Goals for the Electronic Discussion

Just as there should be a reason for the use of in-class discussion, it is important that electronic discussions be planned to complement what happens in the rest of the course. Some possible uses and examples are below.

- **Electronic discussions can be used for building group among the students.** The main goal is social: students are encouraged to get to know each other so that other tasks can be accomplished. For example, a professor in an education course involving information exchange between practicing public school teachers and her students wanted the group to get to know each other so that their interactions later would be more meaningful. Students were able to ask the teachers to talk about such things as their backgrounds and their students' characteristics. The teachers learned about the university students' interests by asking them about such things as their hometowns, hobbies, or areas of specialization. Similarly, a business instructor in a seminar for students doing a common MBA program wanted the students to develop a sense of group that would sustain them through their program. He wanted them to know which students were from similar geographic locations, which came from the same industrial or corporate fields, and the like.

- **Electronic discussions can be used for information sharing.** A common collaborative learning approach is called the jigsaw. In this approach, different people in a learning group read or learn about different things and then have the responsibility to share their information with the group. An electronic version of this approach would have students researching a topic from different perspectives or looking at different aspects of a broad topic, bringing specified kinds of information to the group, and so on. One example of this approach occurred in a food additives course in which the instructor asked the students to post the ingredients from unusual food labels to the group, along with their hypotheses and questions about the function of certain ingredients in the food product. The discussion was aimed toward establishing a label collection (as well as stimulating an interactive problem-based discussion on the topic of additives). Similarly, students in a political science course were asked to discuss information they found on the web pertinent to public opinion polling. These web sources were also used in research papers for an end-of-course assignment.

- **Electronic discussions can be used for processing ideas.** Whether information is presented to students through lecture, textbook or supplementary readings, text or audiovisual material on a home page, it can be processed by students together through electronic discussion. A law professor set up a listserver for her students to discuss assigned cases before each session. Based on this discussion, she targeted remarks in class to those points that she felt the students also needed to consider. The instructor also had a good sense of areas that she did not need to treat in class. A communication professor asked students to discuss the building of electronic social communities and other issues relevant to technology through an electronic discussion, thus calling upon them to create a community and social norms as they used the medium itself. Many instructors use electronic discussions as a way of allowing students to elaborate upon discussions that were begun in class, thereby extending the time available for the discussion and allowing others who are more comfortable with mail than spoken discussion to participate.

- **Electronic discussions can be used as tutorials.** Students can receive extra practice in skills needed in a course or can obtain study assistance. One economics professor used electronic discussions to review before examinations. Students asked questions of each other and this instructor and all got to see the answers.
Electronic discussions can be used to further the communication skills of students. Such "process skills" as communication, critical thinking, and creative thinking cut across all content areas and can be approached through engaging students in electronic discussions. A theatre instructor in a content writing course posed open-ended discussion questions periodically for students to address through electronic discussion. The assignment was to encourage practice in framing written arguments in an interactive situation. A French conversation instructor asked each student to lead an electronic discussion over the course of a week on a topic of their choice (such as favorite music and restaurants). This activity added written dialogue to the instructor's goal of spoken fluency.

Electronic discussions can be used to provide feedback to students. A frequent use of this format is for students to share ideas for paper or speech topics or drafts of their work for others to critique. While specialized programs are available that mark the ways in which others would suggest changes right on the text, the more general software that is commonly in use still permits the exchange of reactions among peers and teacher.

For most instructors, however, any approach serves a combination of goals. For example, one instructor will want exchange of information, critical thinking, and tutorials all from electronic class discussion. Most will see the discussion as complementing other approaches that are taken in the course. The important thing is that there is some clarity regarding the goals of the electronic discussion because other instructional decisions are related to these goals.

Instructors can also choose to use electronic discussion for the duration of the course or for only selected parts. They can engage all students in electronic discussion or make electronic discussion an option for those who choose it. One instructor, for example, gave students "processing options," by which students could respond to outside readings by writing a standard individual journal, by joining an out-of-class discussion group, or by joining an electronic discussion group. Only those who chose the electronic discussion group (plus any who chose another option but wanted to "lurk" on the electronic discussion) were subscribed to the group. Yet another option is to bring one or more outside experts into the discussion occasionally. For example, in one course using electronic format to discuss outside readings, the author of the assigned reading for the week was added to the list so that she could respond directly to the students.