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

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One example of an assignment that worked was having students read a particular article and then post two questions that they had regarding the article. The process went like this. The first student to post simply put up two questions. The next student had to respond to the first student's posting and add questions: at least one question that came from the article, and had nothing to do with the first posting, and one that came from the posting to which they were replying. Their questions had to be on the board before the next class. This ensured that everyone read the article (one of the main reasons traditional class discussions were not working was that many of the students hadn't read and thought they could get by with just listening to the in-class discussion).

Because I hoped that this would get the students to read, there were two criteria for their postings: the questions had to show me that they had actually read the article, and they could not post a question if it had already been posted. Before class, I printed a copy of their postings and used some of the better questions to lead the discussion. The in-class discussion was therefore driven by the students' questions. I chose which questions to use, but they were student generated.

In addition to handing the reins over to the students, discussion boards also create a larger audience. Had I given the same assignment and asked that students turn it in on paper at the beginning of class, I would have been the only audience. Many students would turn in questions that lacked substance or were not well thought out. When their peers make up the audience, they put forth more effort.

While I anticipated success with the above assignment, I was not prepared for what came next. The discussion board finally came to life. My students began to post messages asking their classmates for

help. Here is one interaction that took place while students were researching the issue of Islamic dress in Western/secular societies:

"Help. I'm lost. I have no focus," wrote Mohamed.
Fouad replied with, "I have a focus but no sources."
"Help me and I'll send you some sources."
"Give me the sources."
"Not until you help me focus."

In the end, Fouad helped Mohamed focus on the fact that fear was what motivated secular countries to consider banning the veil and Mohamed sent Fouad the three sources he had that related to Fouad's thesis—secular societies were right to want to ban the veil, but wrong to do so. They could have easily done this with e-mail you might say, but the fact that it took place on the discussion board, allowed the other students to read the postings and benefit from either the sources or the questions Fouad asked Mohamed to help him focus.

I didn't see the interaction going on until it was over because it all took place after midnight the night before their first draft was due. In class the next day, I heard a student say that she was "so happy to find out [she] wasn't the only one without a focus." I imagine others were happy to know they weren't the only ones without sources.

Student-centered classrooms may not always fit into our 50-minute lessons, but effective use of discussion boards is one way to get a head start so that we may turn the responsibility over to the students yet still cover the content we need to.

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