Balancing Voices

Effectively balancing voices requires us to analyze student responses and then set goals for what and how to respond. Are you trying to engage a quieter student or manage a dominant one? Did a student post an incorrect response, or was their post unclear?

Your responses and the method you use to respond (e.g., private email to the student, reply to the student in the discussion forum, or reply to the full group) should help you meet the specific goal(s) you have set.

The table below includes suggestions for balancing the voices and clarifying concepts or misconceptions in an online discussion.

Student response	Your goal	Method	Example response
A quiet student is slow to post.	Encourage and support the student in expressing their ideas. Let them know that you notice and are concerned when they do not participate.	Send a private email to the student.	*Corinne, we haven't heard from you on this reading yet. Is everything okay? Are you having any difficulties with the reading assignment or with posting? How can I help?*
A dominant student takes over the conversation.	Acknowledge the student's contributions. Gently explain the benefits of moderating participation to allow space for comments and suggestions from others.	Send a private email to the student.	*Gene, thank you for your thoughtful contributions to the conversation! I'd like to see how your thinking evolves after you read what others express on the topic. Perhaps you can incorporate your ideas into follow-up comments.*
A student's response is too late to be part of the conversation.	Remind the student that there is give-and-take to interesting conversations, and thus timing is important.	Send a private email to the student.	*Angelo, I think everyone would have benefited from your comments if you had posted earlier in the week. Please post earlier next time so that you can be part of the evolving conversation.*
A student's response is unclear.	Encourage the student to clarify their comment and to provide support for their position.	Reply to the student on the discussion board.	*Rina, could you provide an example that illustrates the main point in your post?*

Create Small Groups for More In-Depth Online Discussions

Discussion forums are the heart and soul of online courses because they constitute the virtual space where students interact, learn, and build community with one another (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016).

Instructors can create small online discussion groups to increase student-to-student engagement, helping them become more self-directed and collaborative with their peers. Small groups can be assigned challenging problem sets, case studies, real-world scenarios, or complex issues to work on and respond to as a group. These small-group forums should be more informal spaces where students can openly share their ideas without concern for being evaluated, although you may drop in to monitor student work. Small-group responses can then be shared with the whole group in a full discussion board, or, if your class is very large, you may want to summarize commonalities and differences from small groups. Once you have formed a set of small groups, you might consider keeping them together throughout the semester.

Below are three basic ways to form groups for live discussions.

Grouping type	Uses	Methods
Random	Quick, efficient, and fair Provides opportunities to work with a variety of other students Ideal for informal discussion groups and short assignments (Barkley et al., 2014).	Use simple and transparent techniques such as grouping by • alphabetical order of first or last names; • counting off by the number of groups you want to form; or • using the learning management system (LMS) function to create a randomized small group.
Instructor-determined	Allows for strategic grouping of students based on similarities or differences in characteristics such as content knowledge, skills, or demographics Ideal for assignments that are ongoing, group projects, or controversial discussions	**Data Sheet:** At the beginning of the course, ask students to fill in a survey that identifies their major, career interests and experience, digital skills, demographics, work style, and scheduling availability for group work. This information can be used to group students according to similar interests or to enhance the diversity of a group (Barkley et al., 2014). **Likert Scale Rating:** To create groups with diverging opinions about a controversial topic, ask them to reply to a question using a Likert scale to determine their opinion on a topic to form groups.
Student-selected	After students have had the chance to work with or participate in discussions with two to three different students or groups of students, you may want to allow them to create self-selected groups.	Use the LMS or a Google Doc to create a sign-up sheet for a preset number of groups with a maximum number of spots. You can also create sign-up sheets based on a particular topic or task so that students might choose their group based on the topic. Reminding students of the learning benefits they reap from working with students who are different from themselves is recommended.

Adapted from Barkley, E. F., Major, C. H., and Cross, K. P. (2014). *Collaborative learning techniques: A handbook for college faculty* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Sources

Barkley, E. F., Major, C. H., and Cross, K. P. (2014). *Collaborative learning techniques: A handbook for college faculty* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Boettcher, J. V., & Conrad, R.-M. (2016). *The online teaching survival guide: Simple and practical pedagogical tips* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.

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Create Small Groups for More In-Depth Synchronous Discussions

Instructors can create small online discussion groups during synchronous or live sessions to increase student-to-student engagement, helping them become more self-directed and collaborative with their peers. Small groups can be assigned challenging problem sets, case studies, real-world scenarios, or complex issues to work on and report back to the whole group. These forums should be more informal communication spaces where students can openly discuss their ideas without concern for being evaluated, although you may drop into each breakout group to be sure all group participants are engaged and working together. Group responses can then be shared with the full group as a wrap-up.

Below are three basic ways to form groups for discussions.

Grouping type	Uses	Methods
Random	Quick, efficient, and fair Provides opportunities to work with a variety of other students Ideal for informal discussion groups and short assignments (Barkley et al., 2014).	Use simple and transparent techniques such as grouping by • alphabetical order of first or last names; • counting off by the number of groups you want to form; or • using the learning management system (LMS) function or online meeting application to create randomized small groups.
Instructor-determined	Allows for strategic grouping of students based on similarities or differences in characteristics such as content knowledge, skills, or demographics Ideal for assignments that are ongoing, group projects, or controversial discussions	**Data Sheet:** At the beginning of the course, ask students to fill in a survey that identifies their major, career interests and experience, digital skills, demographics, work style, and scheduling availability for group work. This information can be used to group students according to similar interests or to enhance the diversity of a group (Barkley et al., 2014). **Likert Scale Rating:** To create groups with diverging opinions about a controversial topic, ask them to reply to a question using a Likert scale to determine their opinion on a topic to form groups.
Student-selected	After students have had the chance to work with or participate in discussions with two to three different students or groups of students, you may want to allow them to create self-selected groups.	Use the LMS or a Google Doc to create a sign-up sheet for a preset number of groups with a maximum number of spots. You can also create sign-up sheets based on a particular topic or task so that students might choose their group based on the topic. Reminding students of the learning benefits they reap from working with students who are different from themselves is recommended.

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Sources

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Offer Students Guidelines for Responding to Their Peers' Posts

"In the Community of Inquiry framework, as well as Vygotsky's work, student-to-student interaction helps create new learning. It's not enough for students to work with your content. It's not even enough for students to work with you. They must work with each other, too, to learn and succeed in our online courses." (Darby & Lang, 2019, p. 81)

To help students interact in course discussion forums in meaningful ways, Darby and Lang (2019) remind us to first ensure that we "create discussion topics that are 'discussable'—that is, avoid closed-ended questions and prompts. Instead offer students the chance to debate, persuade, share their experience as related to a class concept, discuss a case study, or otherwise engage more deeply with class material and with each other" (p. 83). Although Darby and Lang also recommend that we require students to reply to a minimum number of their peers' posts, students may need additional support regarding how they might effectively do so. Consider adding the list and examples below to an announcement discussing how to respond to other student posts.

When responding to your peers' posts you might:

- Offer an alternative yet valid response.
  - *"I appreciated your response and found it very thought provoking. I noticed that you used the Smithson reading to support your argument. I read that article as well and came to a similar but slightly different conclusion. . . ."*
- Suggest a possible adjustment to your peer's response and share why you are suggesting the change.
  - *"I appreciate your response and wonder if it might be helpful to add a visual representation of the data to help the reader better understand your explanation?"*
- Provide an additional resource or information that supports your peer's post.
  - *I was really excited to read that you based your response on a reading from Sandra Cisneros. She is one of my favorite authors. Have you read* Bad Boys*? I think it would give some additional insight for you to consider."*
- Share an idea that you think might improve your peer's response.
  - *Your response was interesting, and it made me go back to the text to reread the passage you reference. I wonder if you would consider adding your own interpretation of this passage based on your experience. I'd love to read more about it."*
- Ask a question to gain clarity.
  - *"I am wondering about the very last section of your post. It seems that you are referring to a personal experience you had but it wasn't clear to me. Could you please clarify?"*
- Ask a question that helps your peer expand on his or her idea.
  - *"You shared some really interesting research you found regarding this topic. I'm wondering if it might be worthwhile to add your thoughts about how the recent laws regarding health insurance might impact your stance?"*
- Play "devil's advocate"—even if you do not necessarily agree with an alternate position, for the sake of debate or to explore the topic further, pose that alternative viewpoint to your peer.
  - *"Interesting post! Have you considered looking at it from this viewpoint? How might you defend your position?"*

Source

Darby, F., & Lang, J. M. (2019). *Small teaching online: Applying learning science in online classes.* Jossey-Bass.

Leverage Asynchronous Materials and Student Work

Consider using asynchronous activities such as discussion forums and assignments to help students prepare for synchronous or live discussions. This gives students a structured way to prepare for participating in the synchronous session. Leveraging the asynchronous work to inform the synchronous sessions can: (a) provide students with the opportunity to explore and apply course content, (b) allow instructors to highlight examples of excellent asynchronous student work, and/or (c) identify areas of confusion or misconceptions that may need additional explanations or supports during the live session.

Opportunity	Asynchronous work	Live session
Course content	Provide videos, readings, and recorded lectures that prepare students with the necessary background knowledge to effectively participate in the live session. *"Please watch the video below and complete this week's readings to prepare for our live session on Thursday."*	Ask questions that require students to apply course materials when participating. *"Which course resource(s) best supports your response?"*
Assignments	Have students complete assignments that prepare them for live discussions and provide you with the opportunity to check for misunderstandings or uncertainty in mastering the content. *"Please use the course readings and the module introductory video to respond to the following three questions. We will be using these questions as the jumping-off point for our live session on Tuesday."*	Reference quality examples from the asynchronous work students completed by asking students, ahead of time, to be prepared to share their responses in the live session. *"Bernice, would you please share the histogram you created for this data set and talk us through how you did it?"* Analyze responses to identify areas of confusion to be clarified during the live session. *"I noticed many of you found it challenging to find the confidence interval for this data set. Let's first review the steps. I will answer any questions you have and then will have you work in small groups to find the confidence interval using a new scenario. . . ."*

Opportunity	Asynchronous work	Live session
Application and practice	Ask students to consider how they can apply the content to their current employment or situation. *As you consider the topics from this week's module, think about the following questions: "What does this mean for me?" "Can I come up with an example of how this information is applied in my current employment?"* Consider having students share these examples in a discussion forum or through social media such as Twitter or a chat function in the course. This allows you to use these examples in the live session.	Ask students to report back on how they applied the content to their current employment. *"Who would like to start us off with an example of the use of data in their current job? Bev, you mentioned that the grocery store you're working at has been charting the speed with which cashiers are checking people out. Can you share that example with the rest of us?"*
Discussion forums	Asynchronous discussion forums assigned prior to a live session are a great way for students to consider the topics and gather their thoughts and share them with other classmates prior to the pressure of a live session. Having the ability to "rehearse" their responses can build their confidence for the live session. You can monitor these forums to provide guidance to students who seem to be unsure of the content and to identify sources of inspiration for the live session.	Begin the live session by clarifying any misunderstandings or confusion identified in the asynchronous discussion. *"Before we get started today, I just wanted to share a quick review of the differences between categorical and nominal, ordinal, and scale data. . . ."* Invite students who had interesting discussion posts to share their thoughts with the group. *"Daniel, you brought up a very interesting point about the use of data in local policing."*

Identify Model Posts

It can be beneficial to identify discussion forum posts that meet the expectations for quality posts and responses. By pointing out quality posts, you are both acknowledging the student who has put effort into crafting a post that meets the expectations and providing a model for other students to follow as they add their own responses. Below are three approaches to identifying model posts.

Acknowledge and Encourage

- Early in the discussion forum, acknowledge the first few replies as a way to encourage others. Simple acknowledgments communicate that you are present and following the conversation. An occasional question or comment can also be reassuring. Consider using emoticons for head nodding or for saying "uh-huh" or "keep going." This type of feedback communicates to students that they are on the right track and should keep going.
    - *"Scott, thanks for getting us started this week!"*
    - *"Bruno, your comment on the speaker's position is taking us down an interesting path. I look forward to seeing where it takes us!"*
    - *"Christi, thank you for stating your position so clearly!"*

Identify and Recognize Examples of Deeper Engagement and Thinking

- As the course takes off and students are getting into the habit of posting to discussion forums, identify posts that apply core concepts and show evidence of deep thinking.
    - *"Rena, your insights on the challenges of leadership in business show a great depth of thought and application of course content. Nice work!"*
    - *"Darvell, thank you for a thought-provoking discussion so far! I also noticed that you commented on two other posts with a compliment and followed up with a question. Nice work."*

Recognize Student-to-Student Interactions

- By identifying quality student-to-student interactions, you can help to foster a dynamic learning community and encourage students to continue to reflect and comment on the similarities and contrasts in the thinking and experiences of others.
    - *"This thread is excellent! I have really enjoyed watching the back-and-forth between the three of you. Your posts have been very respectful, even though there is some disagreement. You are backing up your claims with solid evidence that directly addresses the differences of opinion. Nice work!"*

Strengthening Peer-to-Peer Connections

Engaging discussion forums support students in processing and analyzing content and in making connections between what they already know and what they are learning. They require students to reflect on the ideas being presented in the course as well as the ideas shared by their classmates. It is this cycle of reading, reflecting, considering, and making connections that actually changes the knowledge structure inside the learner's brain. Often it is only when students are responding to a question or to another student's ideas that they begin to know what they think they know—or sometimes, more importantly, what they do not know (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016). Although responses to a peer are typically required in discussion forums, to ensure students actively and meaningful engage, it is helpful for instructors to step in and help students make connections with one another, especially early in the course. Consider using these strategies in asynchronous discussion forums to strengthen those important peer-to-peer connections.

- Build relationships over common interests.

  o *Sarah, I noticed that you are referencing the impact of global warming on the ski industry. Did you notice that Damon is from Vermont and worked at a ski resort? He might have some insights to share with you.*

- Point out ways peers can support one another.

  o *Robert, in your post, you mentioned being frustrated with posting a graphic in the discussion forum. Did you notice that Chie was able to share a picture? You might want to check in with her to see how she did it.*

- Respond to individual students with suggestions to connect with other peers on points of agreement or disagreement.

  o *Brad and Maria, I noticed that you have different opinions on the appropriate age for students to be involved in social media. Why don't you discuss your reasons and share your evidence with each other?*

  o *Jamie, did you see that Jacques has a similar viewpoint on the role of government in education, but he used some different resources? Why don't you check in with him to discuss and share your resources?*

- Encourage responses to someone who has not received a response post.

  o *Hi everyone! Great job on the discussion forum this week! The back-and-forth is excellent and you're sharing some great resources. As you share your final response post, I would encourage you to identify a classmate who has not yet received a comment and comment on his or her post.*

- Point out quality engagement to the whole class and highlight why this is important.

  o *As we wrap up our discussion forum for this week, I would like to point out that 85% of you went above and beyond the minimum requirement of responding to at least two of your classmates. Nice work! The more we engage with others, the more likely we are to be able to clarify our own thinking and gain deeper understanding of course content. You are also gaining access to a lot of resources that will help you with your final project!*

Source

Boettcher, J. V., & Conrad, R.-M. (2016). *The online teaching survival guide: Simple and practical pedagogical tips* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Prompt Students to Share Insights With One Another

Discussions allow students to process and analyze content and to make connections between what they already know and what they are learning. They require students to reflect on the ideas being presented in course content as well as the ideas shared by their classmates. It is this cycle of reading, reflecting, considering, and making connections that actually changes the knowledge structure inside the learner's brain. Often it is only when students are responding to a question or to another student's ideas that they begin to know what they think they know—or sometimes, more importantly, what they do not know (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016). Encouraging students to share insights, questions, and thoughts with their peers is a powerful way to ensure that your students are doing the talking and the learning!

Use the following chart to encourage peer-to-peer connections in live sessions.

Stance	Purpose	Examples
Confirming	Ask other students to confirm or comment on the previous student's response or comment.	"Maria, do you agree with what Hassan said?" "Becca, what do you think about that?" "Sharice, when you heard Tracy make that comment, what were you thinking?"
Checking	Ask students to confirm or refute another student's stance.	"Sherry, do you agree with Mercy? Why or why not?"
Restating	Ask a student to restate a classmate's answer.	"Who can restate Diana's idea?" "Diana, did they get it right?" "Josh, can you please share what you heard Rebecca say?" "Rebecca, is that what you meant, did he hear you correctly?"
Redirecting	Direct student questions back to the class or to a specific member of the class.	"What a great question! Who would like to tackle that?" "I am pretty sure Amanda talked about something very similar in her pre-work. Amanda, would you be willing to share?"

Source

Boettcher, J. V., & Conrad, R.-M. (2016). *The online teaching survival guide: Simple and practical pedagogical tips* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Prompt for Critical and Deeper Thinking

An effective way to prompt higher order thinking and deepen understanding is to provide feedback to student responses in live discussion forums in the form of questions. This planning guide can be used to select questions that prompt students to clarify their points, provide sound evidence and reasoning for their claims, or further elaborate on their thoughts.

Sample Questions

The table below includes sample questions for each of the types of thinking required.

If the student's response is in a discussion forum and available for the entire class to see, you can post your question publicly as well. If the student's response is in an individual assignment or private message, it is generally best to post the question in that same format.

Type of thinking required	Sample questions
Clarification of content or probing assumptions	• Why do you think that? • Can you elaborate on this idea? • Can you think of an example that applies here? • Do you anticipate any obstacles when using this process? • What must be true for this idea to apply?
Reasons and evidence	• Can you explain where in the text the author makes that case? • Can you give me an example? • Is there an external resource that demonstrates the likelihood of your assertion? • What factors led you to this conclusion? • How did you arrive at this conclusion? • Is there a real-world example that supports this claim?
Implications and consequences	• What outcome do you anticipate? • If true, what does that mean for the _____ that/who will be impacted? • How would this impact other _____? (Fill in the blanks in the above questions accordingly, such as variables, industries, fields, etc.)
Viewpoints and perspectives	• How does your main point relate to the author's perspective of _____? • What is your main argument? • Can you provide an argument opposing the one you presented, either your own or from an external source? • How do these two perspectives supplement or oppose one another?

Sources

Boettcher, J. V., & Conrad, R.-M. (2016). *The online teaching survival guide: Simple and practical pedagogical tips* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Bowen, J. A., & Watson, C. E. (2017). *Teaching naked techniques: A practical guide to designing better classes.* Jossey-Bass.

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Sources

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Summarizing Discussion Forums

You may want to consider closing out a discussion forum with a summary post. These posts serve two purposes: (a) to provide expertise in the content and clear up any misunderstandings and (b) to summarize the key thoughts and ideas generated by the group and provide a bridge to the next set of learning objectives.

Summary posts can be posted as a new discussion thread in the existing discussion forum. If students are not likely to return to the week's discussion post and would therefore miss out on the summary post, you may want to consider posting it as a group announcement or as an email to the class.

Provide Expertise

Near the end of the discussion forum, it can be helpful for students to hear an expert voice that confirms their thinking and helps them integrate core concepts and understandings. This is also a good time to highlight additional resources that might be useful to them. See a sample below:

> *Our readings from the last week have highlighted many new applications of DNA analysis, including tracking down poachers using rare-animal DNA. These research techniques are being applied in many other fields. Your discussion posts indicate that you understand the processes for extracting DNA and analyzing it. I encourage you to check out the video on using DNA analysis in the optional resources section of the course.*

Summarize and Connect

Summarizing is an effective way to incorporate your students' insights and comments to affirm their academic growth. Summarizing also pulls together discrete pieces of information, connects current content knowledge to past knowledge, and helps students prepare for future learning (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016). At the end of the module, add a post that shares student insights and the learning of the group and makes connections to the next week. See a sample below:

> *We have explored a number of technology adoption models. Many of you shared excellent examples from your own fields. For example, Sharice shared the story of her company integrating a new chat feature and Joel mentioned the struggles his company is having with implementing new accounting software. You all had some interesting insights and I enjoyed learning from them. Let's take those principles and models forward next week as we examine potential future technologies using AI.*

Source

Boettcher, J. V., & Conrad, R.-M. (2016). *The online teaching survival guide: Simple and practical pedagogical tips* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.