

## **Making Online Discussions Part of a Cycle of Learning**

Online discussions can be a powerful way to engage students in an experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984) by requiring them to respond to concrete problems so that their naïve thinking is made visible, reflect on their current thinking, articulate how their thinking is changed by integrating new concepts and approaches, and make plans to use their new thinking to do the challenging work of our courses.

Below are three examples of online discussion sequences that engage students in this cycle of learning.

### **Case prediction**

1. (Online) For their initial discussion post, students read a short case that describes a situation where a concept they will be studying in the upcoming part of the course is relevant. The scenario is unfinished, though, so students are asked to use their current knowledge to predict what they think will happen next. Their post explains their prediction as well as the reasoning behind that prediction.
2. (Online) After they have made their initial posts describing their predictions, students read and respond to several other students' posts, asking questions and comparing their predictions to those of their peers.
3. (Online or f2f) Students learn more about the relevant concept(s) through course readings, lectures, and other learning activities. At this point, they may learn how the case was actually resolved so that they can consider whether their prediction was accurate and identify gaps in their thinking. They are asked to explain how their thinking is changing so that they begin to develop their own sense of the abstract concepts that guide experts' thinking about cases such as these.
4. (Online) Students return to their initial posts and explain how the gaps or inaccuracies in their predictions are (or aren't) resolved or answered as a result of what they learned about the course concepts. Then they are asked to describe how they will use these concepts on upcoming assignments.

### **Case analysis**

1. (Online) For their initial discussion post, students read a short case that describes a problem where a concept they will be studying in the upcoming part of the course is relevant. Students use their current knowledge to propose and explain a solution to the problem (or, alternately, to diagnose or determine what caused the problem). Their post explains their proposed solution or diagnosis as well as the reasoning behind that solution or diagnosis.
2. (Online) After they have made their initial posts describing their proposed solutions or diagnoses, students read and respond to several other students' posts, asking questions and comparing their proposed solutions or diagnoses to those of their peers.
3. (Online or f2f) Students learn more about the relevant concept(s) through course readings, lectures, and other learning activities. At this point, they may learn the actual solution or diagnosis that experts used to respond to the problem so that they can consider the viability of their solution identify gaps in their thinking. They are asked to explain how their thinking

is changing so that they begin to develop their own sense of the abstract concepts that guide experts' thinking about cases such as these.

4. (Online) Students return to their initial posts and explain how the gaps or inaccuracies in their analyses are (or aren't) resolved as a result of what they learned about the course concepts. Then they are asked to describe how they will use these concepts on upcoming assignments.

### **Data prediction**

1. (Online) For their initial discussion post, students are given a short description of the parameters of a published (or unpublished) study in your field where a concept they will be studying in the upcoming part of the course is relevant. Students study these parameters and use their current knowledge to predict what they study will find. Their post explains their prediction as well as the reasoning behind that prediction.
2. (Online) After they have made their initial posts, students read and respond to several other students' posts, asking questions and comparing their predictions to those of their peers.
3. (Online or f2f) Students learn more about the relevant concept(s) through course readings, lectures, and other learning activities. At this point, they may learn the results of the study so that they can consider whether their prediction was accurate and identify gaps in their thinking. They are asked to explain how their thinking is changing so that they begin to develop their own sense of the abstract concepts that guide experts' thinking about this kind of research.
4. (Online) Students return to their initial posts and explain how the gaps or inaccuracies in their predictions are (or aren't) resolved or answered as a result of what they learned about the course concepts. Then they are asked to describe how they will use these concepts on upcoming assignments.

### **Reference**

Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.