

Discussion Roles Transform College Asynchronous Talk

Written by Cheryl Hancock

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CHERYL HANCOCK, DEC 12 2016

Online discussions are challenging for entry level college students. New to learning online, adult students struggle often from the start in asynchronous discussions. Unfamiliar with the different environment of a new format and platform for learning, they are often far too overwhelmed with navigating the class and trying to meet minimum course requirements to see the online discussion forum's many benefits.

Learning through discussion, unfortunately, takes a hit. Students give the regular excuses that they are afraid of sounding silly or being wrong in front of the class. Others are frozen with writer's block, and there are some who just rewrite textbook passages or peers' responses. Are these really excuses, or do students just not see the value in and importance of class discussion? I'm of the opinion that many of my students just don't know where to begin when it comes to asynchronous discussion. My question is: how can instructors break students out of thinking that holds them back? The answer: we can scaffold the way to create their own quality learning experiences!

Discussion Roles do just that. Giving students roles offers them quality academic scaffolding in examples of responses they can write. It alleviates the 'great unknown' of where to start, the 'how to' of forming a substantive response, and promotes higher level thinking from the beginning of class. Because each role views the same question in a different light, students get the chance to experience all types of thinking about one question. There are ten roles, and each provides a "lens" through which to view any question. What's best is that roles can be used in any course, from science to math to English.

The roles can also help poor typists, ESL students, and those with limited critical thinking skills by giving them time to think, without interruption, and a standpoint from which to begin thinking and writing. The roles support Bloom's higher order thinking skills, but most importantly, they give students a starting point. For many adult students, knowing how to respond or feeling as though they are responding with quality is a very important aspect of college learning and growth as a student. Not knowing what to write, how to form the response, or what the instructor "is looking for" can quell student learning, thinking, and creativity.

The ten different each offers a unique approach to thinking about and responding to a discussion question: Discussion Starter; Key Terms Definer; Passage Seeker; Connect to Research; Connect to Theory; Connect to Social Constructs; Summarizer; Devil's Advocate; Class Clown; Quiet Kid in the Back.

Students receive a role sheet that explains each role and provides an example of how the role is used. After choosing a role, they can formulate a response to a particular discussion question or student response. For example, the *Key Terms Definer* focuses solely on defining vocabulary, such as the definitions of unfamiliar course terms. In a math course, this might include a discussion on algebraic structures. As a second example, a student might choose the *Connect to Theory* role which focuses on researching theory or the origins of a way of thinking.

The Devil's Advocate focuses on the opposing view point, which allows students to politely debate ideas and question assumptions, promoting critical analysis. *The Passage Seeker* focuses on finding important passages in the reading selections, such as a favorite or important poetic line in a poetry class or quoting the President in a political science class. After enough use and experimenting, students can eventually take on a role without the role sheet. The ten roles give students power to take control of their own learning and feel more secure about offering a quality

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response about the topic being discussed.

Discussion roles offer students an awareness of the variety of ways to view and learn about any given topic. Using the roles, students can begin to understand the ways in which they might influence, guide, control, or turn over control of a discussion. Also, students can learn to develop their higher level thinking skills with the more challenging roles. Instructors can reinforce the use of roles by praising students' use of them, which intrinsically motivates the writer. They can also model role use in their replies to students, create learning teams where roles are assigned, or find other creative ways to promote role use.

Discussion roles provide a tremendous learning and critical thinking advantage for entering online students who are seeking ways to first become comfortable responding in discussion and then challenge their critical thinking skills!

About the author:

Dr **Cheryl Hancock** is a faculty member for the College of Humanities of the University of Phoenix where she has been instructing writing courses online since 2006. Passionate about online learning, she is constantly experimenting with and developing new teaching methods in order to both empower and excite critical thinking and learning in her adult online students.