ONLINE DISCUSSIONS are the asynchronous posting of electronic messages by members of a class in a continued conversation on topics designated by the instructor.

Effective online discussions share several characteristics. They support the learning objectives of the course through careful planning and presentation, and they generate and maintain student interest and motivation through the use of provocative questions that facilitate critical thinking, not “just the facts.”

Online discussions are appealing for several reasons:

- They promote active learning and critical thinking
- Every student has an equal chance to contribute, whether they are extroverted or shy.
- They are open-ended and non-linear so students can explore the topic from a variety of perspectives
- They allow time for thinking and reflection because students can participate at any time
- They promote the development of literature research skills
- Students can compare their work to the benchmarks set by the best contributors

Five keys to moderating discussions:

- Make your presence felt but don’t dominate the conversation
- Use rubrics or clear instructions to set objectives and expectations
- Ask thought-provoking questions
- Function as a “gatekeeper” by opening and closing discussion topics
- Immediately stop inappropriate or rude postings

And number six: Make it fun!

One of the essential first steps in using a discussion forum is to be clear about its function and aim, and to state this at the outset so that students know what it’s for. Some examples of forum purposes include:

- A course opening activity or ice breaker which helps students to get to know each other.
- An open forum where students comment and discuss any aspect of the material they are learning.
- Responding to issues/answers to specific questions for everyone (including the instructor) to read and react.
- An extensive discussion on a controversial issue.
- To share and discuss current events and research not covered or inadequately covered in the readings.
Team discussions or debate between teams.

A peer review option allows students to rank the value of other students' posts in the forum, leading to more interactivity, greater student feedback and a greater feeling of "connectedness" among students.

Tips for providing feedback to student posts:

- Provide a mixture of probing questions and supportive comments
- Focus on the positive
- Provide a safe environment where they feel they will not be criticized for their opinions
- Be responsive so they don’t feel left out
- Try writing “weaving” comments – a summary of what has been said
- Delegate responsibility to students to bring substantive material to the forum on occasion

References:

Freeman, Jennifer Using Discussions in Online Courses: The Importance of Interactivity [Online]

McKellar, Patricia, Maharg, Paul, Talk about talk: are discussion forums worth the effort? [Online]

Keller, Michael: On-line discussions can improve student learning The University of Adelaide Intranet Project [Online]