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Three -Point Oral Communication Checkup

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The Details of Discussion...in Online Courses

Point One: Online courses develop critical thinking through written discussions.

Point Two: Respectful exchanges among online students can be facilitated by involved faculty.

Point Three: The permanence of online communication makes evaluation of online discussions somewhat easier.

February's newsletter began with three points about classroom discussion. This newsletter continues that thread, but specifically applies online courses.

Although in-class discussions are better at building instructor-student rapport and developing essential impromptu speaking skills, online courses have a different role.

"Discussions" in online courses are not oral, but can be more informal, using more conversational language (see the January 2008 newsletter). They also provide three advantages in the development of student critical thinking, faculty facilitation, and the evaluation of student contributions to the discussion.

Point One: Online discussions do a better job of developing critical thinking skills, according to Sautter (2007). Effective writing requires carefully supported points, which is essential for critical thinking. Also, because there is more time to write and rewrite before posting in an online environment, the overall discussion tends to be more thoughtful.

Point Two: When students reply to one another within a forum or bulletin board, they are more careful to respond with respect to their peers. This creates a healthy atmosphere, especially if the bulletin board is carefully watched by the faculty, and the faculty member is as involved in the exchanges as the students.

Point Three: Rather than trying to keep track of who said what while also facilitating the classroom discussion, online classes provide a permanent record of the contributions of each student. Instructors can review the record and thoughtfully assess individual contributions.

In-class discussion encourages immediate thinking and impromptu speaking, and online classes encourage more written critical thinking. Either way, students are engaged in active learning.