Examples of Best Practices for Using Threaded Discussion (from Penn State)

NOTE: CourseTalk is Penn State’s asynchronous on-line discussion area. It functions in a similar way to WebCT’s threaded discussion tool.

Sample Exercise 1
Students read a tutorial and reacted to questions on the material with exercises operating on a two week cycle. The students worked in groups of 6, with a different point person responsible for summarizing and posting the group’s answers. A main discussion area was provided for general discussion and questions between students. A virtual chat was set up for questions to the TAs once a week. Questions to the TAs or instructor were much more productive since students worked on their own as much as they could.

Sample Exercise 2
To support critical thinking, we created an on-line interview exercise. Students were to read about a political figure or any person that had relevance to the course material first. These "interviewees" each had their own web page. Students read about the person and were then asked to formulate a question for this person. In addition to the interview question, the students had to submit justification for their question and how it related to the course material.

Sample Exercise 3
We adapted this area to support an "ask the expert" activity for another class. 18 industry experts from different areas of expertise in the telecommunications industry participated in a 5 week on-line case assignment. Students read each expert's page. Some experts provided pictures and some did not. After reading about the experts, students then asked the experts questions at key decision points in the case assignment. Faculty monitored the questions to make sure that the same question was not submitted twice to each expert since they were giving their time freely. Also, if two or three questions were similar, the faculty merged the questions into one.

Sample Exercise 4
We will be inviting a guest facilitator to lead a class discussion (via the class bulletin board) over the course of a week. The guest facilitator is well-known in the field and students were already going to be reading an article he wrote as part of their class work. Now that he's agreed to be a guest facilitator, students will have a chance to ask him questions about his article and his work, first hand. A wonderful chance to bring their studies to life. Students will actually begin reading his article early in the course and will be given a "heads up" about the discussion so that they can begin to formulate questions. Then, later in the course (about 2/3 of the way through), they'll re-read the article and then participate in the discussion. Student participation during the week will be counted toward their overall "Class Participation" grade.

Sample Exercise 5
Role playing exercise - in one class, students work through a case study in small teams. At one point in the case study, which has to do with how to integrate the specific technologies they were learning about into their own classrooms. They were directed to post their own ideas and then give feedback to 2 other students on those students’ ideas. In giving the feedback they were directed to share with their peers ideas for how the original idea could be utilized in a different discipline or expanded on, or share their own experience implementing a similar idea in their own classroom (when possible). This activity took place multiple times throughout the course, each time focusing on a different discipline.
technology. By the end of the course, students had a rich collection of ideas to "take away," which they loved!

**Sample Exercise 7**
Students work in small teams to critique research articles that the team selects. (The activity is repeated 3 times in the course - each team has 3 members, so they take turns selecting playing "leader"). They are given a private bulletin board forum in which to complete the assignment. When they are done (there is a list of specific information they are to submit as a team), they post their collaborative critique to a whole-class forum.

**Sample Exercise 8**
I used Coursetalk as a pretest supplemental activity for my students. I had two discussion areas; one where students submitted exam questions, and the other where students posted topics that were unclear from lecture. I gave students credit for posting, and responding to the latter (providing clarification to their classmates). About 20% of my students posted/responded. I got the distinct impression that had it not been for the extra credit, I probably would not have seen that much activity. I would like to try it again this spring. - Bert Eardly

**Sample Exercise 9**
In comm488, student teams used the discussion area to private discussion rooms. That is, each team had a "discussion topic" called "Team X Private Area" at which they posted team notes, the text of ICQ or IM synchronous meetings for archive purposes and contributions to each of several different sub-topics that were related to their team projects. It was important to the students that only team members (and the professor) could access their team areas -- other teams and outsiders could not. It made it feel more like a team home. - Anne Hoag

**Sample Exercise 10**
In Comm580, I used CT to post weekly discussion questions that accompanied the readings. Students would contribute their own responses and view those of others -- this was important b/c the course was a once-per-week seminar and students needed this ongoing contact with me and with one another the other six days of the week. - Anne Hoag

**Sample Exercise 11**
Five key concepts from the weekly chapters were posted on-line. Students were encouraged to submit their definition or understanding of the concept. Students were not allowed to use a dictionary or book definition. This helped students to see different perspectives on similar concepts, and also helped them to articulate meaning and therefore enhance communication. We were then ready to discuss on-line the rest of the material.

**Sample Exercise 12**
Students were asked to submit a question for each chapter via e-mail. The top 5 questions were submitted to the threaded discussion area where they could be discussed. The owner of the question was the moderator and was responsible for answering all questions about his/her question to the class.

**Sample Exercise 13**
Three key issues for each section were posted on-line. Students worked in teams to formulate discussion for the issues. Each team was then to post a summary of the issue for the rest of the class to review. Any questions for the summaries were the responsibility of the team who posted that summary.

**Sample Exercise 14**
We used CT's polling area to start each new section. We would post the conflicting ideas that were going to be discussed to get a feel for where the class stood on these issues before we began. At the end of the section we took the poll again and compared these to the beginning poll. We learned so much from this activity and the students really enjoyed it. The polls generated much more meaningful discussion.