Communication Plan
for Online Teaching

Dustin Summey, Instructional Design Specialist
Instructional Development Center
University of Central Arkansas
dsummey@uca.edu

PART 1: Sample Course Outline

Week 1:	Introductions and Virtual Icebreaker
Week 2:	Establish format of learning modules for remainder of course
Weeks 3-6:	Instructor-led Forums
	Collaborative Inquiry Projects
Weeks 7-13:	Student-led Forums (Entire Class or Small Groups)
	Collaborative Inquiry Projects
Weeks 14-15:	Final Projects and Presentations
	(Schedule Synchronous Online Meetings)

PART 2: Routine Administrative Tasks

Set a specific time to accomplish these tasks <u>daily</u>. Also establish and maintain regular online office hours at least two times per week where students can make contact via chat, telephone, and web-based videoconferencing tools such as Skype.

- Check content area discussion forums for new posts
- Check social discussion threads (e.g., virtual café, tech help)
- Check private discussion forums and e-mails
- Provide individualized feedback, for both acknowledgment and informational purposes
- Track student participation and contact students who have demonstrated a lack of participation over time (e.g., 10+ days)

## PART 3: Discussion Forum Strategies

- Personal Introduction/Virtual Icebreaker Activity
- Sample Critical Thinking Prompts
- Discussion Forum Guide for Students
- Key Facilitator Roles
- Methods for Approaching Discussion Forum Facilitation

Personal Introduction/Virtual Icebreaker Activity

Dear Students:

Welcome to class! My name is Mr. Summey, and I am excited about our online learning adventure this semester. It is truly an adventure because you never know what direction it will take as we engage in lively discussions and use the Internet to support our research and project development. One of the many reasons I enjoy teaching and learning online is the fact that there are seemingly endless resources readily available through the web.

Before we begin the first module, I think it is important to take time for us to meet each other. I will start here, and then I would like each of you to reply to my post and tell us who you are, including your professional goals and what you enjoy doing for fun. Select an avatar (picture or graphic) that represents you, and add it to your post. Also share briefly what you hope to take away from this course. Finally, take time to read other posts and respond to at least three with whom you find something in common.
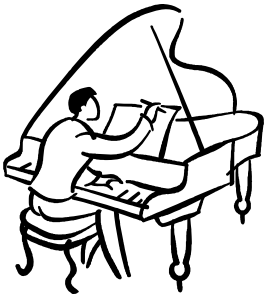
As you might guess by the graphic, I am a pianist. I enjoy all types of music. In fact, my undergraduate degree is in music education. My graduate work is in educational technology and online teaching. I taught high school for six years. My wife and I like to travel and, and we are always eager to explore new places. I look forward to getting to know each of you as we learn together this semester.

Mr. Summey

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Sample Critical Thinking Prompts

<u>Family and Consumer Sciences</u>: *There are a variety of diet plans being promoted currently, and each has a unique set of positive and negative aspects. What do you believe to be the best choice? Use evidence from professional resources (e.g., research articles, etc.; not advertisements) to support your assertions. Then respond to at least one other post.*

<u>Fine Arts</u>: *Given the assigned artwork, describe whether you consider it to be a successful work of art. Justify your stance by discussing the literal, design, or expressive traits that would be considered from one of the three theoretical perspectives: imitationalism, formalism, or emotionalism. Then respond to at least one other post. How is another student's interpretation similar to or different from your own?*

<u>World Literature</u>: *What can be learned about Anglo-Saxon culture from <u>Beowulf</u>? Draw insights from the literature to support your claims. Then respond to at least one other post.*

<u>Music</u>: *How has the Internet changed the landscape of the recording industry for better or for worse? Think about how you access new music and learn about new artists? What role do you as a consumer play in the music industry?*

<u>Business</u>: *The company you work for is considering changing suppliers because an overseas source can provide products at a fraction of the cost of the domestic supplier. Take on the role of either supporting or opposing the change and use data and other factual evidence to support your position.*

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Key Facilitator Roles

- ❖ <u>Guide on the Side</u>
  - o Avoid simply praising students' contributions
  - o Draw upon elements that already exist in the dialogue
  - o Highlight tensions in the discussion
  - o Model an appropriate response
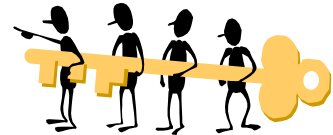
- ❖ <u>Instructor or Project Leader</u>
  - o Address content separately from technical issues and assignment concerns
  - o Enlist student leaders to support their peers

- ❖ <u>Group Process Facilitator</u>
  - o Lead introductory, community building activities (e.g. virtual icebreakers)
  - o Provide assistance to those needing extra technical assistance
  - o Acknowledge diversity when planning for and facilitating instruction
  - o Be authentic. Establish a personal tone with graphics and humor and in general by the way you talk/write/type.
  - o Maintain a healthy rate of responding to posts.
  - o Establish an active pace from the start of the course and continue to drive it through the end. Take care not to let the course lag.
  - o Organize posts and discussion threads. Label message subjects logically and clearly.
  - o Use the appropriate form of communication (i.e. e-mail, public discussion forum, etc.)

Reference

Collison, G., Elbaum, B., Haavind, S., & Tinker, R. (2000). *Facilitating online learning: Effective strategies for moderators*. Madison, WI: Atwood Publishing.

Methods for Approaching Discussion Forum Facilitation

❖ <u>Instructor-Led</u>

The instructor posts a prompt and students are required to post an initial response by midweek and one or more follow-up responses to other students' posts by the end of the week.

❖ <u>Student-Led (full class)</u>

A few students opt to each facilitate one discussion with the entire class, taking on the role of the instructor by crafting the prompt and providing moderation as needed. These student-moderators might select this option as part of a set of collaborative inquiry projects.

❖ <u>Student-Led (small groups)</u>

The class divides into groups of 4-5 people, and each student takes a turn as discussion moderator within small groups. This allows the potential for every student to lead a discussion. It is particularly useful when full-class discussion threads have a tendency to become lengthy and overwhelming to follow.

Discussion Forum Guide for Students

Several discussion forums have been established, and each one has a specific purpose. The instructor will monitor all of them and provide moderation if necessary. Please know that the instructor reads every post. When posting to a discussion forum, picture yourself in a classroom with other students.

❖ General Expectations
   o Remain professional, respectful, and courteous at all times.
   o Keep posts on-topic and professional. Conversation in the virtual student lounge forum should not wander far. Please refrain from discussions of religion, politics, etc.
   o Remember that a real person wrote each post and will read what your write as well. It is easy to misinterpret online conversation. Give the benefit of the doubt. If you become upset, wait a day or two and cool down before posting.
   o Proofread prior to submitting a post. Discussion forums require slightly more formal language than e-mail and chat while still being more casual than writing a paper.
   o Remember that discussion forums are visible by the entire class. Use e-mail for any private comments to a student or the instructor. Inappropriate posts will be removed.

News Forum
General Course Announcements and Information

Tech Help Forum
Questions Regarding Technology Issues

(Please do not e-mail the instructor with technology questions. If other students are unable to provide assistance through this forum, then you may need to contact the campus student technology help desk.)

Student Lounge
Casual and Off-Topic Discussion between Students

MAIN Discussion Forum
Used for weekly topical discussion threads. You will typically be required to post an initial response by Thursday and a follow-up response to one or more other students' posts by Sunday.

Virtual Icebreaker Forum
Used for introductory activities at the start of the course

❖ Other Communication
   o Please feel free to call or e-mail the instructor anytime.
   o The instructor will generally respond to e-mails within 24 hours except on the weekends, in which case the instructor will respond on Monday.
   o In addition to weekly office hours, the instructor is willing to schedule an online or face-to-face meeting at an alternate time by request.

PART 4: Discussion Forum Assessment

Rubric – Student Participation in Online Discussion Forums

	4	3	2	1
Critical Thinking	Conveys significant depth of thought through reflection and new ideas supported by outside readings/resources *(optional: incorporates relevant multimedia)*	Demonstrates some depth of thought and may include new ideas and/or supporting references	Very little original thought; mostly summarizes or restates information from assigned reading	No evidence of critical thinking, synthesis, or reflection
Collaboration/ Contribution	Participates actively by responding to other posts and contributing meaningful questions and/or comments that prompt further discussion	Responds to other posts but may not serve to promote further discussion	Mostly superficial posts with little engagement in overall discussion	Does not respond to other posts or interact within the discussion thread
Promptness/ Deadlines	Post(s) submitted on time and early enough to engage further discussion	Post(s) submitted 1-2 days late	Post(s) submitted 3-4 days late	Post(s) submitted 5+ days late
Organization	Well-organized; logical sequence of ideas	Mostly organized and logical	Little evidence of structure	Poorly written; disorganized
Grammar & Mechanics	No significant errors (two or less minor instances)	1-3 significant errors	4-6 significant errors	Widespread grammar and mechanics errors

PART 5: Management Issues and Strategies (Contingency Plan)

❖ Inactivity (group)

If a discussion begins to stall or lag, the facilitator may take on the role of a prompter and pose open-ended questions that elicit a substantive response.

❖ Inactivity (individual)

The facilitator may address lack of participation by contacting the student privately and determining if the issue is related to motivation, difficulty understanding the discussion prompt, or perhaps a technology problem. Students may become overwhelmed by a complex prompt or by a discussion thread that becomes too big. Another contributing issue may be intimidation or a concern for privacy within the online community.

❖ Dominant Student

Sometimes a student will monopolize a discussion—either deliberately or unintentionally—by participating too much in the thread. In such a situation, the facilitator may contact the student privately while also publicly encouraging all students to participate.

❖ Digressions / Off-Topic Posts

When discussion participants introduce off-topic posts, the facilitator can respond by following the general steps listed below for dealing with issues and if necessary deleting the off-topic posts.

❖ Misconceptions

Establishing netiquette guidelines prior to day one of an online course and reiterating those guidelines in multiple locations within the LMS can help students avoid misunderstandings and remind them to be slow to react when a post is perceived as offensive. If a difficult situation does occur, the general steps listed below provide a good method for diffusing any tension.

❖ Not Following Rubric Requirements

Facilitators can provide representative examples of discussion posts in order to reinforce rubric guidelines and expectations for quality and quantity within discussion forums. This may also be useful if student posts consistently fail to align with rubric requirements.

❖ Inappropriate Communications

Facilitators can follow the general steps listed below in order to deal with "mutineers" who post flaming messages either to incite a strong reaction or directly challenge the instructor or a student.

❖ Balance of Optimal Group Size

While Palloff and Pratt (2007) advise that asynchronous discussions can have up to 20 participants, discussion threads can easily become difficult to manage and overwhelming to follow. One potential solution is to use small group discussions with 4-5 participants. Synchronous (live) discussions should include between five and ten participants.

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❖ <u>General Steps for Dealing with Behavior Issues within a Discussion Forum</u>

1. Send a private e-mail to student.
2. Address the issue in general within the discussion thread.
3. Document the infraction in order to track incidents and support any further action that might be necessary.

Reference

Palloff, R. M., & Pratt, K. (2007). *Building online learning communities: Effective strategies for the virtual classroom.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.