PENNSTATE

Active use of Threaded Discussions and email

Using computer technology, a threaded discussion can be useful to hold virtual office hours, display homework hints, correct any mistakes or omissions in class lectures, and answer all students' questions almost immediately.

Appropriate Student Level: Any
Suggested Class Size: 3 – 100+
Ease of Use Rating: Moderate

Activity Description:
A threaded discussion board or bulletin board system (BBS) can provide a means which student-faculty and student-student can increase communication and provide clarity for concepts and ideas presented in class. A threaded discussion is a virtual format used to allow class participants and instructors to post questions, comments and ideas and others may comment directly to the statements made – For example:

- An original comment or 'thread' is made on the first line
    - A user may read the first line and then comment directly to the statement.
        - Then another user may decide to comment on the original statement or the response
- Or someone may decide to post a new 'thread' or string of comments
    - The postings are usually self-titled so users can read what interests them

The greatest challenge for you is to set up the system. An option for Penn State instructors is 'ANGEL', which has a build in threaded discussion site and other virtual collaborative tools: "ANGEL (A New Global Environment for Learning) is Penn State's centrally supported course management system (CMS). A course management system enables instructors to post their syllabus and course assignments without needing to know any HTML. Instructors can also develop and revise course materials; create collaborative learning groups; create threaded discussion areas; create on-line quizzes; monitor student progress; collect assignments online and much more. Faculty can use as few or as many of the features as they like." (CAC website, 2001)

For more information and assistance contact The Center for Education Technology Services at: http://cets.psu.edu/index.html.

Increased use of email may also reduce the amount of time spent in class clarifying issues. A list-serve can be created for your class or answers to students' questions can be sent to the entire class, in order to avoid repeated questions. Using email to clarify concepts and answer student questions can help free up additional class time and allow for the teaching of more complex topics.

In her book, Revitalizing Undergraduate Science, Sheila Tobias discusses a variety of methods many professors use to increase teaching time and student motivation. One professor in particular, Dr. Robert Brown from the University of Cleveland, speaks of the great benefits of email. "What the addition of E-mail has done for physics 125," says Professor Brown, "is phenomenal." By consistent use of email he is now able to spend more class time on "cutting-

edge physics". The addition of the class bulletin board increases Dr. Brown's availability to his students, allowing him to cover standard physics "at twice the normal pace". He uses the bulletin board to answer questions and address concerns; "students waste little time spinning their wheels." (Tobias, 1992, p. 108)

References:

Caswell, Thomas C. (2001) "The threaded discussion forum: A case study of technology integration" *The Clearing House*, 75(1), p 26

CAC Website: Web Instructional Service Headquarters (2001) Retrieved from: http://cac.psu.edu/wish/tools.html

Levin, Barbara B (1999) "Analysis of the content and purpose of four different kinds of electronic communications among preservice teachers" *Journal of Research on Computing in Education*, 32(1), p. 139

Tobias, Sheila (1992) Revitalizing Undergraduate Science, Research Corporation: Tucson, AZ

Wade, William (1999) "Assessment in distance learning: what do students know and how do we know that they know it?" *T.H.E. Journal*, 27(3), p. 94

The Core Competencies are:

1. Writing, speaking and/or other forms of self-expression
2. Information gathering, such as the use of the library, computer/electronic resources, and experimentation or observation.
3. Synthesis and analysis in problem solving and critical thinking, including, where appropriate, the application of reasoning and interpretive methods, and quantitative thinking.
4. Collaborative learning and teamwork.
6. Activities that promote the understanding of issues pertaining to social behavior, scholarly conduct, and community responsibility.
7. A significant alternative competency for active learning designed for and appropriate to a specific course