



## **Bringing the Classroom Discussion Online A Framework for Successfully Facilitating Large-Group Online Synchronous Discussion**

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### ***Introduction***

Classroom discourse has long been recognized as an important part of teaching and learning. With the recent shift to more information technology based learning, however, teachers using technology based environments have come to rely more on asynchronous "message board" postings rather than keeping the liveliness and engaging part of synchronous discussion. Often cited reasons for not using synchronous chat are time/distance, confusion of more than a few people talking at once, and difficulty in getting participants

### ***Background***

The following are some specific suggestions devised for making synchronous instructional situations productive for student learning and engagement. These techniques have been employed in a graduate level class in educational leadership and have been developed and refined using personal experiences of the instructor and the broad body of literature on computer mediated communication and classroom discourse.

### ***Question/All Answer (Q/AA)***

The **Question/AllAnswer** approach is when the instructor poses a question and then all students in the real-time chat compose a single response to that specific question and post the response.

- It is a time for all students to pause and compose a thoughtful, concise response.
- It is a time for all students to read and think about the messages posted by classmates and await the next direction or request from the instructor.
- This may or may not be a time for students to start reacting, in writing, to any and all messages of classmates. The instructor may post a message such as: Each student is to respond to at least one of the posted answers.

#### **Pros**

All students weigh in

A lot of student responses get generated in a short amount of time

#### **Cons**

A lot of screen reading for all students gets generated in a short amount of time

### ***Split Room (SR)***

The **Split Room** approach is when the instructor will ask a half or a third of the room members to participate in a group discussion (a smaller **AllAnswer** session) while the rest of the learners in the room view the discussion or the formation of answers.

**Pros**

Some students get to engage in a conversation with a limited number of participants, thus the conversation may be less confusing than one with twice or three times as many students. The students who are not in the conversation have an opportunity to read and think about the discussion without having to participate.

**Cons**

The students who are not in the conversation may not pay attention.

***Focused Conversation (FC)***

The Focused Conversation approach is when the instructor will invite one student to have an extended written conversation with the instructor or with another learner (maybe 3 to 7 or 9 back and forth interactions) while the rest of the students read along until given further directions. There are a couple of ways to get a Focused Conversation going. Ask an individual person a general question and continue to probe with follow-up questions with the individual or respond to a posting a student has made and then follow-up from there.

**Pros**

This can encourage deeper thinking by the individual and the classmates following along.

**Cons**

This may lead to non-engaged students to become uninvolved.

***Brainstorming (BST)***

To Brainstorm, the instructor poses a question and student's response with the first short answer that comes into their mind and reads the answers of others and as new ideas come into the student's mind, the student responds again. This technique tends to generate large amounts of responses in a short amount of time. It is suggested that all students in the virtual room participate; of all students in a Split Room format, participate while the other half of the room reads everything.

**Pros**

A wide range of information can be generated in a short time.  
Can get even reluctant students to respond.

**Cons**

There can be redundant responses.  
This technique can become "old" fast if overused.

***Tips***

- Establish patterns for synchronized interaction. If you don't establish the patterns, they will get established for you.
- Offer more than one chat per week, preferably at a different time of day.
- Allow students 5 minutes at the beginning and end of the chat, just like they would have in a classroom.
- Conduct a needs assessment at the beginning of the course to find out when students can attend chat sessions.