Protocols for Online Discussions

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The protocols discussed in the following pages were modified from protocols described in the following two books:

- Brookfield, S. D., & Preskill, S. (1999). *Discussion as a way of teaching.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- McDonald, J., Mohr, N., Dichter, A., & McDonald, E. (2003*). The power of protocols: An educator's guide to better practice.* New York: Teachers College Press.

These revised protocols help students process readings, podcasts, videos, etc. during online discussions.

For these protocols, it is best to have students work in discussion groups of 4-5, with each group assigned to their own discussion forum. When using a protocol, it is helpful to debrief the activity with the whole group to reinforce what was learned from the discussion, and explore any remaining questions.

[Note: For all protocols, you can modify the words-per-post limit as well as the time frame. These structures are guidelines only, so modify as appropriate to your situation.]

The Final Post (asynchronous discussion)
(Modified from McDonald et al.'s *The Final Word* protocol)

Steps:
1. Each student identifies one of the most significant ideas from the reading, illustrated by a quote or excerpt. (Each student should have a back-up quote/excerpt in case another student has already posted the same quote/excerpt.)
2. Each student starts a new thread by posting the quote/excerpt from the text that particularly struck her or him. The student points out where the quote is in the text. In approximately 250 words, the student describes why that quote/excerpt struck her or him. (Specify a deadline for the original posts.)
3. Each student responds to that quote/excerpt and what the original student wrote, using approximately 150 words. The purpose of the response is to expand on the original student's thinking about the topic, to provide a different perspective on the topic, to clarify thinking about the topic, and to question the original student's assumptions about the topic. (Specify a deadline for these posts.)
4. After each student in the group has responded to the original post, the first student has the "final word." In approximately 150 words, the original student responds to what has been shared by the rest of the group, offering what she or he is now thinking about the topic, and her or his reaction to what the other students have posted. (Specify a deadline for the "final word" post.)
5. This process continues until everyone has had the opportunity to have the "final word." This means that 4-5 discussions are happening simultaneously within a particular timeframe (e.g., 1 week), or that they are happening one at a time (each discussion over 1-2 days).

The Last Post (asynchronous discussion)
(Modified from McDonald et al.'s *The Last Word* protocol)

Steps:
1. Each student identifies one of the most significant ideas from the reading, illustrated by a quote or excerpt. (Each student should have a back-up quote/excerpt in case another student has already posted the same quote/excerpt.)
2. Each student starts a new thread by posting the quote/excerpt from the text that particularly struck her or him. The student points out where the quote/excerpt is in the text, but does not explain why that quote/excerpt struck her or him.
3. The rest of the group discusses the quote/excerpt, why it is significant, what it means, and so on. Specify an amount of time for this discussion, such as 2 days.
4. After each student in the group has participated in a discussion about the quote/excerpt, the first student has the "last word." In no more than 250 words the original student shares why she or he thought it was significant, what she or he is now thinking about the topic, and her or his reaction to what the other students have posted.
5. This process continues until everyone has had the opportunity to have the "last word." This means that 4-5 discussions (depending on number of students in a group) are happening simultaneously within a particular timeframe (e.g., 1 week), or that they are happening one at a time (each discussion over 1-2 days).

Posting the Crux of the Matter (asynchronous discussion)
(Modified from McDonald et al.'s *Crux of the Matter* protocol)

Steps:
1. Set up four new threads: Sentences, Phrases, Words, and Insights. Designate a time frame for the discussion, such as 2-3 days.
2. First round: Each student posts a sentence from the reading that she or he feels is particularly significant in the Sentences thread. Each new post must be unique; in other words, if a sentence has already been posted, it should not be posted again.
3. Second round: Each student shares a phrase that she or he feels is particularly significant in the Phrases thread. Each new post must be unique; in other words, if a phrase has already been posted, it should not be posted again.
4. Third round: Each student posts the word that she or he feels in particularly significant in the Words thread. Each new post must be unique; in other words, if a word has already been posted, it should not be posted again.
5. In the Insights thread, the small group discusses what they understand about the reading based on what everyone has posted, and any new insights about the reading.

Designated Readers (asynchronous discussion)
(Modified from Brookfield & Preskill's *Designated Listeners* protocol)

1. At some point in the course, each student takes on the role of the designated reader.

2. During an online discussion, the designated reader does not contribute (except to ask for clarification of someone else's contribution).
3. At the end of the discussion, the designated reader is responsible for summarizing the online discussion. (Note: You can require a specific word count for summaries to help designated readers write concisely.)

Note: This protocol promotes active "listening" during online discussions because it requires the designated readers to read all contributions, look for themes and differing perspectives, ask clarifying questions, and summarize what has occurred during the discussion in a way that values everyone's contributions. Especially when written concisely, these summarizes also serve to help the group feel a sense of closure, making it easier to move on to the next discussion.

Rotating Threads (asynchronous or synchronous discussion)
(Modified from Brookfield & Preskill's *Rotating Stations* protocol)

Steps:
1. Set up threaded discussion forums, with a different provocative issue to discuss in each forum.
2. In groups of 4-5, have students rotate to a new forum. In terms of timing, you could have each group spend one day in a forum – e.g., Forum A on Monday, Forum B on Tuesday, and so on.
3. Have each group record their ideas about the issue in the forum.
4. Once groups have rotated to each forum, give students time to revisit all of the forums to see what other groups posted.
5. As a final activity, have students summarize what they have learned about the issues.

Snowballing Threads (asynchronous or synchronous discussion)
(Modified from Brookfield & Preskill's *Snowballing* protocol)

Steps:
1. Discussion starts with small group discussions, with each small group having their own discussion forum.
2. After designated amount of time, each small group joins with another group in a new forum.
3. After designated amount of time, each larger group joins with another group in a new forum, and so on, until the whole group comes together into the same forum.

Jigsaw Threads (asynchronous or synchronous discussion)
(Modified from Brookfield & Preskill's *Jigsaw* protocol)

Steps:
1. Groups of 4-5 students become experts on a particular issue/topic. Each group of experts has their own discussion forum to work in as they develop their expertise.

Depending on the topic, and level of desired depth of expertise, this could take one week.

2. Form new groups. Each new group includes an expert from one of the original groups. These new groups have their own discussion forum.
3. Experts lead new group in an online discussion on their area of expertise. Again, depending on the topic and desired depth, each expert could lead a discussion over one day to one week.

Chatroom of Voices (synchronous discussion)
(Modified from Brookfield & Preskill's Circle of Voices protocol)

Steps:
1. Form students into groups of 4-5, and set up a chatroom for each group.
2. Post a question, a passage, etc. that focuses the chat.
3. After students have a few minutes of quiet time to organize their thoughts (or you can ask students to prepare in advance of joining the chat), each student in the group then has 3 minutes of uninterrupted time to respond (this can be done sequentially, or in whatever order, as long as everyone writes for 3 minutes). Modification: Each student must begin by paraphrasing the comments of the previous student, and must strive to show how his or her postings relate to the comments of the previous student.
4. After everyone in the chatroom has had their 3 minutes, the discussion is opened up with the following ground rule: Students are allowed to contribute to the chat only about other people's ideas, not expand on their own ideas (unless asked a direct question).

Chatroom Full of Quotes (synchronous discussion)
(Modified from Brookfield & Preskill's Hatful of Quotes protocol)

Steps:
1. Set up a chatroom for use with groups of 10-15 students.
2. Prepare 5-6 sentences/passages/quotes from the text. Assign each student a number based on the number of quotes you have (e.g., if you have 6 quotes, assign students a number from 1 to 6).
3. Share the quotes and explain that students assigned #1 will respond to quote #1 and so on.
4. Give students a few minutes to organize their thoughts about the quote.
5. Call on each student (randomly, by alphabetical order or by entry into the chatroom) to share the quote and comment on it.
6. Each student has 1-2 minutes to respond in the chatroom.
7. Once you have called on all students to participate in the chat, you may want to have them write and post a 250-word summary describing the content of the chat session.

Note: What is interesting about this activity is that since there are only 5-6 quotes that

students are reacting to, that they get to read others' views about the quote they posted on (or will post on).