

Create Small Groups for More In-Depth Online Discussions

Discussion forums are the heart and soul of online courses, because they constitute the virtual physical space where students interact, learn from, and build community with each other (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016).

Instructors can create small online discussion groups to increase student-to-student engagement, helping them become more self-directed and collaborative with their peers. Small groups can be assigned challenging problem sets, case studies, real-world scenarios, or complex issues to work on and respond to as a group. These forums should be more informal communication spaces where students can openly discuss their ideas without concern for being evaluated although you may visit each forum to be sure all group participants are engaged and working together. Group responses can then be posted to a full group discussion board to be assessed using an appropriately modified version of the General Discussion Forum Rubric. Once you have formed a set of small groups, you might consider keeping them together to do these types of activities throughout the semester.

Below are three basic ways to form groups for online active learning. Instructors should choose the group membership method based on the type or purpose of the activity.

Grouping Type	Uses	Methods
Random	<p>Quick, efficient, and fair</p> <p>Provides opportunities to work with a variety of other students</p> <p>Ideal for informal discussion groups and short assignments (Barkley, Major, & Cross, 2014)</p>	<p>Use simple and transparent techniques such as grouping by</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - alphabetical order of first or last names; - counting off by the number of groups you want to form (e.g., if you want three groups, the first person on the list goes in group 1, second person goes in group 2, third person in group 3, fourth person in group 1, etc.); or - using the learning management system (LMS) function to create a randomized small group.
Instructor-Determined	<p>Allows for strategic grouping of students based on similarities or differences in characteristics such as content knowledge, skills, or demographics</p> <p>Ideal for assignments that</p>	<p>Data Sheet: At the beginning of the course, ask students to fill in a survey that identifies their major, career interests and experience, digital skills, demographics, work style, and scheduling availability for group work. This information can be used to group students according to similar interests or to enhance the diversity of a group (Barkley, et al., 2014).</p>

	are ongoing, project groups, or controversial discussions	Likert Scale Rating: To create groups with diverging opinions about a controversial topic, ask them to reply to a question using a Likert Scale to determine their opinion on a topic to form groups.
Student-Selected	After students have had the chance to work with or participate in discussions with two to three different students or groups of students, you may want to allow them to create self-selected groups.	Use the LMS or a Google Doc to create a sign-up sheet for a preset number of groups with a maximum number of spots. You can also create sign-up sheets based on a particular topic or task so that students might choose their group based on the topic. Reminding students of the learning benefits they reap from working with students who are different from themselves is recommended.

Adapted from Barkley, E. F., Major, C. H., and Cross, K. P. (2014). *Collaborative learning techniques: A handbook for college faculty* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.