



Course Design: Discussion Boards

00:08–00:30

Andrew Coletti: Hello and welcome back to this episode of The T in Teaching. This episode is focused on discussion boards and their place and importance in course design. In this episode, our host, Jenny McNiven, interviewed Professor Jim Thompson. Jim Thompson is an adjunct professor at Temple School of Business. Teaching subjects like marketing and international business. Professor Thompson is an alumnus of Temple, earning his Bachelor in marketing in 1975.

00:31–00:54

Andrew Coletti: Besides being an adjunct professor, he also serves as an advisor to the student marketing SPO. Jenny McNiven is a senior instructional designer at Fox's Online and Digital Learning Department. In addition to online course support, she is the coordinator of Fox's Online Teaching Certificate and heads the Department's Faculty Training and Development Program. Thank you for listening and please enjoy.

00:57–01:34

Jenny McNiven: Welcome back to this episode of the T in teaching. I am senior instructional designer Jenny McNiven with the Online and Digital Learning Department, and I'm here today with Jim Thompson, who has been a full-time professor and adjunct here at the Fox School of Business. Jim is one of our discussion board experts. Everyone loves talking to Jim about his use of discussion boards and we thought it would be wonderful to have him into the studio today to talk about how to make discussion boards a powerful and dynamic tool for connection and exploration in the online classroom.

01:34–01:36

Jenny McNiven: So, Jim, thank you so much for being here.

01:36–01:37

Jim Thompson: Very happy to be here Jenny.

01:37–02:04

Jenny McNiven: Excellent. All right. So, we are just going to jump into some questions so we can get right down to it and start getting into the nitty gritty of discussion boards. So, to start off, I think importantly, we need to know where to start when determining topics for our discussion boards in classes. Ultimately, the discussion board should be tied back to our course learning objectives, but there's a lot of freedom in that that may feel daunting to faculty who are trying to design them.

02:04–02:07

Jenny McNiven: So, what would you recommend for where we start with the process?

02:08–02:28

Jim Thompson: So let me do a little bit of background. So, I'm going to circle back to last fall. So roughly a year from now, I was going to be teaching an online course at, but it would be the first one that was mostly asynchronous. I had taught a good number of online courses previously, but this was asynchronous, and we would only meet for less than an hour a week.

02:28–02:48

Jim Thompson: Normally, in previous teaching of the international marketing class, I would introduce topics and we would talk about them in class, but there was not going to be time. So in working with Sarah from the Fox Online and Digital Learning Group, she suggested maybe employing the discussion board as a way to enhance the class. And so that's exactly what we did.

02:49–03:16

Jenny Mcniven: Wonderful. So you were basically like without having enough time in the classroom to cover everything you wanted to discuss. You were moving some of that discussion outside of the classrooms and replacing it with discussion boards, which is also wonderful because discussion boards do count as contact hours in our online classes. So it's a way for your students to interact with each other, but also get quality input from you on the discussions they're having regarding your class content, right?

03:17–03:41

Jim Thompson: Yeah, and that's exactly how this got started. Sarah recommended setting up the discussion board for this class as a way to achieve some of the contact hours. What ended up happening went way beyond that and really surpassed my expectations. So if you don't mind, let me tell you a little bit about that. Normally in the class, I find topics that I would like to discuss, and so I still was doing that and their current marketing topics.

03:41–04:06

Jim Thompson: The nice thing about marketing as a field is that every week, almost every day there are brands doing things that we can talk about in class. And that's true whether it's international or domestic. And so I typically read 4 to 5 business journals or emails every single day with articles about what brands or companies are doing. And so I would, I decided, topics for the class.

04:07–04:36

Jim Thompson: Last fall, there were 60 students in this online class. And so I organize them into pairs, so 30 pairs. And then each week, two or three of the pairs would receive a topic to research. And then ultimately create a video. So, expanding on that a little more, I would provide the topic. I would give them a paragraph or two description of what the topic was and I would give them some links on online sites to get started.

04:37–05:00

Jim Thompson: They would research the topic and then instead of writing a paper or something else, they would do a video. And I had said 5 to 7 minutes max. Pretty typically they did about five and a half and they presented what they learned about that particular topic to the discussion board. And then every student in class had to then comment on each of the videos each week.

05:01–05:22

Jenny Mcniven: That's wonderful. I like how you, instead of making the discussion boards something that was teacher focused, where you were there, you were the expert giving them something to go off of. You made the students the facilitators of the discussion board instead. So that that was the interaction they were getting. The students were responding to the work that their classmates had done on topics that they were familiar with and working on.

05:22–05:35

Jenny Mcniven: I love that. Absolutely Great. So once you've narrowed down on a topic like this, how do you frame it within the discussion board format to inspire great discussion or collaboration? There are so many different ways to do it.

05:35–05:58

Jim Thompson: I just had the students post their [topics], post them by Monday evening, and then now all the other students in class had till Thursday evening to watch and then post comments. They might be comments

where they agreed they may have disagreed. There may be a point in the in the topic where they wanted to expand and that's what happened.

05:58–06:19

Jim Thompson: I should mention the students who did the videos did a great job. I was really impressed and actually I was really impressed with the comments that students made. Maybe it's because it's a lot more interesting when it's a fellow student than the professor, but the students really, they took it to heart. They made comments. Some students really expanded on it.

06:19–06:32

Jim Thompson: Some were students who were not from the US, who had experience in other parts of the world, and so they employ that in their comments. It really made for a, I think, a great way of learning within the class.

06:32–06:55

Jenny Mcniven: It sounds really fresh and different to me. A lot of discussion boards contend to feel kind of stale because students are used to this singular format that we've had for the last decade of Here's the topic, write one response and respond to two other people. But I really like how you flipped it around and made it more about the work that the students were doing to create their presentation and then the response to that.

06:55–07:11

Jenny Mcniven: So there's obviously lots of ways to design an impactful discussion board. So how do you approach actually differentiating the discussion boards you use throughout a class so that they do stay interesting and engaging for students so they aren't just doing the same thing every single time?

07:11–07:45

Jim Thompson: All right. Well, again, I was using this during the course of the semester, so we didn't start with the videos until about four weeks in. And so we've had a number of things we were doing in class up to that point. But then I wanted to give students enough time to research so I would give I would send the email to the two students who were going on a particular topic about ten days in advance, and then that gave them time to research the topic and then talk to each other about what they wanted to discuss on the video.

07:46–08:06

Jim Thompson: So each week the topics were different. And so, you asked about how do you keep it fresh? Well, they were they were different. They weren't always marketing specific. Sometimes it was cultural because a big part of international marketing, international business is understanding cultural differences between, let's say, the US and other parts of the world and other countries.

08:07–08:28

Jim Thompson: And so, I think that was a way to keep it fresh. Another thing that I did was I didn't always agree with the students's™ perspective, not that they were wrong. It's that if they often or sometimes I shouldn't say often, sometimes had a perspective as the customer or the consumer for a brand as opposed to, let's say, the brand itself.

08:28–08:52

Jim Thompson: And that allowed me to then to pick two or three topics or two or three items each week. And then when we in our class, when we only had 55 minutes to talk about those and offer a different perspective than maybe what was presented in in the video or in the comments and to offer in the example here what that is as a consumer, that's it makes sense what you're saying.

08:52–08:59

Jim Thompson: If you're the brand, here's how you might look at it differently. And so that's also how I incorporated in class.

09:00–09:26

Jenny Mcniven: I like how you used your role as someone who was more of a connector and someone who could propose maybe different aspects for them to consider as part of the discussion in the discourse. That's great. So discussion boards can be a really good medium for discourse, obviously, between faculty and students. But I think the secret sauce of a good discussion board is how it connects to students and provides a space for them to explore course materials and topics together.

09:26–09:41

Jenny Mcniven: So what other ideas do we have for keeping discussion boards? Student led rather than focusing on the faculty and the faculty facilitation of it? I like your idea of having students bring their own content. That's something I think you can do in a lot of different ways.

09:42–10:05

Jim Thompson: So I mentioned earlier, marketing is a great discipline because everybody's an expert. You know, if you think about finance or accounting, the students have to learn everything in class. They may have some understanding, but they have to learn pretty much everything. And so I could see where it might lend to a professor doing more talking because they're the experts right?

10:05–10:29

Jim Thompson: In marketing, students are experts. They could talk about brands they've seen advertising. The Barbie movie came out this week. There's lots of perspectives on that. And so I really like having students talk in class because their opinions are completely valid for them. They may or may not be representative of others in class, and that's okay because other students feel differently.

10:29–10:51

Jim Thompson: They can offer those opinions. And that came out in the discussion boards where some students agreed and built, but others disagreed and said, Well, here's what I think. And I think I think it lends to a much better discourse if there's not agreement all the time, that it expands the way all of us think. And I'm a little bit older than the average student.

10:51–10:58

Jim Thompson: And so, I learned as well. I mean, I was seeing perspective from the students that maybe I hadn't considered as well.

10:58–11:21

Jenny Mcniven: Do you find yourself surprised sometimes at the students who maybe are not as comfortable on camera during a synchronous Zoom session? Perhaps you maybe come out and where they shine is in the discussion board, where they have a little bit more time to put their opinion and all of their perspective into one really well proposed context and provide it not in a way that's so confronting as being on camera.

11:21–11:49

Jim Thompson: So I actually think that in this particular class the is for students to volunteer to go first or second. And so the students who are, I think, more confident or less risk averse are the ones who offered. And so they did their videos first and they were okay with it And other some other students said, you know, made comments about how good the video was, how great the students did.

11:50–12:06

Jim Thompson: And I think it made it okay for everybody else. Yeah. And so even those who are maybe a little more introverted or concerned, I felt I think felt okay. And students who weren't from the U.S. and were English wasn't necessarily your first language. I think they felt okay with it as well.

12:06–12:40

Jenny Mcniven: Yeah, I think it's great to have discussion boards as a way of allowing students who have different skill sets or maybe are more comfortable in different situations to show off or to really show up in a different way. Through that context. I know that I've actually been an online student several times before where we've had discussion boards as part of my online content, and I've been in classes with good online discussion boards, and I've been in classes with not so great online discussion boards. Discussion boards where I felt like they'd really been just thrown in there to give students busywork to do so.

12:40–12:56

Jenny Mcniven: They had something else to grade and didn't necessarily connect to the rest of the content or the class activities or what's been going on. So, what are your thoughts on how to really incorporate discussion boards into what you're doing in class time or related coursework?

12:56–13:04

Jim Thompson: Yeah, so I want to do a tangent to something you said. For this particular class I explore videos in the vault.

13:05–13:06

Jenny Mcniven: Ah! The video vault!

13:06–13:30

Jim Thompson: Yes. And many of them were had been created about ten years ago and in marketing ten years is an eternity, right? And then if you throw COVID and the pandemic in there and then supply chain issues that were also happened over the last five or six years and inflation, it means that pretty much anything that was in there was out of date.

13:30–13:55

Jim Thompson: But the other thing in there and a lot of those videos, they were really long and I don't have the long attention span. And so I didn't want to watch them. And I sure don't want to create a long video. But if I'm someone who's Gen Z who's used to watching Tik Tok videos, right, then the content for the class should be consistent with what they're used to and so I felt that saying 5 to 7 minutes was consistent with that.

13:56–14:13

Jim Thompson: And again, most of the students were roughly five and half minutes in length. And I think that really contributes to people paying attention because it's consistent with what they're normally used to saying. And it doesn't require a lot of effort. It's just a few minutes to watch and then you can comment afterwards.

14:13–14:44

Jenny Mcniven: Yeah, I really like that approach because I've definitely also had discussion boards where it was like, watch this YouTube video that's 40 minutes long and format your opinion on perspective on it. And that's pretty taxing for a student who already has a pretty heavy workload. So being able to sit down and actually connect with your fellow classmates to watch them talk for 5 minutes and then be able to respond and engage with that I'm sure, is something that actually keeps your students maybe more excited about partaking in the discussion boards and having that as part of their course curriculum.

14:44–14:52

Jim Thompson: Yeah, So I hope so. I mean, I was actually quite excited when I was watching the videos and reading the comments, so hopefully the students felt the same way.

14:53–15:13

Jenny Mcniven: That's great. So finally, to wrap things up, how would you encourage your fellow instructors to make sure that they're keeping their discussion boards relevant week to week throughout the course? Not necessarily that they have to have one every single week, but how to make your discussion boards relevant and maybe responsive to what is happening in your classroom every week?

15:13–15:44

Jim Thompson: Right. So I like having in class discussions. I again, I think they really add to the class and maybe it's easier in a course like marketing, but I it gave me ideas for four topics for the future as well. When we got into discussions and I felt like maybe what the students were saying was again, pertinent for them, but not necessarily the way that in this case international companies would think about marketing their products.

15:44–15:51

Jim Thompson: It gave me ideas to use for it for future topics. If I could find something relevant in the class.

15:51–16:02

Jenny Mcniven: That's fantastic. I absolutely love talking about discussion boards. I have enjoyed talking about them with you and hearing your ideas and some of the fresh new ways that you've introduced them into your classes.

16:02–16:04

Jim Thompson: Okay, Well, my pleasure and thank you for having me.

16:04–16:05

Jenny Mcniven: You're so welcome.

16:05–16:06

Jim Thompson: It started with an idea from.

16:07–16:08

Jenny Mcniven: From an instructional designer.

16:08–16:11

Jim Thompson: Structural designer. And now it will finish with more ideas.

16:11–16:41

Jenny Mcniven: It will go on to live forever through our instructional design team, I promise you. Well, thank you again, Jen. This has been a really wonderful discussion and I appreciate it. Thank you.