key element in integrating social and cognitive presence during the inquiry process. It serves as the glue in the development of an online community. Simply, teaching presence is what the instructor does to create a meaningful community of inquiry.

When combined, the two frameworks--the three types of learner interaction and the Col Model--are helpful in designing tactics to improve online discussions that will strengthen the online experience and community for both the learner and the instructor. The suggested tactics that derive from these theories were applied in three online journalism courses at a four-year southeastern university in the United States. The next section will discuss each tactic.

### **Discussion and Considerations**

A clear instructional design, purpose and outcome of the learning activity is paramount to students' participation and engagement in the discussion board (Steen, 2015). Further, the role of the instructors and students must be articulated from the beginning of the course and throughout the learning activity (Steen, 2015). This section identifies tactics to assist instructors who include discussion boards in their

online courses. These tactics were followed in several online journalism courses that deployed discussion boards for generation of ideas and critical feedback on news sources. It is not necessary for instructors to incorporate all nine tactics. Rather, on-line instructors are encouraged to select one or two to help them navigate and enhance discussions more efficiently.

1. *Provide a prompt, guidelines, or stipulations.* Action verbs are key. For responses to be thorough and rich, verbs such as *discuss*, *explain*, *argue*, *examine*, *analyze*, and *debate* provide a task for the student. In addition, specify if there is a word count that the response should have, when the response should be made, or any other requirements.
2. *Structure board participation that works for you.* Instructors can decide a deadline for when students should respond. This also will help the student to write meaningful discussion responses.
3. *Let students know when you will participate.* If learners are aware that an instructor will respond to discussion threads a certain day each week, the responses likely will be completed more timely.
4. *Vary the tech methods of response.* For a discussion board assignment one week, a student can submit a written response. For a subsequent week, the submission could be a video or audio response. This helps the learner to interact the material and peers in different ways.
5. *Require that students respond to others.* This tactic could be included as a criterion in a rubric or other evaluation instrument. Specify for the learner whether a certain number of responses would be required.
6. *Direct traffic.* Opportunities exist for the instructor to ask follow-up questions, either to an individual learner's response or in a separate discussion thread.
7. *Inform students privately when they fail to respond to the discussion.* The discussion board is a forum to comment on ideas and raise further questions, not a student's performance or lack of attention to the question.
8. *Have students lead online discussions.* A learner could present a discussion question and serve as a moderator or discussant throughout the discussion assignment. This tactic also is ideal with project presentations that require learners to post research findings, and a learner acts as a discussion leader.
9. *Divide class into small groups.* Learning management systems such as Canvas enable the instructor to place students into groups, allowing learners to collaborate more effectively on assignments and projects without involving the entire class.

## Conclusion

Discussion boards are a form of active learning. Just as several ways exist to facilitate face-to-face discussions, the same is true for the online environment. Effective online discussion boards that use one or more of the tactics can help the instructor and learners maintain a productive course. The tactics also create a sense of transparency for the learner, who is able to contribute to the discussion with clear guidance in the prompt. Regardless of which tactic(s) an online instructor chooses, it will be important to plan and prepare effective discussion prompts that would lead the learner to invest in the content, to gain new perspectives from the instructor, and to interact with other learners in the online course.

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