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Deborah S. Adelman  
*Kaplan University*

Debbie Conner  
*Franklin University, debbie.conner@franklin.edu*

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## Discussion Boards: Boring!

Deborah S. Adelman, PhD, RN, NE-BC, and Debra J. Noguerras, PhD, APRN, ANP/FNP-BC

### Author Note

Deborah S. Adelman, Professor, MSN Program, School of Nursing, Kaplan University;  
Debra J. Noguerras, Associate Professor, MSN and DNP Programs, School of Nursing, Northern  
Arizona University.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Deborah S. Adelman at  
dadelman@kaplan.edu.

### Abstract

Creating discussion boards that capture student imaginations and contain meaningful interactions can be a difficult process. Traditional discussion boards use a question-and-answer format that often is boring for both the student and instructor. This article presents creative approaches to discussion boards that result in lively debates and student-to-student and student-to-faculty interactions, including: role playing, blogging, wikis, and the use of voice.

*Key words:* discussion board, role playing, use of voice, collaboration

### Discussion Boards: Boring!

The reaction of many students to discussion boards in the online classroom is that they are boring (Ruyters, Douglas, & Law, 2011; Zeller, 2009). The truth is that traditional discussion boards are so formulaic, they *are* boring. The standard or traditional approach is: ask a question, read assigned reading and, perhaps, find some outside resources, post an original answer to the question, and reply to set number of other students. There is often little new or original to the students' posts or the instructor's response.

How does one break out of the mold in creating original and lively discussion boards? For many instructors and course creators, this question is not easy to answer. This article will present several ways that we have approached creating discussion boards that are lively and give the student more control over his or her learning.

#### **Role-Playing**

Role-playing is a technique that allows the student to take on the characteristics, behaviors, beliefs, or attitudes of someone else. The scenario is usually well defined and used in the on-ground classroom (Lowenstein, 2011). Use of role-playing in the online classroom is more limited, but has been successfully used by one of the authors in creating a nursing theory course in an online RN-to-BSN program (Levitt & Adelman, 2010).

In role-playing, each student is assigned to "be" someone relevant to the course being taught and keeps that role throughout the course, in addressing discussion board questions and/or assignments. In the above example, students "became" a nursing theorist and answered discussion boards in the theorists' "voices". Lively debates ensued as students defended their theories, tried to prove their theories were "better" than another theorists, and discussed how that theorist conceptualized basic theoretical concepts such as assumptions and definitions. Nursing

students and practicing RNs, who rarely appreciate theory or see its practical applications in practice, left the course excited by and understanding nursing theory and its application (Levitt & Adelman, 2010).

The role-playing can be adapted for use in other courses. For example, in an online course for advanced practice nursing (APN) such as the nurse practitioner or doctor of nursing practice, the students can take on the role of different APNs and defend and discuss their differing approaches to patient care, following a case study each week. The roles could change each unit, as different disease processes, for example, are introduced in an online pathophysiology course, or can be retained throughout the whole course. In a pre-licensure, online or hybrid maternal/child course, the students could take on the roles of nurse, mother, or even infant. The opportunities are endless and role-playing allows the student a "lived experience" and depth of insight to the content that the traditional discussion board does not often allow or encourage.

### **Collaboration**

Collaboration, often called group- or team-work, in the online course improves learning, communication, and critical thinking (Tseng, Ku, Wang, & Sun, 2010). Working as part of a team is an important component of the real world healthcare environment and this skill needs to be fostered and taught in the academic environment (Dittman, Hawkes, Deokar, & Sarnikar, 2010). Issues often arise when nursing students express displeasure with collaborative assignments and discussion boards, stating that they do not like to rely on others for their grades, do not trust that other students will put in the work they will, have trouble communicating online, and do not understand the need for collaboration. Poorly structured discussion boards and assignments contribute to the problems inherent in online collaborative work (Martins, Gibson,

& Maynard, 2004). Faculty often attempt collaboration in discussion boards by assigning groups and having the group post original responses to already created discussion boards.

One unique approach to collaborative discussion boards is to have the group actually create the discussion board question. This approach was used by one of the authors in an online pathophysiology course (Levitt & Adelman, 2010). The first week, the discussion boards used the traditional approach with a twist: a case study was introduced and the first unit, on the integumentary system, used the case study to illustrate the different pathophysiology content. One of the objectives of the course was that the students determine, by the end of the course, what overarching disease process underlay all of the pathophysiology presented by the case study.

During the first week, the instructor assigned students to groups and to the following 6 units. Each unit addressed a different body system and the case study continued, but there were no discussion board questions and the discussion boards are not opened to the students until the Wednesday before the unit started. Only the group assigned to the unit was allowed to see the unit a full week before it opened. The group assigned to the unit researched the body system and saw the next part of the case study. The group prepared the discussion board questions and what they believe were important concepts that needed to be identified in their classmates' posts (Levitt & Adelman, 2010).

Student engagement and ownership of the discussion boards was very high. Debates about what the final disease process was abounded and many twists and turns resulted. Students saw the actual application of pathophysiology in real life nursing. More importantly, collaboration was stressed as a major component of the learning process and group-work was no longer seen as a negative by the students (Levitt & Adelman, 2010).

This approach to collaboration would work in other nursing courses as well. In mental health nursing course, students could follow a case study where the person's symptoms and behaviors are presented in each unit and components of a personality or other mental health disorder studied in light of each unit's topic.

### **Use of Voice in Discussion Boards**

The use of voice in posting to discussion boards is not a new approach to posting in the discussion boards, but does not appear to be used often in nursing education. The use of voice adds much to a discussion board post, allowing the learner and faculty to hear inflection and provides a sense of presence that is lacking in the written post. It also lends immediacy to the post (Arbaugh, 2001).

When using voice, ground rules must be laid. Issues such as how the learner cites references and does reference lists should be addressed. Discussion board grading rubrics must include criteria related to these videos. It is also important to remember that this kind of discussion does not ensure that the discourse is scholarly or meaningful (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001) and the instructor must closely monitor the discussion boards to ensure that course outcomes are being met.

This approach was used by one of the authors in a nursing education MSN program. The students in the assessment and evaluation course were allowed to use one of the many free video programs, such as Jing, to do their posts. They had to post their references when they posted the web address of the video and they had to include the citation in their oral presentations. There was much excitement and creativity as the students found appropriate websites and articles to use in the videos. In the next course the students had, also shared with the same instructor, the

students immediately asked if they could do the video presentations in the new course, illustrating their pleasure with the process of using voice in discussion boards.

### **Social Software**

Wikis and blogs are components of social software, a technology arising from individuals desiring to connect with each other over the World Wide Web. Examples of social software include FaceBook, LinkedIn, wikis, and blogs. Social software, when applied to education, supports a constructivist view on learning by supporting active knowledge construction, incremental improvement, and self-directed learning. In other words, blogs, wikis, and so on are a student-centered design of learning (Andergassen, Behringer, Finlay, Gorra, & Moore, 2009).

Blogs are akin to an online diary or journal, allowing the student to add text, which contains their opinion, viewpoint, or narration of a particular experience. Blogging is different from the traditional discussion board's flat or threaded responses (Tu, Blocher, & Gallagher, 2010) and considered to be a more creative and collaborative activity (Santos, 2011). Utilizing engagement theory in discussion boards allows students to become meaningfully engaged in the discussion board while learning through participation and development of collaborative efforts on project-based assignments, with a non-academic focus (Kearsley & Schneiderman, 1999; Santos, 2011). Student efforts to create ideas in response to specific assignments or activities tend to be more credible, accurate, and authentic when using blogs (Santos, 2011).

Authentic learning experiences are an essential component for educating tomorrow's professionals. Blogs in the online learning environment bridge the gap between face-to-face and the virtual classroom (Hodgson & Wong, 2011). In nursing education, for example, blogs create a supportive culture of peer-assisted learning, building trust and confidence among classmates. By developing an effective learning community, with meaningful and quality interactions



between participants, respectful communication and peer evaluation skills can be developed and refined. These skills are vital to safe and effective practice in the health care environment. To extend blogs from individual contributions to a collective and collaborative learning environment, the instructor must hold individuals accountable for their actions and contributions (Hodson & Wong, 2011).

In a recent Introduction to the Doctor of Nursing Practice course, one of the authors utilized the blog to create an environment where the students could investigate and discuss the benefits and controversies to this new practice degree. Students were assigned as representatives of many NP organizations (e.g., American College of Nurse Practitioners, American Academy of Nurse Practitioners, and Association of Family Practice Physicians) as well as policymakers, practitioners, and members of the public (e.g., patients) to give voice to the differing policies and opinions these groups espouse. In the prompts for the blog, students were asked to address numerous talking points regarding the DNP degree utilizing the voice of, positions taken, biases held, and evidence supporting and opposing their perspectives. The conversation was lively and brought to light numerous philosophies, strengths, concepts, and areas for students to better understand this evolving degree and the successes and challenges being discussed nationally.

Wikis are an excellent tool for courses that require debriefing, such as healthcare profession clinical courses, disaster management courses, and other professional program courses that have an experiential component. Wikis, as a method of debriefing after a clinical experience, are a student-centered approach providing an opportunity for collaborative learning and enhanced communication skills and lend themselves to the discussion board format. The instructor places a case study or other document into the learning management system, which can be added to or amended by the students. While discussion boards can also be used for this

activity, the strands of the responses can become confusing to students and provide a more stagnant learning activity (Ruyters, Douglas, & Law, 2011). Thus, their use in discussion boards needs to be highly focused and often involves more instructor monitoring and guidance.

### **Conclusion**

Discussion boards are often seen by students as a boring part of an online course. Adding fresh approaches to how the discussion board is created increases student involvement and decreases student and instructor boredom. This article has offered some suggestions for how to create that fresh approach and enliven the "boring" nursing discussion board. Lively debates and student-to-student and student-to-faculty interactions, including role-playing, blogging, wikis, and the use of voice, support the constructivist view of learning and learner-centered approach needed in the online nursing classroom.

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