

December 17, 2007

The eLearning Guild's  
**LEARNING SOLUTIONS**<sup>SM</sup>

*Practical Applications of Technology for Learning* e-Magazine

**THIS WEEK: Design Strategies**

## Threaded Discussion Tips for Designers

**By Clarence J. Bouchat**

**H**ave you ever tried talking to a brick wall? Literally, of course, that is something we all shun as fruitless, although figurative brick walls are harder to avoid in our daily dealings with bureaucracy and others with inflexible, opaque interests. A distance education student may sometimes feel that an online course is like learning from a brick wall, with the computer screen substituting for stone and mortar.

Well-designed distance education courses are not that way, however, because they are able to draw the student into a learning process in which he or she has real influence and meaningful interaction with others, and they deliver useable knowledge. On the adult education level, one very powerful way to achieve such quality online learning is by replicating in-classroom discussions, often referred to as threaded discussions or forums. The art and science of developing and running such discussions takes planning, skill, and flexibility on the part of an instructor.

A fair amount of literature and instruction is now available to successfully guide teachers in designing and executing an on-line discussion. Much less guidance is available, however, for the student participating in threaded discussions in how to break through the wall of isolation that can come from sitting at a lonely computer terminal.

*Distance education presents many challenges to the instructor. Threaded discussions, or forums, are a powerful tool, but there is relatively little advice for using them effectively. This week's author follows up on his earlier overview of threaded discussions with specific "how to" points for instructors and for students.*

A publication of



To help students new to threaded discussions, and others facing a block when participating in them, I've put together some practical tips for instructors to improve student performance in online forums. These tips will also help students to ease and widen their participation, and increase their benefits from this very useful learning tool.

This article is a companion piece to one I wrote for *Learning Solutions e-Magazine* in 2006, "Beyond Self-Teaching Online: Using the Threaded Discussion in Distance Education." I briefly introduce the structure of an academic threaded discussion, offer insight on ways to develop one to invite student participation and success, and give a variety of proven methods students can use to share their views and learn with others online. I have focused mainly on college-level distance education studies, although these hints may also be useful in any in-depth online discussion.

### Threaded discussion overview

A threaded discussion may take many forms, so I will concentrate on a forum where a class of mature and knowledgeable students offers insightful commentary on a topic in an iterative fashion, to instruct themselves through different views, analyze situations,

and propose new ideas or solutions. Such threaded discussions go beyond discovering the "one right solution," or shallow online chats of single inputs or multiple one-sentence observations.

This model replicates online a college classroom seminar, and, as such, offers some distinct advantages and disadvantages compared to the face-to-face method. To take advantage of the relaxed scheduling that asynchronous distance education offers, an online discussion allows students to post to the conversation at any time of day for the duration of the discussion.

Asynchronous means that, when participating, students' comments are available to all, delivered through the Internet, and delivered in near-real time. As such, all students can participate, since the egalitarian nature of an online discussion cannot be as readily controlled by quick-witted or dominating personalities.

A forum can be faculty-led and assessed, with the instructor posing questions to start and to continue a discussion, or entirely conducted by students for their own benefit, or something in between. These methods assume that teacher and students prepare beforehand to discuss the topics intelligently, and directly address the subject at hand.

*On the adult education level, one very powerful way to achieve such quality online learning is by replicating in-classroom discussions, often referred to as threaded discussions or forums. The art and science of developing and running such discussions takes planning, skill, and flexibility on the part of an instructor.*



**Publisher** David Holcombe

**Editorial Director** Heidi Fisk

**Editor** Bill Brandon

**Copy Editor** Charles Holcombe

**Design Director** Nancy Marland Wolinski

#### The eLearning Guild™ Advisory Board

Ruth Clark, Lance Dublin, Conrad Gottfredson, Bill Horton, Bob Mosher, Eric Parks, Brenda Pfaus, Marc Rosenberg, Allison Rossett

Copyright 2002 to 2007.

**Learning Solutions e-Magazine™** (formerly **The eLearning Developers' Journal™**). Compilation copyright by The eLearning Guild. All rights reserved. Please contact **The eLearning Guild** for reprint permission.

**Learning Solutions e-Magazine™** is published weekly for members of **The eLearning Guild**, 375 E Street, Suite 200, Santa Rosa, CA 95404. Phone: +1.707.566.8990. [www.eLearningGuild.com](http://www.eLearningGuild.com)

**Learning Solutions e-Magazine™** is designed to serve as a catalyst for innovation and as a vehicle for the dissemination of new and practical strategies, techniques, and best practices for e-Learning design, development and management professionals. It is not intended to be THE definitive authority ... rather, it is intended to be a medium through which e-Learning professionals can share their knowledge, expertise, and experience. As in any profession, there are many different ways to accomplish a specific objective. **Learning Solutions** will share many different perspectives and does not position any one as "the right way," but rather we position each article as "one of the right ways" for accomplishing an objective. We assume that readers will evaluate the merits of each article and use the ideas they contain in a manner appropriate for their specific situation.

The articles in **Learning Solutions** are all written by people who are actively engaged in this profession – not by journalists or freelance writers. Submissions are always welcome, as are suggestions for future topics. To learn more about how to submit articles and/or ideas, please visit our Web site at [www.eLearningGuild.com](http://www.eLearningGuild.com).

### **Challenges and benefits of threaded discussion**

Compared to a classroom, a threaded discussion offers some additional challenges. You should expect time lags because students will post when they are able. Intervals between posts could span a day or more, depending on guidance in the syllabus. Such postings are not always in topical sequence, either, since late participants may comment on earlier topics before engaging the discussion at its current position. Out-of-order entries are more acceptable online where you can review earlier inputs, or where online systems allow comment nesting through topical groupings.

Time lags can have advantages too. Unlike a classroom discussion, students have the time and resources to do further research on the Internet, or ponder a point before responding. Used properly, such delays enrich and inform the dialogue. Teachers must also carefully plan for online discussions, since instructions to students concerning their assignment, and the site on which to accomplish it, must be entirely clear and self-sustaining, or else the teacher runs the risk of wasted effort and frustrated students.

The benefits of threaded discussions make them an entirely worthwhile addition to any course, despite these drawbacks. Students may appreciate a forum offering the opportunity to interact directly with peers and an instructor in a give-and-take manner. Threaded discussions are also very flexible, allowing even precisely-planned courses to change to meet emerging student interests, or to discuss an unfurling related news event.

A threaded discussion is also a welcome relief from single-shot assessments like tests and papers, where the student has much less interim feedback on his or her mastery of the course material. A discussion encourages classmates, and the instructor, to reply and comment on postings. Through the replies and comments, a student may gauge his or her progress on understanding the material.

A forum offers another style of assessment that is less formal than writing an essay, but more expressive than an objective test. This method of assessment gives students additional ways to show what they know, if they do not demonstrate that as well in formal writing or tests. A forum offers teachers a venue to interactively assess, and to teach beyond assigned readings or videos, too.

Monitoring students' understanding through a forum allows an instructor to determine whether students are accomplishing lesson objectives, and is the venue through which a teacher can intervene if they are not. A well-prepared, in-depth, iterative threaded

discussion offers advantages to online teaching through its relatively relaxed and flexible nature that gives faculty a continual assessment and teaching tool. Students benefit from human interaction, having an additional way to show mastery of the course material, and learning from the knowledge of fellow students – despite the time lags and jumbled nature of responses that may result.

### **Instructor tips for student participation**

To help the distance education student learn, an instructor should ensure that there are many loop-holes and gates leading through the brick wall obstacle that some students perceive. Such assistance may come as a well-thought-out and -presented for-

**April 14 - 17, 2008 | Orlando, FL**

## **THE ELEARNING GUILD 2008<sup>SM</sup> ANNUAL GATHERING**

**Expand Your Knowledge,  
Build Your Expertise,  
Connect with Your Community.**

**Become the  
Master of  
Your Universe...**

Co-located with



Produced by



**www.eLearningGuild.com +1.707.566.8990**

um, keen monitoring of the discussion, and ready access to the instructor to fix and direct problems as they arise. A good course is set up with multiple chances for the student to succeed. Because the discussion must run itself for long periods of time (to accommodate sleeping, eating, and other activities in which a teacher may want to engage), its purpose, task, and participation expectations should be entirely self-evident to a student without further intervention from the instructor.

### **Getting off to a good start**

Good guidance starts with clear instructions and expectations written into the course syllabus and supplemental information. Upon entering the online area where threaded discussions occur, the instructor should orient students to the intent of this online event, and remind them of the important aspects of the forum that they will find in the syllabus. As part of lesson planning, the instructor should carefully write the questions that will guide the discussion or the task, to which students must respond. Any uncertainty on how to begin will manifest in student frustration and reluctance to start engaging.

If a discussion lasts for several days or more, an opening question might be a relatively easy one that draws in student participation and builds confidence (especially during a forum early in a course, or with students new to this method of learning). An easy first question may soon play itself out, so, embedded in the question should be a second and third step that later students can use to broaden a maturing conversation. This phased, multi-question approach will succeed if part of the guidance students receive in the syllabus is to not re-answer an initial question, if previous participants have already done so adequately, but to critique earlier comments, or build upon them, using the other parts of the question already posted. That allows a question to drive a discussion for several days by itself.

Through careful presentation of the assignment, and soliciting feedback from colleagues or previous students, you can catch unintended consequences before the students receive their task. Presenting the question or tasking should also be clear and consistent, so that students do not second-guess their assignment.

### **Sustaining participation**

Once the discussion starts, instructors may encounter two problems with student participation: students front-loading or back-loading their participation, rather than engaging in a steady conversation throughout. Front-loaded participation means that most of the students actively participate early in the threaded dis-

ussion availability period, and participation for most people tails off dramatically at the end. Back-loading is the opposite; most participation occurs in the last couple of days of a threaded discussion with little occurring early in the availability period. This may be caused by a difficult or unclear opening question, so students wait for others to venture into the fray, which pushes the conversation into the back end.

It may be unavoidable that students concentrate their efforts because of their own availability schedule, and it may even be welcome, since that means that the inherent flexibility of asynchronous online learning is delivering for the student. When all students avoid participation for the same event, then the instructor did not plan adequately in order to avoid the conflict. A single major event like the Super Bowl or a critical World Cup match can skew short duration discussions, while events such as a long holiday weekend, or a mid-term examinations schedule may adversely impact longer duration forums.

A course author may also level participation through the guidance students are given, and through the questions an instructor poses during the discussion. The course instructions should make clear the amount of participation expected, and what an acceptable input includes. At a minimum, for an in-depth, insightful discussion, such guidance should require each student to make an initial response to the opening question or task, and to respond to two others' inputs in a meaningful way. This promotes student interaction along the avenue envisioned by the instructor. Instructors could also require a daily, or some other set period, posting depending on the course workload and nature of the assignment. It should be readily apparent to the student, however, what is expected.

A well-timed and well-guided forum may still have skewed participation problems, however, if the assignment itself drives it that way. An easy opening question with a right or wrong answer encourages student front-loading. A vague, poorly-worded opening, or one that is complex and impenetrable, will encourage students to wait for someone else to start, and then to adapt their answers based on the feedback the first student gets. A phased multi-question forum (as described earlier) may alleviate both of these problems.

### **A threaded discussion is a group effort**

The students must also be comfortable, from guidance given by the instructor, that a threaded discussion is as much a group effort as an individual one. They should learn as a group. Everyone does not have to show mastery of all concepts all of the time. Use tests and essays to assess such individual level

*To help the distance education student learn, an instructor should ensure that there are many loopholes and gates leading through the brick wall obstacle that some students perceive. Such assistance may come as a well-thought-out and -presented forum, keen monitoring of the discussion, and ready access to the instructor to fix and direct problems as they arise. A good course is set up with multiple chances for the student to succeed.*

of knowledge; threaded discussions have a different purpose. If evaluated, perhaps the guidance might state that the baseline grade is determined on the collective insight and level of discussions or solutions, so that a rising tide raises all boats, and adjustment of individual performance will depend upon a student's contribution in attaining the overall level. Such group cooperation and learning is one of the strengths of threaded discussions.

### **Evaluating progress and moving on**

Before transitioning from an initial discussion, an instructor should determine that the students have met the question's objective, and that the desired number of students have attained a requisite baseline of knowledge. Should that not occur, the threaded discussion offers the instructor the opportunity for specific online teaching to fill the gap before climbing to a more demanding level. The flexibility of online discussions also means that the instructor may never move to higher level concepts, or may delay their introduction, because the remainder of the allotted time is used in basic instruction where it is needed.

Once the initial assignment has run its course, the instructor should have follow-on question(s) that take the discussions to a higher cognitive level involving application, evaluation, or synthesis, or that in some other way broaden the scope of the discussion. Pre-plan secondary questions to ensure a high quality of understanding and presentation (preferably vetted by peers for this purpose), and thereby refreshing the discussion at a higher level. This allows students who understand the material to continue to demonstrate their knowledge, while those not yet at that level to learn from others through interaction. This relieves the instructor of the burden of constant teaching, and makes teaching another learning opportunity for top students (because one of the best ways to learn something is to teach it).

Phrasing a threaded discussion with multiple questions keeps it interesting, and encourages steady student participation, although back-loaded responses are still possible.

Another way to spread participation is to break a large group of students down into sub-groups. You may subdivide a class of 15 into three groups, each given the same or complementary questions to answer in parallel. Here, non-participation in a small group is much more noticeable than in a large group, and peer pressure may cause everyone to pull his or her load. An advantage to such a method is that it allows students to read the other groups' discussions, and then comment on the differences as part of the assignment.



THE ELEARNING GUILD'S  
**ONLINE FORUMS**<sup>SM</sup>

*January 17 & 18, 2008*

## **Building Immersive Learning Simulations and Games**

- **LEARN** how organizations – whether corporate, academic, or government – are using gaming and immersive learning simulations
- **EXPLORE** using different tools and processes for developing ILS and serious games
- **DISCOVER** how serious-games learning can offer more engaging and effective learning on a wide variety of topics and formats
- **EXAMINE** how to design effective immersive learning simulations and serious games
- **ENSURE** that your ILS / serious games meet both the learners' and the organization's goals



**Register Today!**  
**+1.707.566.8990**  
**[www.eLearningGuild.com](http://www.eLearningGuild.com)**

Hosted by:



Technology  
Sponsor:



Another method individually assigns each discussion participant a specific aspect of a concept in which he or she specializes, in order to introduce, comment, or apply as a teaching tool for his or her peers. There is no hiding or delaying when everyone must comment, and the large amount of initial information is a rich larder from which to sustain the rest of the dialogue for the remainder of the discussion.

#### **Know when to end a discussion**

Knowing when to terminate a discussion is also important to ensure enthusiastic future participation. Usually a discussion will terminate on the date specified, but if the discourse meets its objective early with quality input, then the instructor can release the students with a pat on the back to attend to other aspects of their lives. Leaving a back door open for latecomers to add their thoughts is necessary, however, since the syllabus contract probably informs them that the time was available. An early termination, though, may emphasize to some recurring late participants that a threaded discussion may end sooner than the last day it is scheduled. You may also extend discussions, if required to establish knowledge needed later in the course. Such an extension should avoid other class work and non-course conflicts, and may need student concurrence if extending beyond established contact hours.

#### **Instructor tips for better execution**

Planning the threaded discussion is important for its success, but is only half of what an instructor needs to do. Executing the plan is just as important. Since no plan survives contact with reality, an instructor needs to be able to deviate from a good plan.

A teacher should monitor a threaded discussion looking for the obvious, such as connection problems or software malfunctions. Student frustration is greatly alleviated with timely feedback in an e-mail about a system-wide problem.

An instructor being available reasonably quickly also builds confidence in a student that, should an individual problem arise, it will be addressed. To keep an instructor's work load reasonable, and student learning progressing, students should know how and when to contact a campus or software help desk to solve technical problems. Posting such information in the syllabus, and in prominent places online, will help spread the information. (Redundancy of information online is, in general, a good thing for important items, since an instructor never really knows what the student has seen and remembered.)

Should an instructor do everything right, and still get little initial response to a posted question, he or she still has some cards to play. The intent of the task

may baffle the students. This may manifest itself in offline communication from students doing generally well in the course, or in online comments such as, "I think this is what we were asked to do ...". A timely response to such a plea will keep the discussion on track. The instructor may rephrase the question, but if the question was sufficiently vetted that may not help.

The instructor may also answer some part of the question directly, and thereby give students a template of what "right" looks like. If an instructor is concerned about skewing students' responses too much with his or her presence, then filtering an initial answer through a trusted student for posting may be all that they need. Rather than offer an answer, a teacher may give a source for the answer from course materials or other references. If really befuddled by a class' lack of response, invite another instructor to read what has transpired so far for an additional opinion, or go straight to the source, and find out from the students where the hang-up seems to be (asking either the entire group in the forum, or asking individuals through e-mails or phone).

#### ***Instructor feedback keeps students connected***

The online brick wall never looms far from a threaded discussion, so instructor feedback is important in keeping students connected. Consider giving a daily summary that reassures students they are grappling with the issues as intended. One step better, is to cite individuals by name who the instructor determines have made particularly noteworthy contributions. Public praise is always welcome, and gives the other students a standard against which to measure their own responses. Many students also find reassuring the fact that the instructor is monitoring the discussion, even if offering little to it.

Part of teaching is correcting, so instructors should be ready to intervene if the discussion is no longer achieving its objectives, or to correct errors or maintain the decorum and discipline expected in an academic situation. An instructor needs to balance his or her intervention in a threaded discussion, however. If too heavy handed, the students may become passive, rather than risk the ire of the grade-giver. If too frequent, students may not feel it worth the risk to correct or instruct a fellow student, and possibly be wrong, knowing that the teacher will soon intervene and relieve the students of the responsibility. Not intervening at all risks the breakdown of good academic order and a benign learning environment in some situations, or the propagation of mistruths or unexamined conclusions.

***If an instructor is concerned about skewing students' responses too much with his or her presence, then filtering an initial answer through a trusted student for posting may be all that they need. Rather than offer an answer, a teacher may give a source for the answer from course materials or other references.***

You should give some instructor feedback at the individual level too. Another advantage of an online discussion over an in-resident one is that an instructor may hold a side conversation with a mis-performing, mis-comprehending, or just plain missing student without interrupting the general conversation. Counseling in private should be firm, specific, and as positive as possible, and always first assume a student's action is only mis-informed rather than malicious. (Hanlon's Razor: "Never attribute to malice that which is adequately explained by stupidity.") A simple e-mail, followed by a phone call, where necessary, may be all that is needed to clear up an absence or solve a problem.

### **Refining execution**

Even once a threaded discussion is complete, an instructor may still do things to ensure student participation in the completed or future course discussions. Despite the best of planning, events sometimes occur that make a student unavailable for an extended period – adversely impacting participation in one or more discussions. For good reasons, ranging from a death in the family to a calamity like Hurricane Katrina, an instructor may want a student to get credit for threaded discussion participation, without losing the interaction, collective teaching, and camaraderie for which the threaded discussion was designed.

One way to incorporate these advantages into a make-up assignment, is to have the student summarize the threaded discussion as a reference for those who participated. In this way the student still learns from his or her peers, demonstrates mastery of the material through identifying and condensing significant concepts, and produces a product of use to the class. Improved future participation may result from strong feedback to the discussion just passed. A frank, objective evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of a student's performance, while explaining the grade he or she achieved (if a graded event, or just simple feedback if ungraded), may guide a student to better participation, and raise the overall level of the group's discussions.

These are some techniques an instructor may employ before, during, and after a threaded discussion to help students participate and learn. Good planning is vital to explain to students the standards expected of them, and ensure their tasking is clear, achievable, sustainable, and properly timed. Although usually planned, the flexibility inherent in a threaded discussion allows an instructor to garner more participation by following students' interests, incorporating current events, and renewing, extending or curtailing the topics as the students' learning requires.

### **Improving student participation in a threaded discussion**

Since this method of learning may be new to students, putting them at ease and setting expectations should go a long way toward ensuring a threaded discussion's success. An instructor should familiarize students with necessary administrative items that may be of help and relief to the student as part of the course's introduction, or posted them at the site of discussion. Items to cover should include the instructor's philosophy or goals on expected standards of courtesy and student interaction, as well as hints on how to engage in dialogue to answer the assignment. Students should understand and adhere to these standards to enhance their performance, while an instructor should enforce them with public praise and private counseling. This section includes some thoughts on interaction standards and techniques for answering an assignment that students and instructors may find useful.

Some general rules for all academic contact, whether face-to-face or online, to ensure civil discourse and effective, measured use of time and effort devoted to a discussion may include:

1. There are no bad ideas. All participants should treat postings to the forum as a serious and professional comment by the author. A student may disagree with the ideas and viewpoints of others, which is expected, and is the source of a healthy dialogue. Defend a position or viewpoint, or support that of other participants. However, keep discussions at the professional, not personal, level. Academic freedom to state reasoned arguments applies online, as it does in a classroom.
2. Share the topic. Students should *not* try to give an all-encompassing complete answer to a question initially. Make a worthy contribution to the topic, and allow fellow students to answer other facets in order to build a dialogue. That allows everyone to contribute, and prevents any one person from spending an inordinate amount of time on threaded discussions. Much of the learning in a forum occurs in bandying about ideas, so students should save some time and effort to respond to others. Cooperate and graduate.
3. Treat other participants with dignity and respect. In Internet etiquette, putting everything in capital letters online constitutes yelling (UNDERSTAND?!?!?).
4. Help manage knowledge online. Students should use the subject line of a posting to summarize its intent – make it the bottom line, or bumper sticker, for easier reference by others. A discussion's dialogue will pile up quickly, and short, descriptive subject lines will help others reference earlier comments. If a stu-

*Part of teaching is correcting, so instructors should be ready to intervene if the discussion is no longer achieving its objectives, or to correct errors or maintain the decorum and discipline expected in an academic situation. An instructor needs to balance his or her intervention in a threaded discussion, however.*

dent references back to a previous posting, he or she should do so in a descriptive way that lets others know the specific reference. As a topic in a thread evolves, so should its subject line.

5. Keep postings to the forum focused on the issue at hand. While students have latitude on where the dialogue goes, stay away from personal agendas, or from following extreme tangents. Address the issue posed.

6. Keep postings to a reasonable length. A student should make a point in his or her posting as succinct and clear as possible. Critically think about the subject, reflect on an appropriate response, and then post it. Do not ramble.

7. Non-attribution. It is inappropriate to forward someone's postings without his or her permission. Most schools have a non-attribution policy, and postings to forums should remain only for reference by students and faculty assigned to the course.

8. If a student uses direct quotes, references, or sources in a posting, cite them in accordance with school policy. It is academically bankrupt, and plagiarism, to pass along another's work or ideas as your own.

9. Be careful when using acronyms (i.e., USR, QTB), slang, and technical terms. Remember, students (and your instructor) come from wide backgrounds, experiences, and geographic regions. As a courtesy, explain certain terms the first time you inject them into the dialogue.

These suggestions form the social and academic decorum by which students and instructors should conduct themselves. Following these standards should keep exchanges civil, but not necessarily insightful or reasoned.

### **Suggestions for students**

To improve students' responses, and give them confidence to answer an assignment that is well developed with previous students' inputs, here are some techniques that a student may use to gainfully participate in a forum, even when it seems that everything that can be said has been said. These ideas will assist all students in staying involved.

1. Dialogue. Forums should be dialogues among the well-informed students. To accomplish this, participants must review the course materials to establish a foundation. Then, armed with newly acquired knowledge, students can build upon each others' comments during the online discussions, using some of the techniques below. Initial questions or tasking imposed by an instructor are to start the discussion. If entering a mature dialogue, with nothing to add to the original question that was not already stated, participate by building upon the responses in the preceding entries.

2. Disagree. Just because several answers to a question were posted before a student can participate, does not necessarily mean those answers are correct. Disagree with earlier observations from students when warranted; disagree with the course materials; or disagree with the premise from which the instructor posed the question. Back up disagreement, however, with explanation, facts, or logic.

3. Defend. When a disagreement occurs, a threaded discussion participant should defend his or her point, or those of another student, with facts, analogies, or reason. When kept at an academic level, this is how discourse occurs, and, in a forum setting, how students teach one another.

4. Data. Add to the pool of knowledge by citing pertinent facts or explanations from the course materials. This shows a student has actually read the material (which will impress an instructor and the other forum members), and, even more important, that a student can apply course knowledge to a relevant situation. Even better is to go beyond course material and find references online or in the library that further the group's understanding of a topic. An example might be finding and quoting from a recent political speech or an official history. Including an internet address (URL) is so much the better since everyone can assess it firsthand. Cite any new references in the proper context of how it adds to the on-going discussion.

5. Devil's Advocate. A student may agree with a point, in fact the entire forum group may agree on a point, and come to consensus before examining all facets of a question. A student may play devil's advocate, and pose problems with the consensus, to see how strongly fellow students really believe it, or how strong its logic is. Others may not hold their convictions deeply, and re-examining the topic may help them better understand it. Playing devil's advocate should also show the advocate's understanding of the topic by his or her skill in identifying and probing weaknesses.

6. Distill. Another action the "response challenged" student may resort to is distilling a long and sometimes rambling thread of discussion among group members into a concise focused summary. This not only provides a handy reference for participants to continue the discussion, but is very beneficial for later use. A good summary shows that the summarizer recognizes the key points in a debate, and understands them well enough to re-present them succinctly.

7. Divulge personal experience. Personal experiences often add a dimension of reality that course materials and academic discussions lack. Explain how an observation is relevant to the overall discussion, however.

8. Dilemma. If a particular dialogue resonates with

*Students should use the subject line of a posting to summarize its intent – make it the bottom line, or bumper sticker, for easier reference by others. A discussion's dialogue will pile up quickly, and short, descriptive subject lines will help others reference earlier comments.*

an issue a student might be experiencing or observing, pose the dilemma to the group and ask for their analysis.

9. Deluxe Combo Grande. Using a variety of the techniques above will encourage a thorough review of the topics while keeping the exchange interesting and lively.

### Summary

Online students should not feel like they are exclusively teaching themselves. A well-constructed online course gives the student a variety of learning and assessing methods. One particularly useful tool is the threaded discussion, replicating through the Internet an in-classroom discussion, through which a student can help shape the direction of his or her learning, exchange ideas, teach and learn from peers, and build a sense of camaraderie all under the guiding hand of an instructor.

Threaded discussions allow an online instructor to both assess student understanding and teach when necessary, and can be established by starting with easy topics and building to higher levels of understanding. Although there are disadvantages of a threaded discussion when compared to one in the classroom, there are also many advantages, which make it a very useful teaching tool.

Good instructor planning and flexibility can increase the quality and quantity of student participation in a threaded discussion. Of note are efforts to include clear guidance on discussion expectations, well thought-out and self-sustaining assignments, and enough flexibility to adapt the plan to changing situations, including emerging student interests and relevant news events. Feedback to students, as a group and individually, is also useful in improving future performance. An instructor should also ensure that students understand the etiquette and techniques of threaded discussions, to increase student's participation, learning, and enjoyment. These include acceptable behavior in postings, academic freedom and non-attribution policies, methods to manage the class' collective learning, and techniques to engage the topic to continue and increase the learning process.

A properly crafted and delivered threaded discussion can measurably increase a course's teaching potential, and deliver a student from the dreaded isolation of sitting behind a virtual brick wall. 

### Author Contact

Clarence J. Bouchat is an adjunct instructor at Harrisburg Area Community College teaching geography classes both online and in the classroom. He is a graduate of the U.S. Air Force Academy (USAFA) and University of Southern California. He started teaching



bouchatc@hotmail.com.

geography in the classroom in 1993 at USAFA, and has subsequently taught at the University of Maryland and online at the U.S. Army War College.

Contact Clarence by e-mail to

*Discuss these articles in the "Talk Back to the Authors" Forum of Community Connections ([http://www.elearningguild.com/community\\_connections/forum/categories.cfm?catid=17&entercat=y](http://www.elearningguild.com/community_connections/forum/categories.cfm?catid=17&entercat=y)). You can address your comments to the author(s) of each week's article, or you can make a general comment to other readers.*

*Additional information on the topics covered in these articles is also listed in the Guild Resource Directory.*

### In the Archives

This is Clarence Bouchat's second article for Learning Solutions. The eLearning Guild has previously published articles whose topics relate to this week's. These are available to Guild members in the Learning Solutions Archive online. Members must log in to download them. Here are the authors, the article topics, and the publication dates.

#### Previous article by Clarence Bouchat

Beyond Self-Teaching Online: Using the Threaded Discussion in Distance Education. October 30, 2006.

#### Articles on related topics

Victoria Walker, Developing a Distance Learning e-Portfolio System. June 18, 2007.

Vince Cyboran, Lesson Planning: The Missing Link in e-Learning Course Design. March 19, 2007.

**Online students should not feel like they are exclusively teaching themselves. A well-constructed on-line course gives the student a variety of learning and assessing methods.**

### Best of the Blogs: Excellent recent posts

E-Learning Queen: "Workplace-Focused Language Courses: Keys to Effective E-Learning." <http://elearnqueen.blogspot.com/2007/12/workplace-focused-language-courses-keys.html>

eLearning Technology: "Crash Course in Visual Thinking."

<http://elearningtech.blogspot.com/2007/12/crash-course-in-visual-thinking.html>

elearnspace: "Second Life: Hype and backlash"

<http://www.elearnspace.org/blog/archives/003181.html>

elearnspace: "Strategy execution."

<http://www.elearnspace.org/blog/archives/003179.html>

Scobleizer: "Great list of Office 2.0 apps." <http://scobleizer.com/2007/12/07/great-list-of-office-20-apps/>



## A Worldwide Community of Practice for e-Learning Professionals

The eLearning Guild is a Community of Practice for e-Learning design, development, and management professionals. Through this member-driven community we provide high-quality learning opportunities, networking services, resources, and publications. Members represent a diverse group of managers, directors, and executives focused on training and learning services, as well as e-Learning instructional designers, content developers, Web developers, project managers, contractors, and consultants. Guild members work in a variety of settings including corporate, government, and academic organizations.

Guild membership is an investment in your professional development and in your organization's future success with its e-Learning efforts. Your membership provides you with learning opportunities and resources so that you can increase your knowledge and skills. That's what the Guild is all about ... putting the resources and information you need at your fingertips so you can produce more successful e-Learning.

The eLearning Guild offers four levels of membership. Each level provides members with benefits commensurate with your investment. In the table you will find a comprehensive summary of benefits

offered for each membership level. To learn more about Group Membership and pricing, go to [www.eLearningGuild.com](http://www.eLearningGuild.com).

Guild Benefits	Associate Free	Member \$99 US	Member+ \$695 US	Premium \$1,695 US
eLearning Insider	✓	✓	✓	✓
Past Conference Handouts	✓	✓	✓	✓
Resource Directory – Access & Post	✓	✓	✓	✓
Community Connections – Access & Post	✓	✓	✓	✓
Job Board – Access Jobs & Resumes	✓	✓	✓	✓
Job Board – Post Resumes	✓	✓	✓	✓
Job Board – Post Jobs	✗	✓	✓	✓
Learning Solutions e-Magazine	✓	✓	✓	✓
Guild Research – Standard Interactive Reports	*	*	*	*
Guild Research – Online Briefings	✓	✓	✓	✓
Guild Research – Archives	✗	✓	✓	✓
Guild Research 360' Report Purchase Discounts	✗	✗	10%*	20%*
Online Forums – Live Events	\$	\$	✓	✓
Online Forums – Archive	✗	✗	✓	✓
Annual Gathering or DevLearn Registration	\$	\$	\$	1 year free
Learning Management Colloquium	Upgrade \$	Upgrade \$	Upgrade \$	Upgrade \$
Optional Workshop OR Colloquium Upgrade	\$	\$	\$	1 year free
Event Fee Discounts	✗	20%	20%	20%
Online Event Site License Discounts	✗	✗	20%	20%

\*See [www.eLearningGuild.com](http://www.eLearningGuild.com) for details

✓ = Included in Membership

✗ = Not available

\$ = Separate fee required

The eLearning Guild organizes a variety of important industry events...



April 15 - 17, 2008  
ORLANDO, FL



April 16 & 17, 2008  
ORLANDO, FL



CHECK ONLINE  
for topics and dates!