

# BUILDING COMMUNITY WITH A DISCUSSION-BASED ACTIVITY

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## INTRODUCTION

With coursework being online this semester due to the global pandemic, a discussion activity was implemented in a foundational reading and writing course in order to give first-year students a place to build a supportive community of learners and discuss issues they may face while learning online.

The discussion activity was designed based on Self-Determination Theory (SDT), specifically a sub-theory called the Basic Psychological Needs Theory (BPNT) which states that only when basic needs are satisfied can individuals achieve their highest potential with regard to development and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 1987; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Three integral parts of BPNT are: competence, the sense an individual has of being capable of doing something; relatedness, the feeling of being connected to others within a community; and autonomy, acting in a manner that is fully-informed, self-endorsed, and congruent with internal values and interests (Ryan & Brown, 2003).

In a previous iteration of this activity in a traditional face-to-face context, there was evidence that suggested this type of activity could help students foster peer communities which promoted self-awareness and feelings of competence in speaking and reflective abilities (Yarwood et al., 2019). Since students would be unable to make connections with their peers in a face-to-face classroom, creating opportunities for them to do so in synchronous meetings seemed really important to building an autonomy-supportive classroom environment in which students would feel confident and comfortable enough to share their learning with peers. With coursework online for the Spring 2020 term, building peer relationships and learner autonomy seemed even more crucial than in a more traditional semester.

While initially designed to bridge the gap between classroom interaction and English use in the Self-Access Learning Center (SALC), the following discussion-based activity was integrated into the online reading and writing course in the hopes of fostering a supportive and self-aware community of learners among students.

## THE ACTIVITY

Prior to the start of the term, discussion prompts related to situations and issues students may encounter in an online language class environment were developed. Some prompts asked students to consider aspects of their language learning while others asked them to reflect on the challenges and issues that arise with learning online. The prompts included a situation or general question followed by a few additional questions to encourage discussion and deeper

engagement with the topics. Figure 1 includes two example prompts students were asked to discuss.

*Fig. 1*

Do you fear making mistakes in English? Why or why not?

- When other people make mistakes, how do you feel/react?
  - Who do you fear making mistakes in front of the most? Why?
  - What can you say to yourself to reduce the fear? (E.g. I'm still learning. It is normal to make mistakes.)
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You want to book a 15 minute meeting with an ELI teacher. How can you prepare?

- What's the scariest thing about speaking to a new person? How can you make it less scary?
- What topics do you feel comfortable talking about? Why?
- What do you want to achieve during the conversation?

At the beginning of the semester, students engaged in an activity to explore useful phrases and language for English interactions in the classroom. They compiled a discussion language resource that they could reference throughout the term as needed, and I then provided them with my own list (Appendix A) to complement their own. Students also participated in a practice discussion to get used to this type of interaction in breakout rooms in Zoom.

Next, students were asked to participate in small group discussions at the beginning or end of each synchronous online class meeting. The small groups remained the same for three to four weeks at a time in order to encourage greater connectedness among students. The discussions were held during 15 class periods over about eight weeks during the semester.

In addition to the discussions, students were asked to reflect on their interactions during the activity using a Google Form immediately following the discussions. The purpose of this was to encourage further engagement with the topic and give students a space to express ideas they may not have been able to express during the activity.

## **DISCUSSION**

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the time set aside for these discussions allows students to interact and engage with each other in meaningful ways. Students have remarked that the discussions are one of the most useful parts of the course. Through the discussion activity, students can get to know each other, learn about resources available to them, and perhaps validate their understanding of how to deal with various situations that may arise during the semester.

Possible variations of this activity might include: asking students to develop discussion questions related to various prompts to better align with topics covered in your course, asking students to record short reflection videos instead of doing the written reflections in the form, or

incorporating extended engagement with the topics through individual research or exploration of facilities such as the Academic Support Center and other available resources.

## CONCLUSION

The discussion activity described here offers students an opportunity to build relationships with their peers and learn and reflect about the ways in which they and their peers deal with challenges related to learning English online. By creating a space for students to interact in this way, we hope that students feel supported and take steps to grow in their abilities to reflect and become autonomous learners.

## REFERENCES

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## APPENDIX A

You are having a group discussion with your classmates.

What can you say/do to...

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### Listen actively

*Nod your head*

*Say things like:*

- *"Oh, interesting."*
- *"Good point"*
- *"I see what you mean."*

### Share your opinion

*I think...because...*

*For me,...*

*In my opinion,...*

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### Ask for clarification when you don't understand something

*What do you mean?*

*Can you explain what you mean?*

*Could you repeat what you said about...?*

*I'm sorry, I didn't understand that.*

### Change the topic of the discussion

*Ok, let's talk about the next question.*

*Let's move on to the next topic.*

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### Agree with your classmate

*I agree with you. I think...*

*Good point. I also think...*

### Politely disagree with your classmate

*I like your idea, but I disagree. I think...*

*Good point, but I don't agree. I think...because*

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### Interrupt politely to share your opinion

*Excuse me. I think...*

*Wait a minute. Can I say my opinion? I think...*

*Type in the chat*

### Give an example to support your idea

*For example...*

*For instance...*

*One example is...*

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### Get back on topic if the discussion is off topic

*Let's get back to the topic of our assignment.*

### Encourage your classmates to participate/share their ideas

*I'm curious what \_\_\_\_\_ thinks. What do you think?*

*What do you think, \_\_\_\_\_?*

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### Start a conversation

*Ok, let's get started. We need to...*

*Let's begin our discussion.*

*Alright, let's start.*

### End a conversation

*Ok, we're out of time. Thank you for sharing your ideas.*

*Alright, that's the end of our discussion. Thank you, everyone.*

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### Manage time

*We only have \_\_\_ minutes left to talk about this.*

*How much time do we have to work on this?*

### Show that you understand what your classmate is saying

*Good point. Good idea. I see what you mean.*

*Show a thumbs up. Nod your head.*