Building an Online Discussion in Canvas.

Whether teaching online asynchronously or synchronously, Discussion Boards provide spaces for asynchronous communication among students. Moreover, "regular and substantive interaction (RSI)" between students and instructors are a requirement of SLU's regional accreditor, the Higher Learning Commission (HCL), and have been incorporated as standards within SLU's **Distance Course Design Rubric-Version 3**. Consequently, it is important to consider discussions and the necessary technical steps for creating them in Canvas as part of your course design process.

Types of Online Discussions.

The two (2) most common types of online Discussions are:

- **General**: This discussion is a space for students to ask questions about the course, assessments, or due dates (i.e., administrative questions about the course). There is only one of these discussions and it is open the entire length of the course, is ungraded, and often has a title such as "Help," or "Course Q&A" to distinguish it from other discussions.
- **Content-based**: These discussions focus on topics or specific points of the course content. They are a place for students to discuss the topic, clarify their understanding of it, and share perspectives and interpretations. There are multiple content-based discussions throughout the length of the course with each discussion lasting a certain amount of time (i.e. opens and closes on specific dates). These discussions might be graded and have a title that corresponds to the content topic.

Creating a Discussion Assignment for Individual Students.*

1. To create a discussion, click on "Discussions" tab in the Course Navigation. Then go to the top right of the Discussions page and click the "+Discussion" button. A pop-up titled, "Add Discussion" will appear along with a space to enter the name of the Discussion. Consider naming it something that reflects the type and topic of the Discussion.
2. Enter all the instructions, links, and materials in the Rich Content Editor (RCE) box.
3. Below the RCE, select the Options you wish for this Discussion, for example:
   - The "Users Must Post First" selection forces students to answer content-based discussion prompts on their own first before they can see what everyone else has posted.
   - If you want to grade the discussion, select the "Grading" option. This will then give you fields to enter the points, the due date, and the availability dates for when students can access this discussion. You may then add a Rubric if you wish.
   - "Save & Publish" the Discussion when you have selected the options.

Note: for a more in-depth technical guidance, please visit the Discussions Overview (Instructors) tutorial in the Canvas Community.

A Note about Graded Discussions.

An issue in the discussions no matter the LMS is how to set the due dates. There is yet to be a system that allows for a double due date, i.e. initial posts due on X and response posts due on Y. **One option** is to have a staggered deadline, such as Initial posts due halfway through the module with responses due by the last day of the module. With this option, the Due Date is the last day of the module. **Another option** is to have the Due Date be the day the Initial Post is due and have the Availability End date when the Responses are due. In either case, including detailed instructions that clearly communicate the due dates and the availability dates helps students develop a routine for completing all posts in a timely manner.

Creating a Student Group Discussion Assignment.

Depending on the purpose of the discussion and the class size (especially for large sections of >25 students), instructors may opt to group students to reduce the number of students "talking" to each other at any given time. To achieve this, the first step is to create a Student Group in the People Tab on the Course Navigation menu, and then pair it with a Discussion in the Discussion Tab on the Course Navigation menu.

1. Go to the top right of the People page and click the "+Group Set" button. A pop-up titled, "Create Group Set" will appear. Enter the name of the group set (consider naming this student group something like "Discussion Groups" to designate it as something different from other student groups you create). Then, in the "Group Structure" setting, select "Split number of students per group" and enter the number of students you wish per group (i.e. 5 students per group in a class of 25 students). Each group will only be able to communicate with their group when you designate that a Discussion is a Group Discussion.
2. After the Discussions Group is created, go to the top right of the Discussion page, and click the "+Discussion" button to create a new discussion topic. The naming of the discussion topic is your choice, but we suggest you include something to indicate that this is a Group Discussion (i.e. Group Discussion on Chapter 12), especially if you have other discussion assignments.
3. All the usual setting options for Discussions are available; however, there is one important setting to note. Select the "This is a Group Discussion" box and then select the Group Set you've created for Discussion Groups.

For all discussions, it is important to have clear, concise instructions to communicate the purpose, the requirements, the grading particulars, and the learning outcomes related to this type of assignment. Doing so will allow both students and instructors to use this assignment to its fullest, while also evidencing learning and creating strong student-student interactions.

For more information or to discuss how you might incorporate these ideas into your courses, contact the Reinert Center by email or submit a consultation request form.