

Enhancing Learning Through Vibrant Online Discussions

By Dale Kimball and Michael Jazzar

The discussion board is the heart and soul of online learning. As such, the life and livelihood of online teaching and learning flows through threaded, asynchronous conversations inspired by thought-provoking questions. To maximize the potential of online discussions, these conversations need to be relevant and inspiring dialogs that empower and enlighten online learning.

The keystone of online discussions, which result in meaningful learning for the student, is vibrant discussion. Vibrant discussions which are highly collaborative in nature inspire the construction of meaningful knowledge by building and expanding learning (Schellens & Valcke, 2005). Vibrant discussions need to optimize the energy and innovation of human thought and potential.

In essence, energetic and innovative discussions are developed through the scaffolding of novel thinking, original writing, and pertinent theory to construct and support new and higher level critical thinking by the learner. In addition, using one's own experience as a filter, these vibrant discussions inspire, support, and honor a diversity of thought through the use of probing and clarifying questions and by validating the thoughts of other students. To illustrate vibrant discussions, please consider the following school leadership post by Jonathan, one of our learners, as well as the instructor's response which illustrates how a reply to a student posting can be constructed to further a vibrant discussion:

Online education is producing more and more work for teachers, who struggle to keep up with communication demands from their students. So how do you keep your own workload reasonable, but still engage students and deliver a sense of online community? The upcoming seminar, **How to Balance Online Learner Needs and Instructor Workload**, will show you how. [Learn more »](#)

Jonathan: "School leaders today need to be more than managers; they must be instructional leaders. Instructional leaders focus upon student achievement and assist and support teachers in promoting the success of each student."

Instructor: "Powerful point! You stated "Instructional leaders focus upon student achievement and assist and support teachers in promoting the success of each student." Based upon this week's readings of Marzano, in



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what ways should instructional leaders support teachers and why, Jonathan and our EDLD 8708 colleagues?

The first two affirmative words “powerful point” demonstrate the instructor’s affirmation and appreciation for Jonathan’s thoughtful posting. The quotation of Jonathan’s own words dignifies and personalizes Jonathan’s thoughts. Theory is interwoven into practice by including the research. The concluding comment personalizes Jonathan by name and extends inclusiveness to his classmates with an invitation to further expand, enhance and propel thought.

Our aforementioned example is presented to illustrate the foundation of vibrant discussions. It includes a student demonstrating understanding, comprehension, personalization, and individualization, while the instructor displays inclusiveness, even as he or she inspires higher order thinking.

Intentional implementation of this powerful technological learning strategy will enhance vibrant discussion board posts and responses that fortify and escalate the true meaning of sharing, learning and growing. Discussion boards need to be built from “the ground up” with vibrant thoughts contributed by each e-learner – thread by thread – until the very structure itself is stable and free-standing. (Edelstein & Edwards, 2002). Please give our strategy a try in your next course and watch learner engagement and achievement soar!

References

Edelstein, S & Edwards, J. (2002). If you build it, they will come: building learning communities through threaded discussions. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, volume V (1). Retrieved from <http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/spring51/edelstein51.html>

Schellens, T. & Valcke, M. (2005). Collaborative learning in asynchronous discussion groups: What about the impact on cognitive processing? *Computers in Human Behavior*, 21, 957-975.

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