Discussion Questions

that increase think time!

Most online educators know that discussion is one of the biggest advantages of online education. The increased think-time allowed by the asynchronous environment, together with the absence of public speaking fears, produces far deeper discussion than is usually found in face-to-face courses.

But many educators undermine this natural advantage by creating poor discussion questions. The number one mistake is to confuse a discussion question with an essay topic. *What are the three criteria used to judge whether patients are competent to make a medical decision for themselves?* is not a discussion question. It’s an essay question and should be left to an essay assignment. Some instructors turn discussion into research assignments by requiring students to cite a certain number of outside sources in order to get full credit. Discussion is, well, discussion. I mostly want to hear what you think, not what someone else thinks.

Creating good discussion questions is just plain hard, and instructors fall back on essay questions for lack of better ideas. Below are some question types that, knowing, will help generate real discussion.

**CASE STUDY**

Case studies are an ideal way to enlighten the practical consequences of different concepts. For example, in a medical ethics course:

A 72-year-old man is admitted to the hospital for a kidney transplant. His daughter is brought in as the best available donor match. As the man’s doctor, you discover from the pre-op lab work that the daughter is not a suitable donor because she is not his biological daughter. What, if anything, do you tell the man, his wife, or the daughter?

This example provides an ideal way to explore how fundamental principles of privacy, physician honesty, and shielding a patient from harm crash in the real world. The question allows for a variety of answers, each of which takes the students deeper into the fundamental issues being taught in the course.

**CONTROVERSY**

Another good discussion device is to generate controversy with a statement that challenges common orthodoxy. Consider this question in an information security class:

A fundamental tenet of information security is that you must force the user to periodically change his or her password. But this practice actually undermines security. With constantly changing passwords, users are forced to write them down in an easy-to-find location or use an easy-to-guess algorithm (my street address followed by a ’1,’ then changed to a ’2,’ then changed to a ’3,’ etc.). We are better off letting users keep the same password indefinitely. Do you agree?

Also important is that a controversial statement needs to draw a fine line that allows for reasonable positions on both sides of the issue. A good statement that challenges what is being presented in the readings demonstrates that the instructor considers the students co-investigators and allows them to draw upon their wider knowledge base to engage the issues.

**SUMMARY**

A good way to end discussion threads is to post a summary of the main points as well as your thoughts on them. Revisiting material is good for retention, and these summaries demonstrate that you are keeping abreast of the discussion. Alternatively, you can assign different students to post summaries of each discussion.

Video summaries help capture attention, because there is something about hearing a voice and seeing a face. It requires only a cheap webcam and a few minutes. Don’t toil over getting it perfect—it’s discussion, remember. Just speak your mind for a few minutes, and post it as a video.

**MORE INFORMATION**

http://elearning.uaf.edu/go/discussion2
http://www.thinkfinity.org/docs/DOC-6813
http://elearning.uaf.edu/go/discussion