

## ***Rider University Online E-coaching Tips***

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### **Teaching Online Tip #5: Discussion Wraps — A Useful “Cognitive Pattern” or “Collection of Discrete Thought Threads?”**

How do you wrap up your weekly discussions? Do you have a favorite technique that helps you and your learners focus on core course concepts? Do your students occasionally take the lead in summarizing fundamental or unusual relationships or patterns?

Weekly discussions are the online analog to classroom discussions. The discussion postings reveal what students know, what they think they know and what is on their minds. Weekly discussions are also the best tool for creating a sense of a learning community. One feature of online discussions that is not discussed regularly is how to close out a discussion. What do we want students to “take away” from a discussion?

Envision having a conversation with a colleague and you are enthusing about “how thoughtful” the last week’s discussion has been. Can you capture in one-three sentences what you believe your students are going to remember, think about, question from that discussion?

Here are two effective teaching practices you may want to consider.

#### **Summarize the key viewpoints, patterns, relationships from the postings**

It is helpful to keep in mind what our brains are doing when we are learning. When we are learning, we are modifying and growing the connections in our brains. We are processing data, identifying similarities and patterns, making sense of unfamiliar information, and occasionally delighting in new insights and possibilities!

As students are discussing ideas in the weekly conversations, the questions, perspectives and ideas that they bring into the conversation tend to be broad-ranging and dispersed. Often just as the conversation gets to the point of identifying key patterns and interesting relationships, the week ends and a new topic begins. Often the students are left wondering, grappling with questions such as:

- What was that all about? How do the themes from that conversation fit into the larger course picture?
- Where has this conversation taken me? Taken our group?
- What have I learned? What do I know now that I did not know before?
- What is next? Are there actions that we should pursue at some point?
- Have I changed how I think about these ideas? Or about this problem?
- What are the new challenges ahead?
- What do the discipline experts think about this?

- What does our faculty leader think? (Not that faculty have to agree with experts, but it is important for students to know their instructor's opinion, as learners view faculty as their guide and interpreter of the experts as well as being an expert.)

The purpose of a discussion summary is to bring some type of closure; even it is temporary, to a topic. This does not mean having answers, but rather identifying the "take-aways," and pruning to the essentials. We know from memory research (Demasio, 1999) that we remember very little of what we encounter — with good reason!

Demasio describes the process of learning as our brain searching out and finding receptor nodes for bits of new information and then arranging that information into a useful mental model. If existing mental models interfere, or there are no readily accessible receptor nodes for the information, words can be just words, and no meaning or remembering takes place. All is ephemeral.

Summarizing the discussion is an opportunity to help the students focus and reflect on the essential information and course concepts, to help highlight key issues and help to develop a useful knowledge base, rather than vague recollections or nothing at all!

Here are some suggested formats for discussion wraps.

- Create a closing discussion thread labeled "Summary," "Wrap-up" "Key Ideas" labeled with a core course concept for the week. This is the place for the key ideas to be summarized and clarified jointly by faculty and students. This summary thread can capture how the students have expressed convergence or divergence from these ideas, along with references to examples.
- Create an executive summary that encapsulates the key postings of the week integrated with the key concepts and post it in your faculty blog or forum. The goal of the executive summary is not to make it too easy for the students, but to bring the threads of ideas and discussions together. This can be longer or shorter, depending on the maturity of the students, the content, and the importance of the discussion concepts. Faculty who teach the same course each semester can create a reusable template for reinforcing some of the key concepts, creating a new version of recyclable lecture notes! (Obviously, these lecture notes are refreshed with references to current student comments.) This is primarily a faculty creation, but provides for review, critique and comments from students. However, another excellent strategy that pushes this creative work back to the students is to rotate responsibility for discussion wraps to students, as is implied in the idea of students creating a podcast of the executive summary below.

- Create a group summary discussion thread by asking each student to identify the key concept for them from the discussion. The posting can be an insight, challenge, action, change, relationship, or pattern
- Hold a live synchronous Q & A Wimba session with your students and review key ideas from a unit that covers 2-3 weeks and archive that session. You or one of the learners can do a review of that activity.
- Have a summarizing discussion in the Wimba classroom. Review the concepts from the readings and comment on the discussion and conclusions that ensued.
- Create a podcast summary or invite students to do this.

### **Involve the Students**

Keep in mind that the creative process of preparing a summary from a week's discussion requires advanced skills such as analysis, synthesis, questioning, linking ideas, and identifying patterns, and reinforcing relationships. These are the types of skills that we desire for our students! As faculty we want to share this type of creative experience!

Literature on groupwork makes the following observation about how people participate in groups. "Each of us has a typical way of acting in a group. Some people like to lead, some act to keep the group focused on the task and some serve to keep the group from taking itself too seriously." (Svinicki, 2006) This is just as true for online groups as it is for face-to-face groups. Here are some roles/tasks that are pertinent for online weekly discussion groups.

- Information and opinion giver. Offers facts, opinions, ideas, suggestions, and relevant information to help group discussion.
- Information and opinion seeker. Asks for facts, opinions, ideas, suggestions, and relevant information to help group discussion.
- Summarizer. Pulls together related ideas or suggestions and restates and summarizes main point discussed.
- Coordinator. Highlights relationships among various ideas by pulling them together and harmonizes activities of various subgroups and members.
- Diagnoser. Figures out sources of difficulties the group has in working effectively and the blocks to progress in accomplishing the group's goals.
- Reality tester. Examines the practicality and workability of ideas, evaluates alternative solutions, and applies them to real situations to see how they will work.

You may want to solicit students to volunteer to assume one or more of these roles for some of your weekly discussions. In particular, you may want to solicit a volunteer or

maybe a team of two to take on the role of *Summarizer* for a week. If you do assign this task to your student, remember how important your “voice” is in taking the next step of providing confirmation, affirmation or disagreement with the student’s summary. This is part of the Teaching Presence for you to “be there” for online students. As noted above, your opinion and next challenges — as one expert contribution — is a key component of the community summary from that week’s discussion work and also part of your Cognitive Presence. (Garrison, Anderson and Archer, 2000, Rider Tip 2, Teaching Online Tip #2: The importance of Presence: Social, Teaching and Cognitive.)

### Interesting Bits and Pieces

You may want to view a one-minute video clip of Diane Schallert of the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Texas. In this video clip, Schallert explains why she uses the technique of creating a separate word document for weekly summaries. <[www.utexas.edu/academic/blackboard/examples/videos/schallert\\_02.html](http://www.utexas.edu/academic/blackboard/examples/videos/schallert_02.html)> At this same web location, Professor Schallert shares the research that supports why she thinks “the process of compiling discussion threads and posting them again increases learning.”

Reder and Anderson (1980) showed that college students remember more important material from reading chapter summaries than from reading entire textbook chapters. In addition, Mayer et al. (1996), showed not only that students remember more of the important material when it is presented as a summary but that they also better understand the material.

The references for this research are included in the list below.

### Actions

Enjoy trying one or more of these strategies! Some of these summary activities can be part of your assessment plan.

Reminder: More information about Wimba, a collaborative learning software application that supports synchronous communication and rich media is at the Teaching and Learning Tools website at [http://www.rider.edu/2559\\_5876.htm](http://www.rider.edu/2559_5876.htm) under the topic, Technology.

### References

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*Note: These Online Teaching tips are for faculty who are teaching online in Rider University's College of Continuing Studies [CCS]. These tips are part of an ecoaching service from Judith V. Boettcher at [ecoach@designingforlearning.org](mailto:ecoach@designingforlearning.org). More tips are at <http://www.designingforlearning.info/>. Contact Judith with questions, requests to review your courses, and any other requests focused on providing the best teaching and learning experiences possible for Rider faculty and students.*