*Please share with your faculty:*

**Using Online Discussions for Informal Assessment**

Evaluating students’ participation, comprehension, and application of course material from in-person class discussions can be problematic, especially in large lecture classes which do not lend themselves easily to class discussions, and where students may feel intimated to speak. Generating meaningful online discussions can provide an effective alternative or supplement to in-person class discussions. Unlike in-person discussions, where the same few students tend to dominate the discussion, an online discussion can ensure that all students are actively participating by reflecting upon course content and providing their informed opinions about course topics. As a result, online discussions can provide a meaningful informal assessment method for instructors to gauge students’ understanding and application of the course material. There are different ways to set up an online discussion, but one way I have found to work well involves creating a chain of questions and responses to a given topic. More specifically the instructor starts the discussion by posing an initial discussion question relating to a given topic. A student will then respond to this question, and then post another discussion question for the group that relates to the same topic. Another student will then respond to this question and will then post another question. In order to make sure that the online discussion is meaningful, it is important to remind students that they should be providing substantial discussion questions that go beyond a yes or no response, and elicit students informed opinions (as opposed to just asking a question that involves reciting course content). In addition, in a large class it is recommended to divide students into online discussion groups so that the discussions remain more personal, interactive, and focused. By reading through students’ comments and questions, instructors can then assess how students are interpreting, evaluating, and applying the course material. Instructors can then use this information as formative feedback for informing their instructional practices on a given topic.

**Check out!** The following article provides useful tips for creating a meaningful online discussion forums: Gernsbacher, Morton A. (2016). Five tips for mproving online discussion boards. *Association for Psychological Science.* Retrieved February 28, 2019 from <https://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/five-tips-for-improving-online-discussion-boards>

**Please share examples** of ways you have used or designed online discussions in your classes, and I will feature those examples on [YU’s Learning Assessment Website](http://yu.edu/provost/assessment/).

**Please contact me** if you have any comments or questions on any aspects of your program assessment activities.