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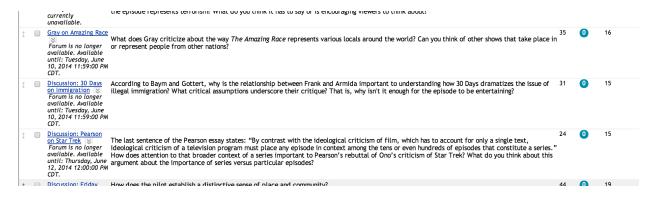*Ethan Thompson, Texas A & M University-Corpus Christi*

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:

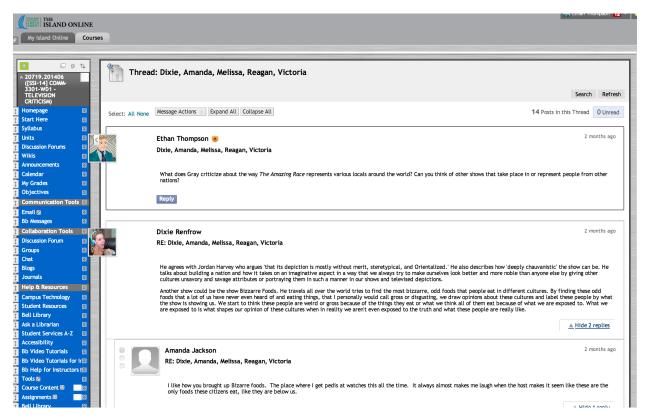My online course had 20 students, and each discussion forum (corresponding with each particular discussion prompt) was broken into groups of 4-5 students discussing the same prompt. In other words, for each prompt there were actually four separate sections for the same prompt. This means that all 20 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:

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:

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	

	Levels of Achievement		
Criteria	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.