

Effective and Engaging Discussion Any Time

What are Any Time Discussions?

Any Time (aka. Asynchronous) discussion is a conversation carried out between in-class or synchronous meetings. The conversation might involve the instructor or be purely among the students. It could involve small or large groups. Responses to instructor prompts might be immediate or after several weeks.

Why use Any Time Discussions?

- a. **To extend the synchronous or in-class discussion.** Students need meaningful practice with a subject to learn it well. Any time discussion provides that practice time and can enhance its value by adding feedback from the instructor or other students between class meetings.
- b. **To provide greater flexibility about when students can reply.** Students can schedule their participation in asynchronous meetings around their work and family demands. They can listen to recorded lectures as they exercise or commute. It is this flexibility that has made online learning possible for many adult students.
- c. **To prepare students for synchronous work.** Vess (2005) found that online asynchronous meetings prepared students for f2f discussions. Her students reported that they felt better prepared, more comfortable, and more confident to engage in f2f discussions.
- d. **To reduce technological glitches.** Any Time Discussion takes less tech to be successful and makes it easier to use the required tools.
- e. **To give non-native speakers more time to respond.** Students will have less trouble communicating because of accents and dialects. Foreign students will have more time to compose their answers in English (Park & Bonk, 2007).
- f. **To reduce the pressure on quieter students.** Students will have more time to think about and frame their responses (Park & Bonk, 2007). Wang & Woo (2007) found that f2f classes were rated higher than asynchronous meetings on promptness of responses, efficiency, interactivity, and ease of communication. However, students rated asynchronous meetings as being more comfortable, less aggressive, and offered greater equality among members to voice their opinions. Students feel less self-conscious than when in synchronous conversations on video (Dahlstrom-Hakki et al, 2020). Role-playing is less stressful when one has time to compose a reply.
- g. **To deepen the conversation.** Students do better on conceptual understanding and critical thinking in asynchronous meetings than in synchronous ones (Dahlstrom-Hakki et al, 2020). Callis-Duehl et al (2018) found that students in asynchronous meetings question more of their peers' unscientific statements than in a f2f class, although in both classes they did not respond to most unscientific arguments.
- h. **To ask more complex questions.** Since the students have more time to consider them, the structure of the assigned discussion protocols and CATs can be more complex in asynchronous meetings.

- i. **To increase equity.** Some students may not have the equipment or bandwidth they need to participate fully in a synchronous meeting. Others may experience connection disruptions that remove them from the session. Also, some students in synchronous meetings may not turn on their webcams because they lack privacy where they are connecting or because they do not want to give up their privacy.

Which Tools can I Use?

1. **Discussion Forums in Blackboard**: Most people know how to use these, and documents of up to 100 MB can be uploaded to them. That can include text and images. Students can upload video to a forum through an Ensemble Dropbox.
2. **Email**: Good for one on one conversations, but messages can get lost in mailboxes or may never arrive if the mailbox is full.
3. **Microsoft Teams**: Teams has several tools associated with it. One of those is a group texting capability in which you and your students stay in contact at any time through its Channels. You can set hours you will look at the texts, and your students may communicate late at night when they are working on projects. Teams is free for all SUNY Cortland faculty, staff, and students. You can create a Team for each class, adding all your students to that Team, which ensures that student study groups are more equitable in composition. Then you can create Channels for various types of discussion (Ask the Prof, specific content areas, disciplinary skills, etc.). You should identify how often you will check the texts, and when. Students will probably use it much more often, especially late at night when they want to ask each other questions about their projects. You will need to remind students to turn on their notifications in Teams, as they are automatically turned off at the start. The other limitation with Teams is that when someone graduates or otherwise leaves the campus, they will no longer have access to the Team.
4. **Groupme**: Groupme is another Microsoft product, and can be used on any platform or device. To create a Group with all the students in one of your classes, you will need all their phone numbers, so this is less commonly constructed by the instructor. It is more commonly used by small groups of students, who create their own study groups. Also, if the app is not installed on one's phone, texting charges apply. Groupme is not available on SUNY Cortland's Microsoft installation, so you would also have to create a new Microsoft account to access it. However, Groupme can be useful for maintaining contact with student groups once they have left campus. Groupme allows group texting with up to 500 participants.
5. **Flipgrid**: Flipgrid allows audio and video threaded conversations, along with some fun tools for self-expression (emojis, frames, & drawing tool). Again, it is available as an app on phones. I've added a Flipgrid topic to the "Teaching Hybrid Courses" organization on Blackboard so that you can test the product. It is listed as the Appendix to that organization.

To access the organization, Enter [Blackboard Access](#) from the Faculty/Staff tab in MyRed Dragon. Go to the "My Organizations" tab. Look for "Teaching Hybrid Courses." Click the arrow to the right of the title when it comes up and click Enroll. This will self-enroll you in the site. If you have any questions regarding the Community, please contact teaching@cortland.edu

6. **[Blogs in Blackboard](#)**: Students can produce the blog with text, image, multimedia, etc. and the instructor and other students can comment upon it. Using a blog in Blackboard is safer than having students construct them in Wordpress, as the Blackboard blog is behind a firewall and student postings there will not follow them after graduation.
7. **Journals in OneNote**: Students can produce a journal or notebook and then share it with the instructor, a partner, a group, or the entire class. OneNote is an Office365 tool accessible through the upper left of MyRedDragon.
8. **[Wikis in Blackboard](#), or shared Google Docs, or shared documents in OneDrive**: Wikis are web pages that are jointly created by the members. They can be used to supplement online synchronous discussions or to create group responses. The danger is that any member of a group can change or remove what another group member has created. Again, using a Blackboard wiki or shared document in OneDrive is much safer than using Google Docs, as there is no telling what might happen with the data in a Google Doc in the long term.
9. **Self & Peer Assessments in Blackboard**: These can be set to allow [peer assessments](#) by a number of known or anonymous peers. And of course, the instructor can always comment on any of these.

How can I use Any Time Discussions?

1. **Coaching Students**. Email is one way to carry on an ongoing one on one conversation, but the same could be done with individual discussion forums for each student, particularly in classes with large ongoing projects. The entire history of the conversation would be easier to find, and both would still get a notification when the other has added a new comment.
2. **Students helping Students**. Students can provide other students with assistance, especially if the class has a group chat channel using Teams or [Groupme](#).
3. **Peer Review**. Create groups and have students share their writing with the group. Students should post critical but supportive responses to the writing of their colleagues by the set due date. Students should be assigned their reviewers either automatically (easier) or manually (the instructor should beware of forgetting to do this). These responses might be based on the rubric provided for the assignment, which has the added benefit of training students to write to the rubric, and thereby reduces complaints at the end of the semester. After receiving their feedback, students revise their work based on those responses before

submitting the final work to the instructor. The instructor can review the work in the groups and can also require peer reviewers to submit their marked rubrics, with the name of the person reviewed.

4. **Virtual Office Hours:** Rovai (2004) suggested creating a discussion forum as “virtual office hours,” which he compared to conversations around the office water cooler. Others have framed this sort of asynchronous meeting as a “Web Café” or an “Ask Me Anything (AMA).” Ideally asynchronous office hours would reduce the number of individual emails asking the same questions, as email is a formalized individualized means of communication that doesn't contribute to community building in the class. In my experience, virtual office hours work best with students aged 25 and older. Those older students can also be great models for traditional age students, but many online instructors have found that asynchronous office hours don't work very well with traditional age college students and have replaced them with synchronous office hours, which seem to work at least as well as f2f office hours (Li & Pitts, 2009).
5. **Creating Low Stakes Supportive Conversations.** Toor (2020) describes how she builds community by having students submit a low-stakes personal essay in a group discussion forum. The other students in their group read those essays and highlight a “gold star sentence” in each essay where the author really hit the mark. Student writing became more vulnerable and more authentic as the groups continued to work over the semester.

What Best Practices apply to Any Time Discussions?

- a. **Decide how you will grade Participation and Attendance.** The Registrar will request a last date of attendance when a student drops or doesn't show for a class. Usually the last time the student was interacted in the course is given.
- b. **Plan How You will create a Sense of Community.** Social presence is harder to create in an any time discussion. You will need to (1) reach out to students and (2) encourage interaction between them. Flipgrid can help get students to know each other.
- c. **Have Students help set Rules of Etiquette for the Class.** In the first week, have students develop rules of etiquette for the discussions. You can do this with a wiki and poll. Add in one or two rules you would like them to follow once they have created the basic contract for behavior.
- d. **Assign an Icebreaker.** Do this early in the class so that students start to learn about each other.
- e. **Provide Discussion Prompts Two Weeks ahead of Due Date.** Wang & Woo (2007) found that students in an asynchronous meeting were not as prepared as students in a f2f meeting when they first encountered a prompt. Instead, the online students could read the prompt, think about it and seek the appropriate information, compose the response, and then post it. Two weeks provides students with flexibility in their response time, flexibility they may need to do their schoolwork around work and family obligations.

- f. **Assign Multiple Due Dates.** Require students to make their initial response by Wednesday night and then make their responses to other students' posts. To ease grading, you might assign two discussions instead of one, as that will make it easier to check the responses.
- g. **Use Divergent Questions to Generate Deeper Student Responses.** Ask open-ended (divergent) questions rather than questions that can be answered by yes or no (dichotomous) or ones with one correct answer (convergent). If the question calls for application of a heuristic and there is only one correct answer, be sure to ask the student to explain how they reached the answer (Tofade et al, 2013). If you want them to memorize facts, use self-check quizzes and have the computer grade them automatically.
- h. **Treat Students like Experts in Training:** Assign them questions or cases that an expert in your field might address but scaffold them to the level of the student. Give them moderately challenging assignments. What these look like will differ by discipline and often by instructor. See Gilbert (2005) for suggested categories for coding online discussions.
- i. **Model Academic Responses:** Require students to cite sources in their responses (i.e. Bloom p. 120).
- j. **Set High Expectations for Student Responses, but Grade Lightly.** Avoid "Post Once, Reply Thrice" because that mode is over-used and as a result gets the least amount of thought from students. Assign a percentage of points equal to the amount of work you want them to do but give high grades to students who reply earnestly if not cleverly. Reward the work.
- k. **Use Multiple Prompts.** With large groups, give students a choice as to the questions they will answer. For example, if teaching about the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, you might ask them to explain the challenges and victories for either women, African Americans, Latinos, or the GLBT community. This helps avoid having 25 similar responses to the same question.
- l. **Provide a Rubric for Discussion Responses:** Have examples of weak and strong responses and ask them to use the rubric to assign them grades. Two sample rubrics are included at the end of this document.
- m. **Use a Limited Number of Discussion and Assessment Protocols.** While using a variety of small group discussion protocols in the Any Time discussions (Role-playing, Round Robin, Case Studies, Think Pair, etc.), instructors should assign only a few protocols and Classroom Assessment Techniques (Angelo & Cross (1993)) in each class (no more than 5 of each), so that students can easily get used to those formats. An introduction to using protocols can be found at [Using Small Group Discussion Protocols](#) along with [20 Examples of Small Group Discussion Protocols](#). The best source of CATs remains Angelo & Cross (1993).
- n. **Monitor but don't Dominate Student Interactions.** Give students room to develop their own ideas and understandings, but if a few students are dominating, try to determine why. Such domination indicates a lack of equality and trust among the students that can reduce the efficacy of peer work. Always work to improve peer work and try to intercede early when you see issues arising. If you don't catch it in time, be ready to step in if a flame war begins so you can shut it down before it burns away the collegiality of the group. And if students are stalled, give them a couple ideas to get going again.
- o. **Be Cautious with Humor.** Without body language to guide students, it is difficult to tell humor from actual beliefs, and this can cause misunderstandings. Be careful with your language and use occasional emojis when useful. Prepare the students to also be conscious

of this. In this age of texting, many students will be very skilled at this, but do not assume that all of them are.

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