What is the purpose of a discussion board and how can they be beneficial?
A discussion board is a “space” where students can further delve into classroom content. It can promote collaboration, and offer individuals room to explore topics, issues, and/or questions. The discussion board is an excellent tool for students who may feel more comfortable expressing their understanding of course content in a written format, as opposed to verbally.

Discussion boards can also be used to further employ the resources of the Internet by allowing students to include hyperlinks to relevant content. Since discussion boards are asynchronous, they offer an opportunity for conversation that again cannot be found within the classroom environment.

What makes a good discussion board topic?
The ideal discussion board topic should always facilitate learning opportunities. It should ideally
1) Address the course content
2) Reveal your own understanding of that content
3) Promote peer interaction.

Tips for writing a good discussion thread
- The Three Part Post (Developed by Dr. Judith Boettcher, Executive Director of the Corporation for Research and Educational Networking)
- If the discussion question asks you to respond to an open-ended query pertaining to a particular problem, challenge, or idea, a good thread will incorporate three parts:
  - Part 1: State what you’re considered thought or recommendation might be. In other words, answer the question, “What do you think?”
  - Part 2: State why you think what you think. Examine your own experiences, beliefs, or knowledge. It is also a good place to provide references, textual quotations, and/or links to materials that reinforce your opinion.
  - Part 3: State what you wish you knew or directly solicit the opinion of classmates (in other words, ask a question!)
Example of a successful discussion thread:
Question: Discuss your thoughts on the current national preoccupation with reality TV shows. In what ways are they used to represent or reinforce gender, racial, or economic stereotypes?

Response from student 1:
Reality shows are certainly an ever-expanding phenomenon, yet—in my opinion—they often convey many harmful stereotypes that undermine whatever entertainment value they possess. The genre exploded in the new millennium with shows like Survivor and Big Brother, which chronicled the relationships and personalities of “real” people within a competitive context. In recent years, however, reality shows have increasingly focused on the day-to-day lives of “authentic” individuals. There is one show that I think particularly epitomizes the current dilemmas inherent in this latter type of reality programming: Jersey Shore.

Jersey Shore was initially developed by the MTV network in 2009. The most recent season features the exploits of eight so-called “guidos” and “guidettes”: Paul (“DJ Pauly D”), Ronnie, Nicole (“Snooki”), Mike (“The Situation”), Vinny, Jenny (“J-Wow”), Deena, and Sammi (“Sweetheart”). I initially began watching the show at the insistence of my roommate, and occasionally follow the exploits of the cast due to their constant presence in both gossip magazines and mainstream media sites. I—along with many critics of the show—find it problematic due to three main criteria: their representation of Italian-Americans from New Jersey, their portrayal of the lifestyle of young Americans, and the show’s depiction of gender stereotypes.

Adam K. Raymond of The New York Times Magazine notes that the show has particularly infuriated Italian-Americans; Richmond states that the president of UNICO, an Italian-American service organization, has asked MTV to cease production of Jersey Shore because “it perpetuates the stereotype of young Italian men as mindless drunk oafs with more hair gel than brain cells.” Raymond’s full article can be found here: http://nymag.com/daily/entertainment/2009/11/italian_group_asks_mtv_to_yank.html

Indeed, Jersey Shore frequently shows male cast members who engage in alcohol-induced debauchery, avoid “grenades” (unattractive females), and whose only other occupations are “GTL” (gym, tan, laundry). The show’s females are also subject to equally negative representation, in that they are all heavily tanned, wear provocative clothing, and are constantly on the prowl for the perfect “juice-head gorilla” (read: a young man who likely takes steroids to increase his bulk.) For the show’s fourth season, the cast relocated to Italy, where they spent several months partying, fighting, and generally perpetuating negative stereotypes of American youth. Although this show supposedly chronicles the experiences of “real” Italian-Americans from New Jersey, only two of the cast members (Sammi and Deena) are actually from New Jersey, and not all of the individuals are ethnically Italian. The show thus, in my opinion, is deliberately designed to accentuate these stereotypes.
My question is this: is there anything redeeming about Jersey Shore? Do you think that these types of reality shows (that follow the lives of “real” people in day-to-day settings) are more detrimental than competition reality shows like Survivor?

Response from Student 2 to Student 1’s post:
I agree that Jersey Shore, by and large, demonstrates many negative stereotypes. And yet, you cannot ignore its current cultural relevance. According to Rebecca Brown, an MTV blogger, several universities are using Jersey Shore as a platform for discussion (http://remotecontrol.mtv.com/2011/05/10/university-of-chicago-jersey-shore-conference/). For instance, a student at the University of Chicago intends to sponsor a conference on the show which will include topics such as “The construction, localization and performance of ethnicity, or I’m not white, I’m tan”“. Jersey Shore has the potential to be detrimental, if these stereotypes are perceived as fact. But, in my opinion, it is very obvious that the Jersey Shore cast members are characters, not “real” people.

Also—just to play the devil’s advocate—I think that several reality shows (even those of the “day to day” variety) have positive repercussions. Consider a show that airs on the TLC channel—“What Not to Wear.” This program is hosted by two individuals who provide makeovers to primarily women. Unlike Jersey Shore, these women are portrayed as real people, not as “one-dimensional” stereotypes. Although some of the individuals on the show are more receptive to makeovers than others, they are not relegated to simple labels of “hero” and “villain.” This show has both positive intentions and consequences. Again, I certainly admit that many programs do reinforce negative stereotypes, but it is difficult to classify all “reality shows” as representing these stereotypes universally.

Additional Tips

- Strive to always bring up new, interesting comments. There is no point reiterating a remark that has already been made. You should always try to further the discussion—be provocative! Even if you have a similar opinion as the previous respondent, bring up an additional example or resource. The second poster in the above example includes many comments for the next student—or even the previous poster—to agree or disagree with.

- Good discussion threads should be substantial but concise: convey only the information that is most meaningful and accessible to your classmates. Make sure to always re-read your response! A good habit is to copy and paste your thread into a Word document prior to posing to check for errors in spelling and grammar.

- Don’t just state that you agree or disagree with the poster—make sure you offer an inventive reason why (avoid things like “You go girl, I totally agree!”) Always be professional and respectful to your classmates and avoid ad hominem attacks (criticism against the person, not his/her comments.)