

Using Rubrics and Journaling to Assess Learning and Participation in Online Discussions

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Effective design of course activities is a critical factor in the success of any online course. This is especially true for discussion activities as unfocused discussion can eat up a great deal of time and energy for both learners and instructors. It is easier to facilitate an online discussion when its purpose has been clearly stated to the learners. It is also easier to evaluate the learning that takes place through an online discussion when that learning can be directly related to specific outcomes. Some discussion activities are developed with the intention of having learners reach a consensus about a particular issue. Other topics are best addressed when a wide range of opinions are put forth which may lead to healthy disagreements or debates. Whatever the purpose of a discussion, it should be reflected in both formative and summative feedback to the learners, and there are tools and strategies that can help. Many articles and books have presented theories and practical advice on online facilitation (e.g. Berg, 1996; Pallott and Pratt, 1999; Collison, 2000). This paper focuses on learning through online discussion and provides some ideas for conducting its assessment for formative and summative purposes.

Assessment in online course can be used to encourage students to participate and to reflect on their experience (Mason, 2001). Since the evidence of learning in online discussion is the posted messages, content analysis becomes the most common method by researchers and teachers alike to analyze learning that are achieved in the online environment (Rourke et al, 2001). We summarize several evaluation rubrics and templates that can be used to assess online discussion. Please note that the rubrics and templates presented here are generic and serve as examples of how assessment can be done in a systematic manner. Instructors may wish to modify the criteria or grading to better suit the learning outcomes of their courses.

Rubric for Individual Discussion

Based on RRU's participation guidelines for discussion, the rubric below can be applied to grade individual learner's performance in discussions. Instructors can assess the postings on a weekly basis or at the end of a discussion topic. Scores can be compiled to reflect each learner's learning during the course if instructors would like to provide feedback to learners, or at the end of the course as the final grade for discussion/participation.

However, assessing discussion with such detail and attention requires considerable time. Instructors may choose to apply the analysis to a sample of the learner's postings rather than assessing each posting. Another technique would be to have learners apply the analysis through the use of a reflective journal. See [*Reflective Journal*](#) below.

	Criteria	Indicator	
Participation	Minimum two postings per week throughout the course	Number of postings and even distribution of postings	
Critical thinking	Postings indicate critical thinking about the topic at hand	Postings show: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analyses • Insights • Observations • Reflections • Substantive questions to further discussion 	
Response and synthesis	Postings draw from the assigned readings and reflect on the postings of other learners and possibly integrate ideas from others	Postings that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make references to readings and others' posting to advance the discussion • In making references, pose questions, ask for clarification or offer comment or different perspectives 	
Additional relevant information	Suggest appropriate websites or resources to move the discussion to a further level but not burden the class by including unnecessary information	Postings that <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include relevant resources with explanations on why such resources are of relevance and interest to the rest of the class 	
Succinct postings and netiquette	Keep individual posting brief; encourage others to participate; respect others perspectives	Postings that <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Average no more than 2 paragraphs at a time • Invite others to comment and respond • Are respectful of others 	

The criteria can be customized to include a course's learning outcomes or to incorporate differential weightings to place more emphasis on one criterion over another. Following is an example.

Score:

4. Excellent –If the person were not a member of the online discussion, the quality of discussion would diminish significantly.
3. Good – If the person were not a member of the online discussion, the quality of discussion would diminish.
2. Adequate - If the person were not a member of the online discussion, the quality of discussion would somewhat diminish.
1. Not satisfactory - If the person were not a member of the online discussion, the quality of discussion would not be changed.

Learner name: Jane Smith

Assessment period: September 5 to September 12

	Criteria	Indicator	Weighting x Score	
Participation	Minimum two postings per week throughout the course	Number of postings and even distribution of postings	1	4
Critical thinking	Postings indicate critical thinking about the topic at hand	Postings show: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Analyses Insights Observations Reflections Substantive questions to further discussion 	5	2
Response and synthesis	Postings draw from the assigned readings and reflect on the postings of other learners and possibly integrate ideas from others	Postings that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make references to readings and others' posting to advance the discussion In making references, pose questions, ask for clarification or offer comment or different perspectives 	4	3
Additional relevant information	Suggest appropriate websites or resources to move the discussion to a further level but not burden the class by including unnecessary information	Postings that <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Include relevant resources with explanations on why such resources are of relevance and interest to the rest of the class 	3	1
Succinct postings and netiquette	Keep individual posting brief; encourage others to participate; respect others perspectives	Postings that <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Average no more than 2 paragraphs at a time Invite others to comment and respond Are respectful of others 	2	3
		Total:		35

As a formative feedback to Jane based on the assessment, the instructor can help her work on critical thinking and researching relevant resources.

Peer Assessment Rubric for Team Discussion

Learners working on group projects can use peer assessment to provide performance-enhancing feedback to their team members. It is a dynamic and interactive process, involving the learner in the assessment, critique, and judgment of the quality and standard of other learner's work, which has been shown to promote deep learning (Juwah, 2003).

This rubric can be used by learners to analyze their own and their team members' participation and contribution to the team discussion and team product.

Score:

5. Contributes more than other group members
4. Contributes at a similar level
3. Contributes at a lower level than most of the group members
2. Does not contribute effectively
1. Contributions have a negative impact on team process

	Criteria	Score
Team process: Individual's participation to the team	displays a high level of enthusiasm	
	shares ideas	
	helps the group function well as a team	
	organizes the group and ensures things get done	
	performs tasks in accordance with team expectations	
Team productivity: Individual's contribution to the final product (e.g. team reports)	Brainstorm ideas	
	Provide constructive feedback	
	Analyze group contributions	
	Synthesize ideas to produce group product	
	Edit group product	

Reflective Journal

The onus of evaluating online discussion can be shared between instructors and learners. In fact, involving learners in the assessment brings benefit to the learning process because they have a chance to reflect on their newly acquired knowledge and skills (Garrison and Anderson, 2003, p.97-98). The techniques of a reflective journal can be applied in several ways.

- Reflect on their own postings using the Rubric for Individual Discussion: instructors can ask learners to extract three of their own best postings as evidence for their achievements in each of the stated criteria in the assessment rubric.
- Self-assessment of their own participation and contribution to the team using the Rubric for Team Discussion: As an integral part of the peer assessment, learners can evaluate their own performance against the team process and team productivity as a way to reflect on their development of team work skills.

- Reflect on their own and/or others postings against course learning outcomes: Reflection can be in a broader context of learning and be tied into course learning outcomes; therefore, learners can be asked to extract evidence of learning through their own postings or others' postings which help them learn the most. This technique gives the vicarious learners (or lurker) a venue to express their performance achievements even if they may not be posting frequently (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

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