

# Reinvigorating Student Discussions Online

Grayson College increased student interaction and engagement by implementing student-led discussion forums.

This is the second article in a three-part series on cultivating a sense of belonging among online students. This installment looks at how Grayson College—a rural community college in north Texas—reinvigorated online discussion boards and increased student interaction and engagement with course materials by implementing a student-led discussion board activity called “You Take the Lead.” Part 3 in this series will share insights from UCLA.

## Key Takeaways

- Online students can sometimes feel isolated, especially when reading dense theoretical texts.
- “You Take the Lead” revitalized the discussion board as a source of student-to-student exchange of ideas and engagement with course materials.
- The sense of belonging increased not only among the students but also between the students and the instructor.

## Serving the Community

Leaders at Grayson College feel the weight of responsibility to their local community. Located in rural Denison, Texas, just three miles south of the Oklahoma border, Grayson College is a major driver of regional growth and social mobility for county residents. “Our students are often working professionals looking to increase their skills or change careers,” explains vice president of instruction, Dr. Dava Washburn. “Online courses are essential to their aspirations.”

One of the area’s major employers is The Texoma Medical Center, and Grayson College’s health sciences school is a major provider of education and training for both aspiring and working professionals in the medical field, offering several nursing credentials, including bachelor’s and associate’s degrees and certificates. A significant number of those courses are offered online; in the nursing program alone, 22 online course sections were offered

in Spring 2024 with over 200 students enrolled. This represents only a fraction of total online enrollments at the college.

Like online students everywhere, Grayson's sometimes felt disconnected not only from campus life and faculty but also their fellow classmates. They didn't always feel that sense of belonging and community. "We noticed a trend among surveys from online courses that students didn't feel the same level of belonging and community as their in-person classes," recalled Washburn. "We wanted to change that dynamic."

College leaders partnered with [iDesign](#), an instructional design service provider, to improve and redesign their online course offerings. The partnership focused on finding new ways to create a sense of engagement and interaction among students in online courses.

## Curriculum Redesign

The faculty in Grayson's nursing program embraced the opportunity to redesign their online courses. "I think all of us wanted our students to be more engaged," said Allison Collins, EdD, RN, CNE, and instructor in the college's RN to BSN program. "One of the things I really enjoyed was working with the iDesign learning architect to revamp some of the course activities to foster that engagement. We were empowered to come up with new approaches."

One of the courses that received significant attention was the upper-level course Theoretical Principles of Nursing. It contained a considerable number of reading and writing assignments on the theoretical origins of modern nursing practices. Students were expected to identify, apply, and synthesize nursing theories. It was a little overwhelming. "These nursing students were already employed in the field," explained Collins. "The dense readings and extensive writing quickly led to burnout, overload, and disengagement."

Online courses [can be isolating](#); without sufficient class discussion and interaction with peers and professors, difficult texts become even more daunting. To counter this phenomenon, twin goals emerged: first was to enliven the course by increasing student-to-student interaction and maximizing existing professional knowledge; second was to increase student engagement and invigorate the discussion board environment. An initial idea to invigorate the course was to build an assignment that included video in the discussion forum. Yet simply transforming written work into spoken work didn't produce more student engagement or a sense of student ownership of the content.

Grayson faculty such as Collins collaborated with iDesign learning architects to overcome these problems by creating a series of discussion board assignments called “You Take the Lead.”

## You Take the Lead

In “You Take the Lead” discussion forums, the instructor appoints three to five students (depending on class size) to be discussion leaders for a given week while the other students are participants. Each week, a new group of students serves as leaders until all students have their turn. If there is enough time in a quarter or semester, students may lead the discussion board more than once.

To the entire class, the instructor assigns specific chapter segments, videos, or articles; to the discussion leaders, the instructor provides four questions tied to the week’s content that they must address on the discussion board. The discussion leaders post responses to the questions, cite textual evidence, add their own experiences, and pose four open-ended discussion questions to their peers. Discussion leaders used a media comment/video for their responses and questions to “talk out” their ideas conversationally, not read from a script.

The peer participants, having already read the same course materials, respond to the leaders’ four questions either in writing or by a media comment or video. The response must agree or disagree with the leaders’ ideas and cite at least one source from the assigned materials and one example from the student’s own experience. The discussion leaders respond to their peers’ posts within 24 hours.

“We designed ‘You Take the Lead’ to provide structured leadership roles for each student with defined tasks and responsibilities, to encourage students to share their ideas and experiences,” explained iDesign lead learning architect Carmen Christopher. This activity revitalized the discussion board as a source of student-to-student exchange of ideas.

“We saw an immediate difference,” recalls Collins. “The students connected their own experiences, observations, and even hypothetical perspectives to the leaders’ critical thinking questions.”

By allowing students to post via video format, a fresh sense of connection and community was created. When students heard their peers “talk out” ideas, they could see they were all moving through the content together. “Listening to other students’

interpretations made the theories more relatable,” confirmed a student in the nursing theory course the semester after the redesigned course went live. “I also liked that we had week-long response windows,” the student added. “I think that extra time meant we could fit the discussion into our schedules more easily. Compared to courses I took online before the redesign, we had more meaningful discussion threads.”

Post-redesign survey feedback from students and faculty indicated that because students used video comments, richer interaction occurred compared to text-only discussion boards. The survey also revealed that the “You Take the Lead” activity increased the sense of belonging not only among the students but also between the students and the instructor.

“We got more insight into student comprehension from the media comments and videos,” said Collins. “And we were able to respond in kind, posting our own audio or media comments back to the students.”

Ultimately, “You Take the Lead” demonstrates how a ubiquitous technology such as discussion boards can be transformed from a tired mode of communication into a stimulating site of community and connectivity by adopting an innovative approach to student roles and responsibilities.

To learn more about how to implement this type of discussion forum, see “Flipping the Board” in iDesign’s open educational resource, [Creative Discussion Forums](#).

Coming up, Part 3 in this series will share insights from UCLA.