

Correspondent

Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

SWOSU Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning Newsletter

May/June 2019

Marci's Messages

I just wanted to let you know that I will be retiring on July 1, 2019, and Lisa Friesen will be the new Director of the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning.

Canvas Updates

Since the release of Microsoft Edge, more customers have been switching to more modern browser technologies. Microsoft has announced that Internet Explorer 11 will ultimately be discontinued. Microsoft Edge is the default web browser on Windows 10 machines.

Upcoming Change

On 3 August 2019, Internet Explorer 11 will no longer be supported as a Canvas browser. Internet Explorer was previously downgraded to a functionally supported browser in March 2018.

CETL's New Director

Please welcome Lisa Friesen as CETL's new Director beginning July 1st, 2019. I will be retiring at the end of June. I have enjoyed working with each of you during my 31 years at SWOSU. Marci

SWOSU Instructional Excellence Academy Class 2



Faculty have been selected to participate in Class 2 of the SWOSU Instructional Excellence Academy. Academy is Southwestern Oklahoma State University's initiative to provide resources to university instructors who wish to improve teaching and learning in their classrooms.

Many excellent applications were received and reviewed by a panel of SWOSU staff and faculty. The Class 2 of the SWOSU Instructional Excellence Academy that runs Fall 2019 through Spring 2020 are

- **Dr. Angela Gore**, School of Nursing and Allied Health Sciences
- **Dr. Christi Cook**, Department of Language and Literature
- **Ms. Cindi Albrightson**, Department of Computer Science and Engineering Technology
- **Dr. Daniel Kavish**, Department of Social Sciences
- **Dr. David Lawrence**, Department of Computer Science and Engineering Technology
- **Dr. Elaine Davies**, Department of Art, Communication, and Theatre
- **Dr. Geo Kelly**, Department of Business
- **Dr. Keturah Adams**, Department of Chemistry and Physics

- **Mr. Paul Hummel**, Department of Parks, Recreation, and Management
- **Dr. Sylvia Esjornson**, Department of Chemistry and Physics
- **Ms. Tammy Blatnick**, School of Nursing and Allied Health Sciences

Contact Ashley Walkout about creating a course header for the homepage of your Canvas Course.

For Example



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Focus on SWOSU Faculty

The Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning is spotlighting faculty members monthly in a series of articles called "Focus on SWOSU Faculty". These faculty have been selected as doing inspiring active learning activities in their courses and have agreed to share some of their activities with the SWOSU community. One SWOSU faculty member will be spotlighted per month who is using transformative and other exciting active learning methods in their teaching which advances student learning at SWOSU. This month, CETL is spotlighting Dr. Becky Bruce, Department of Social Sciences as CETL's May/June 2019 spotlighted faculty.



Dr. Becky Bruce grew up in New Mexico where she thought she would grow up to be a lawyer, but during her freshman year at the University of New Mexico, she fell in love with history and political science. Not real sure what you do with a degree in history, she considered law school, until she took a year off and worked for a lawyer and realized that was not for her. She then realized that her love of both history and political science could be blended together and she decided to go to graduate school and to study

U.S. diplomatic and political history. She earned her Master's degree from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas and her Ph.D. from the University of Alabama.

Dr. Bruce earned her undergraduate degree in History and Political Science at Eastern New Mexico University, a teaching university similar to SWOSU. As a first-generation student, college was an intimidating experience her first year, but she had a wonderful experience as an undergraduate at ENMU because she was able to have a great mentoring relationship not only with her advisor, but all of her major faculty as well because it was a teaching university where she was not just another student ID number. While serving as a Teaching Assistant in her Ph.D. program, she realized that she loved to teach too, and knew that she wanted to teach at a university similar to her undergraduate experience because she wanted to become that same mentor to her own students. The opportunity to come to SWOSU was the perfect fit.

Dr. Becky Bruce has used many different teaching techniques, including



Socratic method, experiential learning, peer teaching, and critical thinking, to engage students in learning. In her general education courses, Dr. Bruce uses the Socratic method during lectures by continually asking questions to keep the students actively engaged in the lectures. She also uses cohort learning and critical thinking during in-class assignments which require students to read primary documents and then discuss and answer critical thinking questions about the source in small cohort groups. This enables the students to debate the answers in a way that helps students with poor reading comprehensions to get the help from students with good reading comprehension while being able to contribute their own thoughts. In her World Cultural Geography course, Dr. Bruce employs clicker quiz/peer teaching techniques to enable students to collectively deduce answers to difficult questions, thus helping each other walk through the critical thinking steps. In upper division courses, Becky also uses peer review on writing assignments because she has found that learning how to review another person's work in a constructive way helps a student learn to look at their own papers with a critical eye. Teaching online is a little more difficult to use all of these techniques because of the lack of face-to-face interactions. To remedy this problem, Dr. Bruce engages the students in discussion board assignments in which the students debate current events that connect to the topics in the course. This enables Becky to engage in conversations with her students, and the students with each other, while helping students learn to communicate effectively, think intellectually and critically about events that affect the world they live in, and to make connections between historical and geographical theories and their own lives. Finally, she believes that one of the most important things she does is continually ask student how they feel about different techniques when she tries them out to see if the students feel it helped them and she engages with several of her colleges in brainstorming new ideas to try in the future.

Workshops Available for June

CETL Workshops with Nathan

DropBox Training

Nathan is taking DropBox training to the departments. Please call (3077) or email (Nathan.Thiessen@swosu.edu) and schedule a day and time for Nathan to come and do DropBox training especially how to link dropbox documents/videos/recordings to Canvas.

Basic Zoom Training

Contact Nathan for one-on-one Basic Zoom training. The training introduces faculty to all of the basic Zoom features. It is structured for the new Zoom user. Please call (3077) or email (nathan.thiessen@swosu.edu) and schedule a day and time for training.

Advanced Zoom Training

Contact Nathan for one-on-one Advanced Zoom training. The training introduces faculty to advanced Zoom features. It is structured for the experienced Zoom user. Please call (3077) or email (nathan.thiessen@swosu.edu) and schedule a day and time for training.

CETL Workshops with Mapopa

Using the new improved Analytics in Canvas

This Workshop introduces faculty using the new, improved Analytics in Canvas. The Workshop walks faculty through the new Analytics interface and familiarizes them with its enriched features.

Tuesday, June 4, 2019 1:50 p.m. to 2:30 p.m.

Join this workshop via ZOOM: <https://zoom.us/j/960339908>

Tuesday, June 11, 2019 1:50 p.m. to 2:30 p.m.

Join this workshop via ZOOM: <https://zoom.us/j/960339908>

Tuesday, June 18, 2019 1:50 p.m. to 2:30 p.m.

Join this workshop via ZOOM: <https://zoom.us/j/960339908>

Tuesday, June 25, 2019 1:50 p.m. to 2:30 p.m.

Join this workshop via ZOOM: <https://zoom.us/j/960339908>

Using Speedgrader, Docviewer and Turnitin

This three in one workshop walks faculty through using Speedgrader, making annotations using Docviewer and also managing Turnitin submitted assignments.

Wednesday, June 5, 2019 1:50 p.m. to 2:30 p.m.

Join this workshop via ZOOM: <https://zoom.us/j/960339908>

Wednesday, June 12, 2019 1:50 p.m. to 2:30 p.m.

Join this workshop via ZOOM: <https://zoom.us/j/960339908>

Wednesday, June 19, 2019 1:50 p.m. to 2:30 p.m.

Join this workshop via ZOOM: <https://zoom.us/j/960339908>

Wednesday, June 26, 2019 1:50 p.m. to 2:30 p.m.

Join this workshop via ZOOM: <https://zoom.us/j/960339908>

How to begin a Semester in Canvas

This hands-on Workshop walks faculty through the process of beginning a semester in Canvas. The workshop covers steps such as importing a copy of your course from a previous semester, building a course from scratch, uploading files into a course, weighting grades, welcoming students and others.

Thursday, June 6, 2019 1:50 p.m. to 2:30 p.m.

Join this workshop via ZOOM: <https://zoom.us/j/960339908>

Thursday, June 13, 2019 1:50 p.m. to 2:30 p.m.

Join this workshop via ZOOM: <https://zoom.us/j/960339908>

Thursday, June 20, 2019 1:50 p.m. to 2:30 p.m.

Join this workshop via ZOOM: <https://zoom.us/j/960339908>

Thursday, June 27, 2019 1:50 p.m. to 2:30 p.m.

Join this workshop via ZOOM: <https://zoom.us/j/960339908>



CETL Workshops with Steve

Introduction to Canva.com

In this workshop you will be introduced to the basic features of Canva.com. Canva.com is a user-friendly graphic design website that provides users with over a million photographs, graphics, and fonts that can be used to enhance presentations and websites.

Wednesday, June 5, 2019 1:30 p.m. to 2:00 p.m.

Join this workshop via ZOOM: <https://zoom.us/j/9123629032>

Wednesday, June 12, 2019 11 a.m. to 11:30 a.m.

Join this workshop via ZOOM: <https://zoom.us/j/9123629032>

Wednesday, June 19, 2019 1:30 p.m. to 2:00 p.m.

Join this workshop via ZOOM: <https://zoom.us/j/9123629032>

Wednesday, June 26, 2019 11 a.m. to 11:30 a.m.

Join this workshop via ZOOM: <https://zoom.us/j/9123629032>

Introduction to Educreations

This workshop introduces you to some of the tools and features of Educreations. A free lesson-sharing App that allows for the sharing of content, lessons, etc. among Teachers, students and peers.

Friday, June 14, 2019 1:30 p.m. to 2:00 p.m.

Join this workshop via ZOOM: <https://zoom.us/j/9123629032>

Friday, June 21, 2019 11 a.m. to 11:30 a.m.

Join this workshop via ZOOM: <https://zoom.us/j/9123629032>

Friday, June 28, 2019 1:30 p.m. to 2:00 p.m.

Join this workshop via ZOOM: <https://zoom.us/j/9123629032>



Online Learning Consortium Workshops are Available

The Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning has 20 scholarships available for faculty to attend Online Learning Consortium workshops. Go to <https://onlinelearningconsortium.org/learn/workshops/> to see the various workshops that are available. These workshops are not just for online faculty, there are topics that pertain to all areas.

If awarded, upon completion of the workshop, a certificate must be sent to CETL for their records. The cost of the workshops is \$170, so, if awarded and you cannot attend, please contact CETL as soon as possible (prior to the workshop) so that a scholarship may be awarded to another faculty member.

The following are examples of some of the workshops that are offered

- Creating Infographics for Learning,
- Designing with Accessibility in Mind,
- Designing a Flipped Classroom,
- Strategies to Improve Retention,
- Strategies to Increase Faculty Motivation,
- New to Online: Essentials Part 1-Getting Started,
- Exploring Open Educational Resources, Part 1,
- Creating Rubrics,
- Exploring Learning Analytics,
- Strategic Planning for Web Accessibility,
- And many, many more

If you are interested in applying for a scholarship to attend one of the following workshops, please complete the [Registration form](#).

Respondus 4.0 Test Making Videos (transfer publisher test banks to Canvas)

[Creating and Formatting Questions with Respondus](#)
[Using Publisher Test Banks with Respondus](#)

[Importing Questions with Respondus](#)

Course Development Workshop (OCD) with Mapopa

OCD is a fully online workshop, which gives faculty first-hand experience of teaching a fully online course. It makes faculty understand an online course as an environment whose basic rules are different from those of a physical classroom. The workshop introduces you to key concepts, including online course design, digital content planning and construction, communication management, and troubleshooting. Faculty will learn to plan, design, build, react, communicate, troubleshoot and connect in an entirely online environment. Most importantly, OCD gives faculty a hands-on opportunity to create and implement various aspects of their online course in the context of the Canvas interface. Faculty will receive a certificate from CETL upon completion of the OCD Workshop. Register by calling Ashley at extension 3149 or emailing ashley.walkup@swosu.edu.

2019 Transformative Learning Conference Takeaways

Critical Thinking at the 2019 Transformative Learning Conference

Raygan Pierce Chain, J.D.

The 2019 Transformative Learning Conference left me with a lot to consider. It was an informative conference, with great speakers and conference presenters. This year, I wrote a "What I Will Do" list, which includes things like updating my syllabus, using more reflections (both with students and personally), being more mindful when using the term "critical thinking" and creating a class participation policy.

Maryellen Weimer presented an impactful workshop on day two. A funny storyteller, Maryellen exuded her love of teaching and learning, and provided her insights to critical thinking, reflection and discussion. I truly enjoyed her workshop, and she left me with the following ideas:

- As instructors, we always encourage our students to "think critically" about the subjects we teach. But, what does "think critically" really mean? Specifically, what does it mean to students as to what exactly we want them to do? Something to consider at the beginning of each semester is working through what critical thinking means with the students so that we are all on the same page.
- The idea of "reflections" is something that immediately sends shudders through my body. I have always thought of reflections as something touchy-feely. I am trained to see facts and evidence, not feelings. But reflecting on a semester or an assignment can leave students and instructors more empowered. Really thinking about what could be done better, what worked, what didn't, can lead to valuable insights for the classroom...and maybe even get everyone, me included, thinking critically.
- Finally, I often struggle with classes of students who refuse to participate, for whatever reason. This makes the classes dull when I am the only one talking the entire time (for me and the students). It's also hard to really know if the students are truly "getting it" when they don't engage. This is probably one of my biggest goals for future semesters: participation and discussion. One of the suggestions was to create a class participation policy so that everyone knows what is expected of them.

In all, I enjoyed the conference yet again and look forward to implementing my "What I Will Do" list in the future!

****One of the BEST tools I found at the conference is a Podcast called "The Cult of Pedagogy."** It's an amazing discussion about how to make our classes better. I highly recommend it.

Critical Thinking Development about Developing Critical Thinking

David Martyn

One of the more interesting ideas I drew from the Transformative Learning Conference was a method for introducing and developing critical thinking skills in lecture. At times to my students' irritation, I frequently use critical thinking exercises to develop those skills and, at the same time, evaluate student learning. Using the information and knowledge students have, or should have, about a topic we go about the task of solving a problem. Sometimes the problems are universal and practical. For example, we might want to determine the concentration of red dye in a bottle of soda, or the concentration of pain medication in a sample of sunburn ointment. Sometimes the problems are more esoteric. Perhaps we want to compare two reaction mechanisms and identify their similarities in order to better explain them. However, regardless of topic, I frequently fail to get the type of student involvement and interaction I desire. This has been a source of frustration for me and the conference helped identify a source.

One potential issue was right in front of me; Never had I introduced my critical thinking exercises as critical thinking development. It has always been an implicit almost slight-of-hand approach. It was as if I were trying to sneak it in with the "real" material like mixing bad tasting medicine with a spoonful of sugar. I had not defined the term "critical thinking" or explicitly told my students the ultimate goal of the exercise. Thus, in my presentation of critical thinking exercises, students were passive recipients in the development of critical thinking skills rather than active participants. By defining the terms and explicitly telling students why we are working through these critical thinking exercises I hope to actively enlist students. In doing so I hope to foster student involvement and stimulate interactions.

Gamification in the SWOSU Classroom

Jonna Myers

In March 2019, I had the opportunity to attend the Transformative Learning Conference (TLC) in Oklahoma City, OK. This year marked my third year to participate in the TLC and it remains one of the most beneficial events I regularly attend. Colleagues, *I strongly encourage you to attend in coming years.*

I heard so many great speakers on a myriad of topics including different ways to engage students, measure transformation, and develop faculty. However, as I reflect on the best sessions that I attended this year, one theme emerged as most impactful: gamification in the classroom.

For those who are unfamiliar, as I was prior to the TLC, gamification refers to the

application of game mechanics and elements in an educational context. Incorporating games into the classroom is a great way to engage students' natural competitive drive while asking them to apply course material. Since the conference, I have had great experience with gamified variations of *Jeopardy*, *Survivor*, and *The Amazing Race* in my classes. Next semester, I am looking to incorporate something that integrates social media and data analytics.

I am grateful to the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) for giving me the opportunity to attend the conference. I have grown as a teacher and as a learner because of the ideas to which I was exposed there. I hope I'll see you all next year at the TLC!

Insights from CETL's Teaching and Learning Coordinators

Mapopa Musings By Dr. Mapopa Sanga

Technology and E-Portfolios

Experienced e-portfolio practitioners know that "pedagogy should drive technology" and the meaningful e-Portfolio practices involve a complex interplay among teaching, learning, and technology. Effective e-Portfolio platforms can, nevertheless, play a critical role in supporting campus efforts to realize e-Portfolio transformative potential (Eynon & Gambino, 2017).

According to Eynon & Gambino (2017), the e-Portfolio can make a difference for students, faculty, staff, and administrators. E-Portfolios are distinct from traditional learning management systems because they extend beyond traditional course structures, providing a way for students to make connections between and among their courses and co-curricular experiences at an institution. Eynon & Gambino (2017) go on to argue that effective e-Portfolio technology helps make student learning visible to students themselves, to their peers, and to faculty and others across the campus. High functioning e-Portfolio platforms also facilitate students' interaction with faculty and peers about substantive matters, which Kuh (2008) identified as a high-impact educational activity.

An effective e-Portfolio platform also supports professional development, where it can be used as an integral part of workshops and seminars, mirroring and modelling the types of pedagogy that enhance student learning. And many e-Portfolio platforms provide technical structures to facilitate the outcomes assessment process for faculty, staff, and assessment leaders (Eynon & Gambino, 2017).

On the other hand, Eynon & Gambino (2017) observed that if an effective e-Portfolio can facilitate high impact e-Portfolio practice, a clumsy or poorly functioning platform can, conversely, cause problems, frustrating users and diminishing the effectiveness of e-Portfolio engagement. To that end, campus leaders need to select platforms carefully and plan for sustained technical support.

References

Eynon, B., & Gambino, L. M. (2017). *High impact e-Portfolio practice*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, LLC.

Kuh, G. (2008). *High impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them and why they matter*. Washington Dc: American association of College and Universities.

Ray's Reflections By Steve Ray

De-Stress & Detox this Semester

The end of another busy semester is approaching and students are not the only ones dealing with stress. Sometimes faculty get so caught up with concern for their students that they forget to take care of the most important person...Themselves!

Here are a few tips from the web that should help ease the stress;

1. Take a mid-morning or mid-afternoon break. Short breaks have been shown to increase productivity and creativity. Not only will it help reduce eye strain from staring at the computer, It may also ease the stress when dealing with your students.
2. Visit the Wellness center at least one or two days a week during lunch. Studies show that physical exercise increases serotonin and dopamine production in the brain, and can help balance your body's level of stress hormones such as adrenalin.
3. Keep Hydrated: More than 50% of your body is made up of water so you need to keep that balance. Experts say that not only does hydration helps flush out fat and toxins from our body, but it also improves the flow of blood and oxygen to the muscles and brain improving mental function while fighting muscle fatigue.

These are some simple, healthy tips to keep in mind as the semester winds down. Enjoy your break!

Insidehighered.com – March 7, 2019

Discussion Boards: Valuable? Overused? Discuss

Mark Lieberman

Discussion boards have been a staple of online courses for decades. But Carolyn Speer, manager of instructional design and access at [Wichita State University](#), thinks many instructors default to using them incorrectly.

Instructors often kick off a discussion board assignment by asking each student to respond to an assigned reading. To prevent plagiarism, some learning management systems are set up, either by the platform or by policies of the institution or instructor, to only reveal the full contents of a discussion thread after a student has already posted.

- [New approaches to discussion boards aim for dynamic online learning experiences](#)
- [Survey of online learning administrators explores governance, outcomes, instructor interaction](#)
- [We can do better than the master model of online course development. Let's build courses together \(o](#)
- [Pulse podcast features interview with Anders Krohn of Aula Education](#)
- [Social Media, Learning Innovation and Comedy Clubs](#)

"It sounds to me most of the time that what they want is a deep writing assignment done by each individual student on a topic with potentially an opportunity for students to comment on other students' work," Speer said. "At least in our LMS, it's better to do that in a blog."

Though Speer questions the utility of discussion boards, she doesn't think they should be discarded. Lively discussions are among the hallmarks of face-to-face courses. Skeptics of online learning argue it's difficult to replicate their value online -- but Speer isn't a skeptic. "If two people can fall in love online, they can learn American history online," she said.

Speer isn't alone in seeking to refresh the discussion forum as the key source of person-to-person interaction in online courses. Educators are pursuing a variety of strategies for fostering student engagement. One approach is to emphasize quality and thoughtfulness of responses over quantity and frequency. Another puts the instructor in the driver's seat, steering conversations to sharper insights as they might from the front of a classroom.

The goal that unifies all of these efforts? Constructing a learning experience around collaboration as a means to deeper understanding.

Discussion boards are likely familiar to the millions of students who have taken at least one online course, and to plenty of face-to-face students as well. Though many instructors place less grading weight on discussion board participation compared with exams or essays, the value of interaction between students can't be underestimated, according to Vanessa Dennen, professor of instructional systems and learning technologies at [Florida State University](#).

"It is a place to keep them apace with other people, to see who the other people are in the class," Dennen said. "That ties into all sorts of self-efficacy beliefs, along with a sense of community."

What Online Discussions Can Do

Learning management systems are the primary vessel for discussion forums in online courses. Designers at Blackboard, among the first major LMS providers to service higher education, initially drew on discussion forums that already existed in "technical circles," according to Phil Miller, Blackboard's chief learning and innovation officer.

At first, Miller said, many instructors used them primarily to allow students to introduce themselves at the beginning of a course. Over time, Blackboard started receiving requests for more innovative variations, like a "fishbowl" approach in which the instructor and a handful of students discuss a topic while the rest of the class observes.

That evolution mirrors the trajectory of many experienced online instructors. Charles Hodges, a professor of instructional technology at [Georgia Southern University](#), spent the early years of his online teaching career requiring students to answer a discussion post inspired by that week's reading. Over a 16-week semester, this process became exhausting for him, and difficult at times for his students to navigate.

When Hodges noticed that most of his students were responding to the prompt within the last 30 minutes before the Sunday deadline, he decided to instead require students to make an initial post by Wednesday, allowing a few days for discussion to percolate. He also refined his prompts, asking probing questions like "What was the most challenging part of the chapter for you to grasp?" or "How could the reading material apply to your professional practice?" rather than simply requesting a bland recap of highlights from the chapter.

Still, though, "it felt a little rushed," Hodges said.

A few years ago, Hodges landed on two big fixes that proved successful. First, he cut in half the number of discussion posts per semester. Second, he now allows students to respond to discussion prompts with PowerPoint presentations, YouTube videos and concept maps in addition to written text. For some discussions, he makes explicit suggestions for multimedia projects that would enhance students' understanding.

Students spend the first week of each two-week discussion module producing their response. Then they spend the second week evaluating each other's work using prompts from Hodges like "Compare your concept map to the rest of the class. What's missing? What's different?"

"They are doing fewer discussions, but hopefully those discussions are more meaningful, more in-depth," Hodges said.

How to Make Discussion Boards Inclusive

Tips from Jesse Stommel, executive director of the Division of Teaching and Learning Technologies at the University of Mary Washington.

- Build a community of care.
- Ask genuine, open-ended questions.
- Wait for answers.
- Let conversation wander.
- Model what it looks like to be wrong and to acknowledge when you're wrong.
- Recognize that the right to speak isn't distributed equally.
- Make listening visible.

No matter how much Hodges experiments, some students will only want to use the discussion boards the minimum amount for credit, he admits. But motivated students in his class, many of whom are practicing teachers, form relationships that extend beyond the class itself.

"They do develop a little bit of a rapport between themselves ... They notice somebody that's teaching in the same grade or content area," Hodges said. "They make those connections pretty fast."

Dennen thinks discussion boards can help students who might feel overwhelmed by the material get a firsthand look at what they can gain from their peers.

"Twenty-five percent of my class is going to feel uncertain about a topic initially. But then the 25 percent of my class that feels quite confident about it and very gung-ho is going to go ahead with the discussion activity," Dennen said. "They're providing a model for the rest of the students of what to do. Their model feels a lot more achievable [than mine]."

Rote online discussions also put students in marginalized groups at a disadvantage, according to Sean Michael Morris, director of digital learning at the [University of Mary Washington](#). He's concerned that formulaic discussion prompts prevent students from adequately expressing themselves or even forming their identity -- particularly if every student, regardless of background or identity, is expected to weigh in with roughly similar reactions.

"By asking open-ended questions, by giving students the opportunity for dialogue in an unassessed or ungraded space, the discussion forum can become a site within online learning for 'college' to happen," Morris said.

The Instructor's Role

The ultimate goal of a discussion board assignment is to get students talking to each other. But instructors rethinking their discussion boards emphasize that they play an active role throughout the process.

Some students might be shy or reluctant to participate early on. In the first couple weeks of her courses, Dennen makes a point to privately send emails to students who haven't contributed much. Students sometimes assume that they're far behind their classmates whose discussion board posts make them seem like "experts"; Dennen helps assure them that students often feel that way and they shouldn't let it deter them from engaging.

"That's the most important time to give students super-timely feedback and grades on their discussion performance, to let them know if their performance was on track or not," Dennen said. "It sets the tone for the whole rest of the course."

Another Experiment

Alexander Laskin, professor of strategic communication at Quinnipiac University, told students to introduce themselves to each other using only emoji. Students had to guess what each other's emoji chains meant.

At Wichita State, Speer has developed a discussion board model that would seem to be far more time-consuming than average -- but she's not complaining.

She teaches quantitative methods and research methods classes in the institution's criminal justice program, as well as an introductory course in American government. For each course, she starts the semester by creating five or so discussion threads, each on a pre-established topic. Students must respond to at least one thread, but they can respond to as many as they want. Later in the semester, she offers students the option to start their own threads, warning them not to duplicate someone else's.

Instead of assigning a grade based on whether or not a student posted, or the number of words in a response, Speer gives high marks to posts that "advance the discussion." Each student who posts is building on what other students said, as in a face-to-face conversation.

"You can restate and affirm all day if you want to," Speer said. "I'm not giving credit for that."

Over time, grading has become more efficient as Speer has developed a routine of steering conversations toward certain topics that generate discussion. Speer also marks down for "cluster posting" on any day, and even more so for cluster posting on the last day before posts are due. She says she's never received a negative comment about her discussion board approach on a student evaluation.

"I don't dread my discussion boards. They don't feel like they're work for me," Speer said. "They're not heavy. They're not *my* discussion boards."

New Variations

The popular video-creation tool Voicethread has been a boon to innovators of online discussions. At [Bryant University](#), discussion boards consist of a mix of written "essay-like" responses, usually informed by research, with "experiential" video posts that express an opinion or tell a story, according to Bonnie Budd, Bryant's director of online learning.

"These students are all over the country, different time zones," Budd said. "They become an actual conversation and not just an assignment."

Budd has also helped introduce to the university a discussion post format known as [3CQ](#), developed by Jennifer Stewart-Mitchell, a K-12 teacher who frequently publishes curriculum ideas. Each student's response must include a compliment, a comment, a connection (3C) and a question (Q).

"It gives them a framework to get away from 'I agree,'" Budd said.

Regular and Substantive Interaction

Federal rule makers this year have been striving to refine the federal standard for interaction in online courses. Follow along with "Inside Digital Learning" [here](#).

Enthusiasm for online discussions varies, even among instructors who use them. Patrick Lowenthal, associate professor of educational technology at Boise State University, believes the federal requirement that online courses include "regular and substantive interaction" between students and teachers sets the tone for an emphasis on discussion boards that sometimes lacks necessary context.

"Sometimes we overuse online discussions," Lowenthal said. He thinks instructors get concerned, for instance, about letting students work on a project for a week without posting on a discussion board prompt.

Lowenthal encourages instructors to be more flexible -- an online course in programming might lend itself less to online discussions than a course in English literature, for instance. Sometimes discussions are more effective if students in the class are split into groups who then report back to the whole group after conversing privately.

In some cases, discussion boards function along the lines of social networks students are already using. Desire2 Learn (D2L), for instance, offers instructors the option for a "single thread of conversation" that extends through the entire semester. The company is also looking closely at the functionality of the workplace chat application Slack, according to Kenneth Chapman, vice president of market strategy for D2L.

"I'm seeing much more of an understanding that the online space needs to feel more like a campus," Chapman said.

Learning management system providers are also working on automating certain aspects of the discussion board process to ease the burden of time and effort on instructors, particularly in high-enrollment courses with dozens of posts to parse. Blackboard has developed and is currently piloting algorithms that can assess the level of critical thinking that students use when answering questions. Instructors can receive readouts that help inform the grades they assign.

"What we are not doing is we are not judging the subject matter of the post," Miller said. "We're not trying to say is this right or wrong. We are just evaluating the depth and the writing structure of the post." That function draws on the [Flesch-Kincaid Readability Index](#), a military-approved readability standard.

That feature, particularly as it gets closer to evaluating the content of a student's response, has gotten "a little pushback" from instructors who "aren't ready for that," Miller admits.

But discussion boards aren't going away any time soon. Nor is the impulse to improve them.

"You might hear in a workshop on how to design your online class, you have to have discussions," Hodges said. "But you really have to figure out on your own what's going to work for your students in terms of best practices for how to facilitate those discussions."



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help, feel free to give us a call.**

