**[Introduction]**

Welcome to the Teaching Remotely Together podcast, where our goal is to connect instructors who are willing to explore, share, and learn about one another's successes teaching in a remote learning environment. In hearing from different instructors on new topics each week, we hope their stories and ideas may inspire new ideas for your own classes. Our topic for this week? Online discussions.

**[Jennifer Richardson]**

Hi everyone, my name is Jennifer Richardson and I'm a professor in the Learning Design and Technology Program here at Purdue University. I wanna share with you today some practical tips for setting up your online discussions. I taught my first online course back in about 1998. And a lot has changed, but a lot has stayed the same over time. Some of the tips I wanna share with you today are hard earned lessons. And I say this because I am not a very detailed-oriented person, so some of these I really had to learn the hard way.

First set of tips I have for you are about setting up the parameters for students. In order to have successful online discussions, the students need to know exactly what you expect from them. So I always include a participation rubric. There's a sample provided here. Something to keep in mind, Kali has explained this, is that students will follow whatever guidelines you give them. So you need to give them specific guidelines. Do I want them to provide evidence? Do I need them to cite resources? What exactly is it that I want for my students in these online discussions?

And something that's also key to this is make sure that you're not holding your students and your online discussions to a higher standard than you would for discussions in your face-to-face exchanges. And by that I mean you can't anticipate the students are going to write the equivalent of an APA or MLA paper each week for their online discussions.

Another thing to keep in mind is that while we all know that deadlines are really what drives student participation in most cases, having online discussions, we need to set up some incremental or midterm deadlines for students in order for those discussions to be successful.

So years ago I learned that a lot of my students were posting in the last hour or two that a discussion was open. Then I discovered, okay, well, what if I make them provide an initial post earlier in the week? So now I have a statement in my syllabus that says, discussions will run from Monday through Sunday, 11:59, Purdue time, cuz you always have to tell what timezone it is or they'll run over you on that one. You're expected to participate throughout the week in the discussions, with at least one posting by Wednesday at 5 PM. So along those lines I'm giving them those deadlines that have multiple points throughout the week. But it's still asynchronous, so they can work it how they need to work it for their schedule.

The next point is that if you want to show that you value your discussions so that your students will then fall in line and value them too, you really need to assign points to your discussions based on the quality of posts, not the quantity. And I know that I have some colleagues that might disagree and they feel that online discussion should be voluntary and it really depends on the particular scenario. This is something that I found to be true for me and my courses. Again, that goes back to me providing

a rubric that helps guide that quality for students.

The next couple of steps are really about helping you prepare in advance for timing, for things that might come up. The first thing that I learned the really hard way is about netiquette and having a conflict resolution plan, and that sounds very ominous. So netiquette is a must, we usually have a statement in most of our online courses that talk about you have to be kind to one another, you have to be respectful of diverse viewpoints. But the thing that we don't always think about is, what does that mean for us as instructors? What if we have to intervene? It's not exactly the same as it would be in a face-to-face class. And it can take more time sometimes.

Just to give you a really short story, once years ago I was teaching an online course. I had two students from different countries, international students, those two countries were in conflict. Now I did not realize even what countries they were from or pay much attention to that this might be an issue. One of the students reached out to me and said that she felt as though the other was disparaging her in discussion posts. I went and read the discussion posts, because I hadn't noticed anything. And I read them multiple times and I still didn't see it. But the point was that that student did not feel comfortable or safe in that particular class environment, so I had to do something about it. And so I did reach out to both of them and set something into place.

Another key point, and this is true of students for all assignments, and we know this, they want feedback on their discussion performances as well. Now some people that have smaller classes might do this by entering something into the gradebook, comments for students to help them improve. Others might do it by going into the discussion forum and helping to reframe questions, or keeping people on track with a particular discussion question topic. And sometimes, if it's a larger class, or it might just be that you're seeing the same types of errors or gaps, you might just wanna send something that's of more general feedback to students via the announcements.

So along those lines, the key point is to really think about the optimal number of students for discussion groups. And depending on who you talk to, or what research study, what it basically comes down to is somewhere between 10 and 15 students. So you wanna make sure if you have a large number of students in your recitation, in your lectures, you wanna make sure that perhaps they are broken out into smaller groups. Discussion groups can usually be easily created in most LMSs, whether it be Blackboard, Brightspace, D2L, Canvas, Moodle. You can usually set these types of breakout of groups into place. If you don't, you might find that you might reach saturation on the topic before everyone can participate.

And the final few tips I have for you is, really, don't feel like you have to have a discussion for the sake of having a discussion question. You don't need to have a discussion each and every week. So if I have a 16-week class, that doesn't mean I need 16 discussions. If I have an eight-week class, I don't need to have eight discussions. Sometimes students are gonna have a different workload, depending on when group projects or assignments are due. And it's okay to not have a discussion question that week.

And along those lines, another key point I find is that discussion questions don't always need to be those straightforward discussion questions that we think about. Incorporate things like reflective activities, or simulations, where you're providing simulation data, or they have to create a simulation, or they have to find a simulation, or demonstrating the problem solving process. So think about how you might make those discussion questions a little bit more unique.

One of the resources that I'm providing here is different types of discussion prompts. And that will also help make your discussions engaging. Sometimes you might want students to be doing something lower level like brainstorming. In other cases you might want them to synthesize and evaluate information. So sometimes I refer to this chart just to get my good idea of what I wanna do and how I wanna break it out.

And finally, think about having your students serve as experts. Let them lead the discussion sometimes. Maybe, depending on the course and how appropriate it is, you might wanna have them create the discussions. And if they're not at a level yet to be an expert, then consider incorporating role playing. Given a scenario and you take on this role and you take on this role, how would you respond? Or assign more traditional roles like starter, wrapper, and gadfly. Putting people into those roles for discussion group based on weekly assignments, or something along those lines, can really be something that's engaging for students. Some students hate to be the gadfly, some students love to be the gadfly. And by the way, before I met James Layman, who taught me a lot of these things and talked through them with me as I learned, I did not know what a gadfly was. So I'm gonna let you look that one up if you're not sure either.

Okay, hope you have a great day.

**[Closing]**

A huge thank you goes out to our guest speaker, Jennifer, for taking the time to share her story and ideas. And thank you to our listeners for taking the time to tune in to this episode. Please be sure to check back for new releases. And if you have ideas or stories you would like to share, please email the innovative learning team at [innovativelearningteam@purdue.edu](mailto:innovativelearningteam@purdue.edu). Our music credit forthis episode goes to bensound.com.