

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Honors in Practice -- Online Archive


National Collegiate Honors Council

2020

Using the Online Forum for Honors Learning

John Zubizarreta

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nchchip>

 Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Educational Administration and Supervision Commons](#), [Gifted Education Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), and the [Liberal Studies Commons](#)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the National Collegiate Honors Council at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors in Practice -- Online Archive by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Using the Online Forum for Honors Learning

JOHN ZUBIZARRETA

Columbia College

Abstract: An online forum in which students share not only what content they have learned but more importantly how, when, and why they have learned provides a safe, open, generative space for learning beyond the limitations of the classroom. Suggestions for its effective use and integration are provided.

Keywords: electronic discussion groups; metacognition; social learning theory (communication); collaborative learning; educational technology

A valuable pedagogical strategy I use in honors courses is an online threaded discussion forum in which students share not only the content they have learned but more importantly how, when, and why they have learned. The forum provides a safe, open, generative space in which students share ideas, research, relevant experiences, and questions that extend learning beyond the limitations of the classroom. Students also make connections across courses and disciplines and ponder how classroom work relates to their personal lives, making associations that result in deeper, more durable learning. Because all students in the class and the professor read the posts, thus encouraging each member to respond intelligently and respectfully, the forum creates a climate of genuine collaborative learning, with students and teacher contributing to the interdependent construction of knowledge through civil, scholarly exchange. Emphasizing critical reflection helps students to think and write metacognitively about the process of learning itself, and the forum becomes a way of acquiring the skills and habits of significant honors learning. Here are some ground rules for students that can be adapted to any course:

1. Each student should contribute a minimum of sixteen entries evenly throughout the semester. Four holistically graded, unannounced periodic checks of your online work are meant to help you remain consistently engaged. These assessments are averaged at the end of the semester for one of your course grades. A second course grade is an overall achievement assessment, an opportunity to make up for lost work and earn an excellent grade despite any inconsistencies in the periodic checks.
2. Each entry should be at least a paragraph's length, 15–25 lines. My interest is not in counting words or lines but in encouraging development of your ideas.
3. Try to make most entries critical pieces in which you reflect carefully about an idea, issue, text, class discussion, outside reading, or related learning in another class—something connected to our classwork. Some entries grounded in personal experience or opinions are okay, but the premium is on critically thoughtful pieces about the intellectual content of the course.
4. Use specific examples and quotations to enhance your discussions. When quoting texts, practice MLA or APA style to continue good habits of sound, accurate documentation.
5. Demonstrate your motivation by referring to helpful outside sources. Collaborate with others in finding, analyzing, and evaluating secondary sources that add valuable dimensions to our discussions. If you discover a cogent journal article or chapter in a book or web site, share it!
6. Your entries will be appreciated and evaluated mostly for content, creativity, depth of thought, and critical engagement. Grammar, spelling, punctuation, and mechanics are not evaluated although you should strive to communicate in clear prose that makes you proud.
7. The forum is a medium for challenging and creative reflection, expression of curiosity, and intellectual growth. Let's respect each other as honors scholars and encourage risk, critical inquiry, and diverse perspectives.
8. Finally, be sure to save your entries to your drive or the cloud, or make print copies as insurance against lost or damaged communications. System crashes, server failures, power outages, network delays

or glitches—these and other woes are not acceptable reasons for not meeting forum expectations. Pencil and paper are amazingly trustworthy technologies!

TIPS FOR THE INSTRUCTOR

1. Assuming a class of reasonable size, try to respond to every post, especially in the first couple of weeks. Later, you can combine entries and reply collectively to several at once. Stay active.
2. Model the kind of writing and critical reflection you desire from students. Offer your own and students' examples of shared research, good writing, proper documentation, civil discourse, and synthesis.
3. Bring forum posts into class discussions. Don't make the forum disconnected busywork.
4. Let students launch discussion topics. Avoid directing conversation with an opening post or question. I prefer not to end discussions at a particular time or end of week. Keep dialogue open to encourage learning as a recursive and generative process.
5. Offer plenty of positive feedback, but don't hesitate to point out room for improvement.
6. Continually remind students of expectations; they can fall behind quickly in an open forum.
7. The forum is a collaborative learning space that shows students' names and photos as we share ideas and resources. If a student is concerned about privacy rights, ask her or him to contact you and appropriate campus privacy officers to discuss options.

The author may be contacted at
jzubizarreta@columbiasc.edu.