

NowComment[®]: Teacher Perspectives (11/2009)

NowComment Online Discussion	Traditional Face-to-Face Discussion
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In General	
A lot of information can be shared (text and pictures are high bandwidth visual information)	Relatively little information shared (low bandwidth auditory information)
Convenient: time of commenting is flexible	Requires coordination of schedules
Multiple conversations to choose from	Only one conversation available

Teacher Benefits	
Transcript available for grading and review	You must juggle listening and note-taking or rely on memory
Sorting comments by participant allows accurate, easy grading of comment quality and quantity	Even with good notes, it's hard to accurately evaluate student participation
Reading comments takes less time than reading essays (students don't have to quote passages, and seeing a comment's context of a comment often eliminates ambiguity)	Reading student essays is very time-consuming, and you don't always know what part of the text the student's arguments are responding to
You can lead discussions even if you're out-of-town or homebound	Discussions must be cancelled if you aren't there
Uploading a document just once gives students ongoing access; no photocopying (go green!), no queues for reserved reading	Time and expense of distributing paper copies (which students often lose or forget to bring to discussion)

Freedom from Time Constraints	
Time for many comments	Only time for a few comments
Everyone gets an equal opportunity to speak (you can require a minimum, or set a maximum, number of comments)	Some students get few (or no) turns to speak
Longer comments (e.g. nuanced, balanced, supported by citations) don't take time away from others	Long comments take time away from others
Students can take time to think through and clearly express their thoughts	Students have to speak up quickly or risk losing their turn, even if their ideas are only half-formed

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Complements Other Instructional Methods	
Read online comments to see what students understand and are interested in, then lecture/discuss accordingly	Jump in somewhat blind and try to gauge their level of understanding as you go
Increases student accountability and likelihood they'll engage with the material	It's hard to know which students have read the material and which haven't
Commenting on enrichment texts can be a good extra credit or make-up assignment	

Improves Face-to-Face Discussion (students bring laptops or you project the online discussion)	
Different perspectives revealed in online discussion can provide organic starting and jumping off points for in-class discussion	It's sometimes hard to know what topic will get the conversation going
Easy for participants to find passages being discussed (text search built into the browser, numbered paragraphs, comment summary lines)	Lots of time lost looking for passages and then, once found, waiting for everyone to locate it

New Technology, New Options	
Hiding other posts until a certain date/time lets students comment with minimal peer pressure	Inescapable influence of previous comments
You have the option of sending a private message to a student	Your comments to a student are heard by the whole group
Tangential observations in a new conversation don't interrupt existing conversations	Tangents can derail the current conversation
You can delete inappropriate posts	No way to delete a comment once made
Participants can edit what they said (until someone else replies to that comment). if they realize they made a typo or other error	Once you say something, it's hard to correct or modify your point without interrupting others
Discussion transcripts remain accessible for student study/reference	Students learn only from what they remember or incomplete notes
Easy to cite/share other resources/perspectives found on the Internet (if you want them to)	Discussion tends to be self-contained with few outside sources cited

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Student Benefits	
They can start a conversation at any time on whatever they find most interesting	The class conversation may not give them a good opening to turn the conversation to their topic
It's relatively safe for students to start a conversation on a topic their peers are passionately opposed to, because the other students can ignore the comment if they want to	There's interpersonal risk to students who force the one class conversation to deal with topics/-perspectives that challenge/upset their peers
Students enjoy working online and socializing with peers; online discussion combines the two!	Few chances to talk through varying perspectives (multiple back-and-forths) with individual peers
Higher and more even participation levels (you can require 100% participation)	A few highly verbal students often dominate the conversation; shy students habitually don't participate
No one is interrupted	Students are often interrupted before they can finish their comment
When the focus is on ideas rather than writing mechanics, online discussion is easier and less time consuming (especially for non-native speakers)	Writing essays or research papers requires more complex argument "scaffolding" than responding to a passage that's right there on the page (the pump is primed)