The online discussion board can be a great way to improve student learning in a blended learning environment. Discussing topics online, asynchronously, can be just as beneficial (if not more) as traditional, synchronous, in-class discussion. In the online environment, students can thoughtfully add to a discussion, and cogitate on other student contributions—something that may not be possible in the traditional classroom. Think about some of the “rapid-fire” discussion that might go on in the traditional classroom—all students probably do not have the opportunity to contribute. Research has shown that online students can feel isolated, so it’s critical that opportunities for social networking and community building be provided.

To achieve a higher level of student learning on the online discussion board, three areas should be considered: 1) cognitive presence, 2) social presence, and 3) teaching presence.

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1 Blended learning is defined as the meaningful integration of classroom learning (face-to-face experiences) with activity experienced online. “Blended learning” takes place in a hybrid class.

Cognitive Presence

“... the extent to which the participants in any particular configuration of a community of inquiry are able to construct meaning through sustained communication.” (Garrison, 2003)

SacCT Discussion Board (cognitive presence)

Questions to ask yourself:
- Do you gage the effectiveness of your Discussion Board by quality of discourse or by quantity?
- Is student interaction purposeful?
- Is the discussion structured and cohesive?
- Do your in-class discussions integrate meaningfully with your online discussions?

Techniques:
- Spend time developing quality discussion topics.
  - If a topic has been started in class, create a discussion topic that moves the discussion to a higher level (from “exploration” to “integration”, for example, or from “integration” to “resolution”) 3.
  - If starting a topic online, consider creating a topic that would encourage progressive discussion (from “exploration” to “resolution”).
  - Try to come up with engaging topics
- Be extremely mindful of your teaching presence on the discussion board.
  - As an instructor, your facilitation and guidance is important. It is your job to move a discussion stuck in an “exploration” stage to the next level – one that in which students can engage in a deep level of learning.
  - Challenge ideas, encourage students to test and research ideas. Ask engaging questions.
  - Don’t overdo it. Your students should carry the discussion – you are the “guide”.
- Provide clear requirements for participation. Requirements should address length or quantity of posts, expectations for content (quality, relevance of posts), and timeliness.
  - Create a “Discussion Board Guidelines” document for students to refer to. This document can contain guidelines that are applicable to all discussion assignments and should include an etiquette statement.
  - Provide additional requirements for each topic within each topic description, if needed, or remind your students to review discussion board guidelines within your topic description.
  - Include topic assignment due dates within the title or description for the topic.
  - Grade your discussion topics following the guidelines you have created.

Survival techniques for large classrooms:

- Don’t reply to every student post. Doing so may “kill” a discussion anyway. You should serve as a facilitator.
- Develop a Grading Form (aka “rubric”) to use to grade discussion posts; address quality of posts as one of the criteria.
- Have the student send you a self-assessment (using a rubric) of their discussion, which can include 1 or 2 their posts
- Create student groups (no more than 10 students per group). Creating smaller groups for discussion facilitates better quality of interaction (and helps establish social presence).
  - To create discussion groups from the SacCT Group Manager,
    1. Using the Group Manager, create your groups.
    2. After groups have been created, select them.
    3. From the Create Group Activity menu at the bottom of the Group Manager page, select Discussion Topic, then click the green arrow.
    4. Proceed to create your discussion topic. The topic you create will be replicated once for each group, with each member in the group only having access to the topic designated for his or her group.
  - To provide additional structure to your discussion groups, assign a student facilitator to each group who would be in charge of leading the discussion and posting the final resolution for the group to a main discussion area for the entire class.

Sample topics:

**Next Steps in Educational Technology: Virtual Worlds (May 4-11)**

- **Description (click to collapse)**
- **SEE THE LEARNING MODULE FOR THE COMPLETE ASSIGNMENT**
- **Post to the Discussion Board at least twice.**
  - Please post your initial post by Wednesday, May 7, 11pm.
  - **Post 1:** (Initial post due Wednesday, 11pm)
    - What’s your general opinion of SecondLife as you understand it to be?
    - Do you believe it will have (or continue to have) a large impact on nursing education? If so, why? If not, why not?
    - Share the links of the videos you chose to watch and web sites you explored.
    - How did the resources you experienced play a role in forming your opinions about SecondLife?
    - If you chose to try SecondLife yourself, please share about your experience.
  - **Post 2:** (Respond to at least one peer due Sunday, May 11, 11pm)
    - Review the videos and sites they experienced.
    - Comment on their opinion of SecondLife and their thoughts about its impact (or lack of) on nursing education.
    - Has your opinion changed since your first post after further research?

Figure 2: Topic requirements & prompt(s). This information is included in the topic description.

**Challenges of Technology-mediated Adult Education GROUP 1**

- **Description (click to collapse)**
- **Facilitator’s Prompt Due:** Tuesday, February 25 (11pm)
- **Posts Due:** Sunday, March 2 (11pm)
- **Facilitator’s Summary Due:** Friday, March 7 (11pm)

Figure 3: Group topic with assigned student facilitator; topic prompt not included here.
Social Presence

“… the ability of learners to project their personal characteristics into the community of inquiry, thereby presenting themselves as ‘real people.’”
(Garrison, 2003)

SacCT Discussion Board (social presence)

Questions to ask yourself:

- Do you or your students feel a “sense of community” with regard to your online discussion board?
- Are your students freely discussing, deliberating, and negotiating with each other online? If not, do you think it’s because they don’t feel comfortable enough with each other?
- What kind of discussion guidelines do you have in place, with regard to social presence? Are you explicitly telling students what you expect? Do you grade students on two-word responses? How many discussions posts are students required to make per topic?

Techniques:

- Create an “Introductions” topic on your discussion board. During the first or second week of class, require that students post to this topic, following your discussions guidelines.
  - Conduct preliminary introductions, in-class, to help students place names with faces.
    - Require that your students also post their picture on SacCT using the Roster tool. To do this, the tool first must be enabled by the instructor, from Manage Course > Tools. Students would then need to edit their profile in the Roster tool in order to upload their photo.
  - Require that your students answer five or six questions about themselves (perhaps some optional, some required). Questions could be related to occupation, hobbies, learning goals, course expectations, etc.
  - Consider using the “Blog Topic” Discussion Board option instead of the traditional threaded discussion for your “Introduction” topic. The blog format tends to be a little less formal and more suited to this type of activity.
  - Model what you expect from your students! Be the first to post an introduction, because it’s important to build a student-faculty relationship as well.
- Create a “cyber café” discussion topic, which could serve as an open space for students to talk about things unrelated to the course.
- Create a “tech help” or “general help” discussion topic that student can use to post technical questions to. Posts to a topic can be set to be anonymous, if needed.
**Survival techniques for large classrooms:**

- As with *cognitive presence*, consider creating student groups, with no more than 15 students per group. Creating smaller groups for discussion helps establish *social presence*. Students may not feel as “lost” in a smaller group, and thus, would connect better to classmates. Review the large classroom information regarding group discussions from the last section (cognitive presence).

- During the first week of class, engage with as many students as possible on the discussion board, greeting students by name individually or by several in one posting, but after that, don’t respond to every posting. Establish your social presence early on, thus, setting the stage for the rest of the semester.

**Sample topics:**

### Figure 4: Sample Blogs, intended to develop community (social presence).

#### Our Community Blogs

This discussion category simulates the use of blogs. It is for building our community, both online and face-to-face. It is open to all students in the course and the instructor.

- **Introductions** (19 Messages / 4 New)
  - Type an introduction of yourself here. Include any professional, academic, and personal interests you feel will help us get to know you.

- **Networking** (20 Messages)
  - This blog is for networking— an important aspect of our online community. Use it to share professional leads, personal needs, and announcements, plan social events, and anything outside of regular classroom activities.

- **Tech Help** (47 Messages)
  - This blog is for posting technology questions and tips. It is a student moderated space—please check here on a regular basis and attempt to assist your peers whenever possible. I will also watch the blog and provide tech assistance when needed.

### Figure 5: "Introduction" Blog in an online class.
Teaching Presence

“… the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educational worthwhile learning outcomes.” (Garrison, 2003)

SacCT Discussion Board (teaching presence)

Questions to ask yourself:

- Are you encouraging active learning on your discussion board?
- Are you encouraging cooperation and reciprocity from your students?
- Are you communicating high expectations for your students?
- Do you give prompt feedback?
- Do you respect and acknowledge different ways of student learning?

Techniques:

- Grade your discussion topics. Some research argues that up the 40% of the course grade should be attributed to course discussion/participation, although as little as 10% of a course grade for online discussion participation can produce results.
- As the instructor, you are the facilitator of course discussion. 
  - Aim to establish the climate for learning.
  - Draw in participants – prompt discussion and interaction between students.
  - Ask questions to help guide the discussion or to trigger deeper thinking.
  - Help the discussion along by identifying areas of agreement and disagreement.
  - Assist your student in reaching a consensus and understanding.
  - At the end of a discussion, summarize postings (see additional information below, for summarizing discussions in large classrooms).
- Provide clear requirements for participation, in terms of netiquette, and time parameters.
  See the techniques section for cognitive presence for additional information on developing guidelines.

Survival techniques for large classrooms:

- Develop a Grading Form for discussion topics. Grading forms is also something that can be used to address cognitive presence.
- Create a Frequently Asked Questions page to post student questions/answers to
- Refer all student technical issues to the University Help Desk and to online student technical resources
- It is especially important to the success of the discussion board in the large classroom that you establish your teaching presence right away.
- Plan response strategies and amounts of instructor responses prior to delivering the course; explain to your students the types of responses that they can expect.

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Summarize postings – summarizing postings for a topic is one way to show teaching presence, provide feedback and prompt additional thought from your students. Creating a quick summary can be done by reading through postings for a topic while taking brief notes on trends that you see. Then use those notes to create a single posting that is used to explain trends, clarify confusing points, and to offer additional information based on responses (from Managing the Discussion Board).

- Summarizing a topic is also a great way to wind down a discussion that has exceeded the number of reasonable postings or that has gotten out-of-hand, so make sure that the topic is finished before posting a summary.

- Lurking might be a good strategy sometimes. Tell students that you will lurk during a particular discussion - explain that you will be reading all posts, but that you won’t be posting responses.

Sample topics:

Figure 6: "Introduction" topic; reference to Discussion Board Guidelines included in topic prompt.

Figure 7: Sample Guidelines document referenced in topic prompt above.

5 Texas Woman's University Distance Education, Managing the Discussion Board for Large Sections, (http://twuid.pbworks.com/Managing-the-Discussion-Board-for-Large-Sections)
RESOURCES

Some of the strategies noted in this handout have been adapted from articles listed below.

- **10 Tips for Managing Larger Classes Online in Blackboard**
- SacCT Discussion Tool: Blogs – How-To (http://www.csus.edu/webct/faculty/blogs-how-to-guide.pdf)
- SacCT Discussion Tool: Journals – How-To (http://www.csus.edu/webct/faculty/journals-how-to-guide.pdf)
- SacCT documentation (http://www.csus.edu/webct/faculty/docs.stm)
- SacCT Grading Forms – How-To (http://www.csus.edu/webct/faculty/gradingform-how-to-guide.pdf)
- *Working with Small Groups in an Online Classroom* (http://www.onlinelearning.net/InstructorCommunity/workingwithgroups.html?s=226.q050q695b.095g321y41). OnlineLearning.net

SUPPORT

ATCS support staff are available for consultation via:

- E-mail at web-courses@csus.edu
- The ATCS Front Desk at 278-3370
- The Faculty/Staff Resource Center (ARC 3012)