



ONLINE DISCUSSIONS

CENTER FOR TEACHING & LEARNING (CTL)

NYU SHANGHAI



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TWO MODES: SYNCHRONOUS & ASYNCHRONOUS

Synchronous

- participants exchange ideas at the *same* time
- For example, via WeChat, Google Meet or NYU Classes > Discussion.

Asynchronous

- participants exchange ideas at *different* times over an extended period, from a few days to a few weeks
- Typically in a discussion forum in a Learning Management System (LMS), such as NYU Classes or Google Classroom.



The advantage of synchronous online discussions is they facilitate faster and more natural conversation.

DISADVANTAGES OF SYNCHRONOUS ONLINE DISCUSSIONS

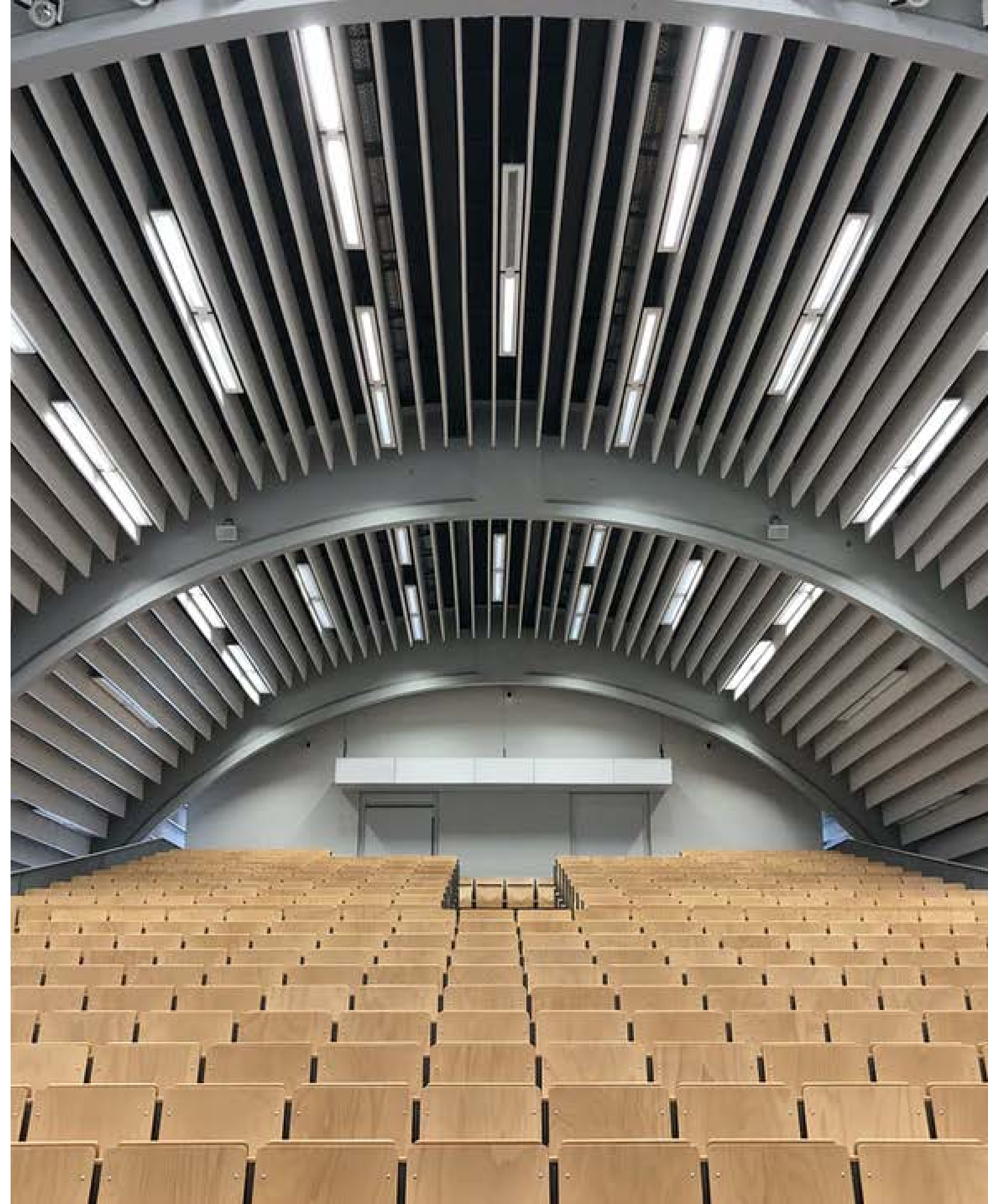
- Contributions may not be as fully developed.
- Discussions can be challenging to moderate.
- If a large number of students is involved, it becomes difficult to tell who is responding to whom.

ADVANTAGES OF ASYNCHRONOUS ONLINE DISCUSSIONS

- Students can participate whenever it suits their schedule.
- Students have time to think and develop their thoughts before they post them.
- Students feel better prepared for class when they have been able to engage with the course content in advance.
- Teachers get a preview of how well students are understanding the content.

THINGS TO
CONSIDER...

SIZE



If your course has 25 students or less, a single online discussion group is suggested.

If your course has 50 students, 10 groups of 5 is recommended.



GRADES

- Assigning a participation grade is the biggest predictor of online discussion success.
- Experts recommended it count for 10% - 20% of the final grade.
- Research shows no additional benefits result when the grade is increased above 20%.

(deNoyelles, Zydney, & Chen, 2014).

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

1 Individual Thinking -
explaining ideas

2 Interactive Thinking -
responding to others

3 Group Dynamics -
balanced and consistent participation,
conflict management, etc.

- A Discussion Portfolio allows students to select & submit their top three posts for grading.
- They include a reflection and the grade they think they deserve and why, with reference to the rubric/criteria.

EXAMPLES

- Prior to starting an online discussion group, give students examples of what you consider to be an “A” post, a “B” post, a “C” post, and so on.
- Prior to sharing your grades & reasons, have students assess the examples using the assessment criteria/rubric to justify their decision.
- Create example posts yourself or you use actual student posts (anonymously & with their permission) from a previous course.



STRUCTURE

- Providing structure leads to better learning (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005).
- Provide start and end dates for discussions.
- Use the online discussion groups consistently throughout the semester.
- Designate an 'opener(s)' and a 'closer(s)' to begin the discussion and summarize the main points.

The approach below can be made more fluid or more directive -

A. FIRST POST

- Respond to the discussion question(s), stimulus or topic with reference to the reading(s), lectures, etc.
- Select a specific focus or point,
- Develop that point with explanations and examples, and invite commentary from classmates on your post.
- End with an invitation or question.

B. SECOND POST

- Read all the posts in your group.
- Then, respond to the first post of a classmate who has not yet received a reply.
- Include specific reference to the main idea of the classmate's post and to the assigned reading(s) or topic.
- Expand on the classmate's ideas with additional information or ideas or offer an alternative viewpoint on the topic and support your position with references to the readings or posts by other group members.

C. THIRD POST

- Respond to the person who answered your first post with gratitude.
- Explain how their post/reply/comments increased your own understanding and/or knowledge & developed your thinking.



CLARIFY EXPECTATIONS

- Provide clear parameters for discussion posts, such as length, frequency & due dates.
- If you want students to have discussed a topic you'll be covering in class, clearly indicate the deadline by which they must have contributed their posts.
- Clarify expectations around language, including degree of formality, use of slang and emoticons.
- Remind students that posts must be professional & respectful.

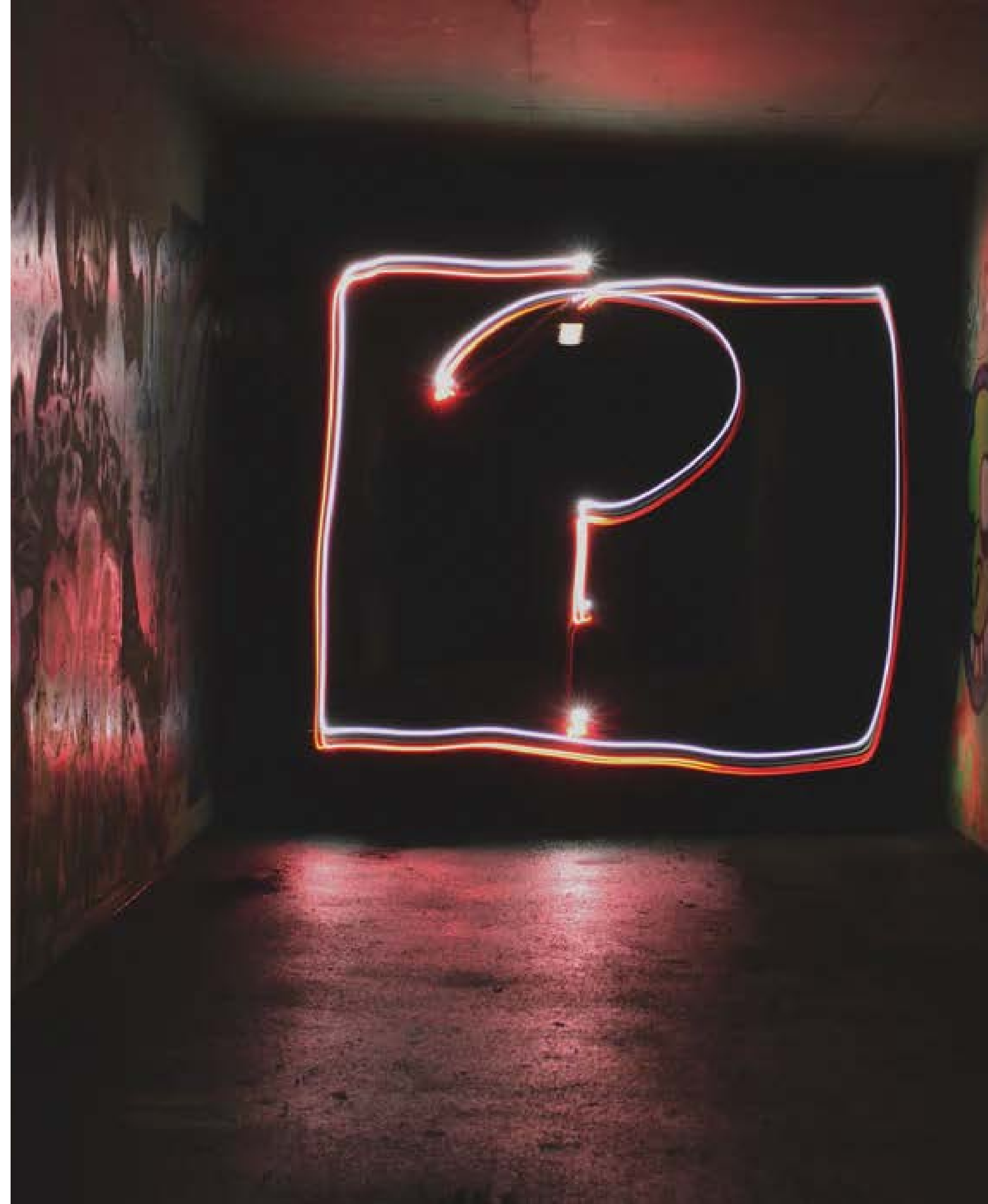


GOOD QUESTIONS

- A good discussion starts with a good question.
- Avoid questions that read like exam questions.
- Provide students with a prompt(s).
- Ask students to express an opinion and support their position by applying course concepts.

GOOD QUESTIONS

- Start with an easy question, then make the questions increasingly more challenging and cumulative.
- Focus on higher-order thinking skills like application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Bloom's Taxonomy, Anderson and Krathwol's, 2001).



INCLUDE EVERYONE

- Encourage reluctant participants.
- Gently rein in dominant ones.
- Foster a welcoming & trusting environment.
- Make students feel they are part of a learning community.
- Encourage students to use first names and allow social chitchat.



TEACHER PRESENCE

- Obvious teacher presence is established by
 - posting discussion questions,
 - directing the group(s),
 - giving and asking for examples,
 - creating “weaving” posts to link ideas together to advance the discussion and
 - providing feedback on how the discussion(s) is going.
- Teacher presence helps keep students focused.
- It also helps refine discussions so they progress past basic information sharing to knowledge construction, application and integration.

TEACHER PRESENCE

- Until good discussion habits are formed, direct instruction and feedback is necessary to keep students on track.
- A final comment from the teacher can be a helpful way to conclude a discussion.
- Teacher comments and questions to the group(s) serve as a model for how the discussion(s) should unfold.



STUDENT OWNERSHIP

- Students need to be reminded to talk *to* each other directly, not *through* the teacher.
- Teacher presence should not dominate but foster discussion *between* students.
- Inform students that your role as *facilitator* will become less involved as habits are formed and momentum develops.

STUDENT OWNERSHIP

- If students direct their questions or responses to you, redirect them to the group.
- Require students to integrate research, cite the textbook, assigned listenings & readings, and your lectures in their posts and responses.



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