Handling Problems in Online Discussions and Group Work

When you are involved in online discussions and group work in Moodle discussion forums, you can run up against various problems that may cause you frustration or annoyance, and decrease your motivation to participate such as:

- “Not knowing what to say”
- “Saying too much”
- “Not everyone is participating in discussion and group work”
- “Nobody is saying anything”

Here are some tips for handling these problems.

Not Knowing What to Say

Students sometimes find that it’s hard to make contributions to online discussions because they can’t think of anything to say or because they feel shy and uncomfortable. If you are not sure what you can contribute, try one or more of these suggestions:

- Look for other people’s postings that you agree with, and say so. You can add your own examples.
- Look for postings that give you ideas you hadn’t thought of, or that get you thinking about something, and respond to the posting to let the author know you’ve learned something.
- Ask a question about something you don’t fully understand, and hopefully, someone will help you out. Don’t worry about asking ‘silly’ questions, there will probably be others with the same question and you’ll be doing them a favour by asking.
- If someone asks a question you wanted to ask, help them feel more comfortable by saying you’d like to know the answer too.
- If someone asks about something you think you know a little about, answer their posting. The very best way to check you know something is to try and explain it to someone else.
- If someone asks a question that you can’t help with but no-one seems to be answering, you can at least offer your sympathy and maybe suggest other sources of help.

Writing your first messages may feel awkward but if you keep on doing it, posting and responding to the discussion will start to feel comfortable.

Saying Too Much

Some students worry about posting too many messages to their discussion forums. But generally, the students who worry about this are the students who keep the discussion rolling. Don’t worry unless:

- over half the postings are yours
- your postings are mainly offering your opinions rather than engaging in dialogue with others
If you feel you’ve overwhelmed your classmates with your postings, you can hold back a bit and encourage others to participate by:

- emailing individual classmates to suggest something they can contribute
- waiting a day or so before answering questions posed by your instructor or other classmates, to see if someone else will answer it
- showing you welcome responses to your postings with closing messages like “What do other people think”
- asking for help from classmates about something you feel less confident about so people can see that you don’t know everything

**Not Everyone is Participating in Discussion and Group Work**

It can be annoying if there are some people in your course who don’t participate in discussion or online group work. In most distance courses with online group work, there will be one or two students who rarely or never participate for a variety of reasons – the pressure of personal circumstances, shyness, illness, or a deliberate decision. If you are participating in a discussion or working together in an online group on an assignment, and you’ve made your contributions, it’s understandable if you feel frustrated waiting for others to contribute. Here are some tips for handling these issues:

- do what you can to encourage your classmates to join in. You can email them privately to find out when they expect to participate or whether they have decided not to. Accept their reasons and apologies with good grace. It’s best not to guilt-trip them (e.g. “You’re letting us down”) because it rarely works.
- can you work on some other aspect of the course while you are waiting for others to participate?
- is there a way to arrange online group work so that people who are behind can do some of the later tasks?
- if some classmates don’t participate and don’t respond to your enquiries, accept that you’ll have to manage without them, and don’t waste time or emotional energy waiting for them or worrying about their lack of participation. Don’t compromise your ability to keep to the activity or assignment schedule, and complete your work on time.
- try to make the discussions so interesting that they will draw the others into participating. The chances are that they are reading the discussions.
- try to be sensitive to classmates who may be trying to catch up with a discussion or online group project that is already half-completed – it’s not easy for them to join in when other classmates have done much of the work. Offer what support you can.

The upside of all this is that by participating, you’ll learn a lot more and probably do better in the course than people who don’t participate.
If you are someone who can’t join in the discussion or group work, for whatever reason, let your classmates know so they don’t wait for you. It’s likely that they’ll be very understanding and supportive, provided you keep them informed.

**Nobody is Saying Anything**

An online discussion can be a fragile thing. If no one posts anything for a while, it becomes harder and harder to break the silence, and no one feels like being the first to contribute. There can be a downward spiral until the discussion becomes completely dormant. Someone needs to be brave and break the spiral as soon as they realize what is happening. Here’s what you can do at this point:

- post a question that prompts a response, for example: “Can anyone explain what the author is really saying in the section that begins …”, and respond if anyone answers you
- organize with another classmate to get a debate going – take sides on an issue and argue it vigorously, with appeals to the rest of the group to take sides
- start a new thread in the discussion about something crucial to the course, for example, how this discussion will help completing the next assignment

Adapted from:

B. Plumpton, *How students can make conferencing work.*
Retrieved from the web, November 2009.