



# New Chalk Talk

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Teaching News

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## “Help! I Have No Focus”: Student-Centered Discussions on WebCT (Part I)

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Although research has shown that student-centered environments foster learning, those of us who teach know that creating such an environment has many obstacles. Here at AUC, the challenge is multiplied as our students have rarely been the part of such learning and aren't familiar or comfortable with their new role. In fact, students often do not take learner-centered activities—such as discussions or small group work—seriously. They expect to be told what's important by the teacher. I've found that the discussion board feature on WebCT is one way to make my courses more student-centered and place some of the responsibility of learning on the students themselves.

In the traditional classroom, discussions are led by the all-knowing teacher. Students may respond to the teacher, but not often to one another. Typically students are engaged in listening, or daydreaming. I've tried to create a less formal, more open-ended, environment for discussions with my composition students and had some success in so doing. But there are always the classes where such efforts provoke blank stares and even fear.

Last semester, I experienced both of these scenarios. I had one class of dedicated and active students. In class discussions there simply wasn't enough time for each of them to give their input; just as the discussion reached a climax, it was time to go. In another section of the same course, class discussions were nearly non-existent. My question regarding what my students thought of one author's agreeing with Berlusconi that Western societies are superior to Islamic societies caused my students to stare at the ground in hopes that they might become invisible. One student actually slid his chair over a little to hide behind another. Those who dared to look at me seemed to be looking right through me to some spot on the wall. Others flipped through the pages of the article searching for an answer. Small group discussions were equally dismal as students sat their waiting for me to come over and “tell [them] what to discuss.”

Midway through the semester I began using the discussion boards more frequently and more effectively. My class of overachievers still excelled in this new forum, and my class of “we’re-too-cool-to-answer-your-questions” students found their voice. These discussion board postings brought to light two great advantages for their use: everyone in the class participated (both in responding and in composing messages), and discussions were driven by the students and not the “sage on the stage.”

In my attentive class, everyone *got* to participate, while in my detached class, everyone *had* to participate. We used the discussion boards to share sources on the topic we were researching, to discuss thesis statements, to discuss readings, to help each other find a topic, and to comment on each other’s drafts. By far the most active thread involved sharing sources. Through trial and error, I developed a few guidelines for designing effective discussion board assignments.

- Participation should be required. I don’t require participation on every thread as the discussion board begins to have a life of its own and some students are more active than others. But if you can get students to the board in the first place, they often come back on their own.
- Assign students to act as moderators or motivators. This takes some of the pressure off of you and places the students in charge. When the discussion starts to die down, these students try to get it going again. They also respond to students postings that they find interesting or offer a counter argument to a classmate’s claims.
- Have at least 2 moderators for any given week and rotate. Some students will be quite good at moderating. They will find interesting questions to post to get the discussion going. Others are not as comfortable or insightful.
- Explain what students are expected to do and provide them with a model to follow. Discuss the purpose of the activity and the types of postings that are acceptable. You want students to feel safe sharing their opinions.
- Design assignments that actually offer students a reason to go to the discussion board more often. If they get something out of it, they will use it.
- Refer to the discussion boards in class. Bring in particular threads you find useful so that students know you are reading.
- Try not to dominate the discussion. I like to jump in every now and again and add my own thoughts, but if I am too present, the purpose is defeated.

**(To be continued)**

*Share with us your experiences by contributing to the New Chalk Talk series, or by simply sending comments/suggestions to [aellozy@aucegypt.edu](mailto:aellozy@aucegypt.edu)*