Instructor Participation in Discussion Boards

Searching through the Internet, there is actually very little information concerning how often an instructor should post responses to students’ comments in discussion boards. Results of research have generally said that instructors believe they should participate, but do not want participation to be mandatory. The following is an excerpt which discusses these findings from an article in the *Journal of Online Teaching* called “An Examination of Online Instructor Presence via Threaded Discussion Participation.” A link to the full article is available at the end of this document.

**Results**

An examination of faculty perceptions concerning the requirement of faculty to actively participate in the assigned threaded discussions in the online classroom found that 77% of respondents support mandatory instructor participation, while 23% were opposed to university regulations on their facilitation of threaded discussions. Of those 23% of instructors who were opposed to requirements on instructor participation, 62% believe that instructors should participate in the threaded discussions but that this interaction should occur at the choice and discretion of the instructor rather than in response to a regulation on teaching. A content analysis of the open-ended responses revealed three themes in relation to mandatory faculty participation: concerns about university regulation, instructor freedom, and instructional quality.

**Requirement of Participation**

A clear majority of respondents believe that online instructors’ participation in the online course discussion threads is essential. Interestingly, while the majority of respondents supported university mandates to prompt this interaction; even those opposed to regulated participation seemed to support the necessity of an instructor’s active participation in the online course. Rather, the argument was not that instructors shouldn’t participate, but that this participation shouldn’t have to be regulated by the institution. This sentiment was summarized by one instructor, who stated,

> Instructor interaction is obviously a key factor in an effective online learning experience. As such, my opposition to regulation is based not on a theoretical disagreement with the need for instructor participation; rather, it is a philosophical argument about the role of the university in policing and mandating instructional expectations of those they have endorsed and hired as experts to teach the course.

A closer examination of the open-ended responses provides additional insight into faculty concerns about institutional standards for an instructor’s participation in online discussion threads. Three distinct trends surfaced in the content analysis of the instructors’ rationale used to support these positions: university regulation, instructor freedom, and instructional quality.

What is clear is that each school may have different guidelines (or no guidelines) for instructors concerning online discussions, but feedback is important and students need to be informed at the beginning of the semester what you expect from them and what they can expect from you. A discussion rubric will provide the information for your students and a paragraph included before the rubric or in the syllabus can explain your discussion participation policies. **Note: It is not recommended that you have no participation in student discussions – students will perceive you**
Examples of your participation policies may include:

- At the beginning of the semester when students introduce themselves in the first week’s discussion area you may answer every posting with a welcome to class, but let your students know that you will not be answering every student’s post thereafter.

- During the first weeks of class you may be contributing more to the discussions. (It may be more important in the first weeks of class to help students feel comfortable in an unfamiliar learning environment.)

- You are there as a mentor and/or facilitator, discussions are not meant to be a one-on-one conversation between teacher and student.

- Depending upon the discussion, you will be posting two or three times during the week. (Frequent short postings by instructors are preferable to infrequent long postings.)

- You may step in if the conversation is headed in the wrong direction.

- You will post a “Week in Review” or “Weekly Summary” at the beginning of the following discussion week (students find these very helpful).

- You will use chat or virtual classrooms to offer “office hours” and/or synchronous discussions as needed.
  - After the discussion week has ended the “virtual classroom” for that week’s topics has ended and you will not answer any posts after that time nor will credit be given for those postings.

These are some examples of guidelines for instructor participation. Be flexible and creative and feel free to add your own strategies. Remember, discussions are a vital part of your online classroom and can provide a dynamic environment for student learning and growth.

Work Cited: