

The 21st Century Television Classroom: How, Why, & Why Not

Read Smarter, Talk Better: A Positive Experience with Online Discussion Forums Ethan Thompson, Texas A & M University-Corpus Christi

After teaching a completely online section of Television Criticism this summer, I am an enthusiastic supporter of online discussion forums and am currently working to integrate them into my face-to-face courses. Here I will simply describe the objectives of my discussion forums, the strategies I used to create them in my online course, and my assessment rubric.

The objectives of the online discussion forums include encouraging students to do the assigned readings, help guide students in those readings, and help them to see how the readings are tied to course screenings, as well as TV outside the course. All of this is done in the guise of giving them something to talk about with one another. To stress the importance of these discussions, I made them a large component of the final grade (10 points each, 250 points out of 1000 total).

For each “unit” in my course, there are generally two discussion forums, almost always tied to specific readings with 1-2 sentence prompts. These prompts require them to consider a particular point from an essay, but ask a question in an open-ended enough way to encourage discussion. My course was entirely conducted through Blackboard. Each unit includes a link to the specific forum prompt, and all the forums can be seen together on the discussion forums page where students can also see upcoming discussions.

An example of a prompt is this one for Jonathan Gray’s essay on *Amazing Race* from *How to Watch Television*: “What does Gray criticize about the way *The Amazing Race* represents locals around the world? Can you think of other shows that take place or represent people from other nations?”

On the discussion forum page, that prompt looks like this alongside others:

Discussion Title	Prompt	Score	Availability	Points
Gray on <i>Amazing Race</i>	What does Gray criticize about the way <i>The Amazing Race</i> represents various locals around the world? Can you think of other shows that take place in or represent people from other nations?	35	0	16
Discussion: 30 Days on Immigration	According to Baym and Gottert, why is the relationship between Frank and Armida important to understanding how 30 Days dramatizes the issue of illegal immigration? What critical assumptions underscore their critique? That is, why isn't it enough for the episode to be entertaining?	31	0	15
Discussion: Pearson on <i>Star Trek</i>	The last sentence of the Pearson essay states: "By contrast with the ideological criticism of film, which has to account for only a single text, ideological criticism of a television program must place any episode in context among the tens or even hundreds of episodes that constitute a series." How does attention to that broader context of a series important to Pearson's rebuttal of Ono's criticism of <i>Star Trek</i> ? What do you think about this argument about the importance of series versus particular episodes?	24	0	15
Discussion: <i>Friday</i>	How does the pilot establish a distinctive sense of place and community?	44	0	19

My online course had 20 students, and each discussion forum (corresponding with each particular discussion prompt) was broken into groups of 4-5 students discussing the same prompt. In other words, for each prompt there were actually four separate sections for the same prompt. This means that all 20 students weren't talking together; thus each student was held accountable for doing the reading and commenting. It is

much harder to disappear into a four-person forum than a 20-30 person class (in person or online) dominated by several participants. This is somewhat like dividing a class into smaller groups, but the asynchronous nature of the exchange really also improves the quality of conversation. When a student clicks on the Gray prompt, here's what the divided groups/threads look like:

Date	Thread	Author	Status	Unread Posts	Total Posts
6/6/14 2:18 PM	Alyssa, Bianca, Bethany, Christina, Vanessa	Ethan Thompson	Published	0	6
6/6/14 2:17 PM	Reece, Michelle, Alexandria, Ken, Jared	Ethan Thompson	Published	0	9
6/6/14 2:16 PM	Dixie, Amanda, Melissa, Reagan, Victoria	Ethan Thompson	Published	0	9
6/6/14 2:16 PM	Leslie, Emilia, Zach, Maelle, Carlos	Ethan Thompson	Published	0	7

Displaying 1 to 4 of 4 items [Edit](#)

I changed the makeup of the groups on a weekly basis. The first comment was a repeat of the prompt, followed by the comments by the students as seen here:

Thread: Dixie, Amanda, Melissa, Reagan, Victoria

Select: All None | Message Actions | Expand All | Collapse All | 14 Posts in this Thread | 0 Unread

Ethan Thompson 2 months ago
 Dixie, Amanda, Melissa, Reagan, Victoria

What does Gray criticize about the way *The Amazing Race* represents various locals around the world? Can you think of other shows that take place in or represent people from other nations?

Dixie Renfrow 2 months ago
 RE: Dixie, Amanda, Melissa, Reagan, Victoria

He agrees with Jordan Harvey who argues 'that its depiction is mostly without merit, stereotypical, and Orientalized'. He also describes how 'deeply chauvinistic' the show can be. He talks about building a nation and how it takes on an imaginative aspect in a way that we always try to make ourselves look better and more noble than anyone else by giving other cultures unsavory and savage attributes or portraying them in such a manner in our shows and televised depictions.

Another show could be the show *Bizarre Foods*. He travels all over the world tries to find the most bizarre, odd foods that people eat in different cultures. By finding these odd foods that a lot of us have never even heard of and eating things, that I personally would call gross or disgusting, we draw opinions about these cultures and label these people by what the show is showing us. We start to think these people are weird or gross because of the things they eat or what we think all of them eat because of what we are exposed to. What we are exposed to is what shapes our opinion of these cultures when in reality we aren't even exposed to the truth and what these people are really like.

Amanda Jackson 2 months ago
 RE: Dixie, Amanda, Melissa, Reagan, Victoria

I like how you brought up Bizarre foods. The place where I get pedis at watches this all the time. It always almost makes me laugh when the host makes it seem like these are the only foods these citizens eat, like they are below us.

Other examples of prompts include: "According to the essay, what are some of the ways in which the use of music communicates the themes of *Nip/Tuck* as a series or the meanings of specific episodes? Can you think of other shows that use music creatively?" Or, "If *NYPD Blue*'s pushing of the boundaries of acceptable content got the show in trouble with public interest groups (and occasionally the FCC), Why did ABC bother putting it there in the first place, and how did it stay on the air so long? Can you think of

other programs that have pushed boundaries successfully?” These prompts require the students to understand some particular point in the reading, then use that point to engage in broader discussion.

In the past, I have given similar prompts to students and required them to bring a response to class written on a notecard. This was somewhat successful, but students still procrastinate to just before class and collaborate on answers they think I want to hear, rather than being prepared for an organic, in-class conversation. By far, I feel that the online discussions in my completely online course were the most successful discussions (in terms of number of participants and quality of discussion) I have ever had. My hope is to build upon those in my face-to-face course for the more in-depth conversations that I think are fundamental to a critical course.

I use a grading rubric that allots up to 10 points based on appropriateness, clarity, depth, and responding to others. Here’s what that rubric looks like:

 **Rubric**

Name: Revised Discussion Rubric

Description:

Rubric Detail

Criteria	Levels of Achievement		
	Insufficient	Competent	Exemplary
Appropriateness	0 Points The response is off topic.	2 Points The response addresses the topic of the forum, but not as directly or correctly as possible.	3 Points The response correctly addresses the question related to screening and/or reading
Clarity	0 Points The response is hard to follow due to problems with organization, grammar, and/or style.	1 Points The response is understandable but is hindered by minor problems with organization, grammar, and/or style.	2 Points The response is very clear due to good organization, grammar, and style.
Depth	0 Points The response is either too brief or very repetitive.	2 Points The response is of adequate length but could be more developed.	3 Points The response is fully developed and insightful
Response to others	0 Points	1 Points Additional comment in response to others	2 Points Exemplary engagement with other comments

By the time we get to this year’s Flow conference, I will have seen how successfully I can incorporate these forums into an otherwise face-to-face course. My plan is to have an initial comment due before the class meets, then grade the forums at the end of the week, probably altering my rubric and rewarding more points for subsequent discussion than I did for the summer online course.