# DISCUSSIONS AT A DISTANCE: AUTONOMY IN ASYNCHRONOUS COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

**Laura Birkenhauer, Student Success Librarian for Campus Engagement**

MIAMI UNIVERSITY
OXFORD, OH • EST. 1809

## Introduction

An academic librarian taught a 14-week, first year experience course during the fall 2020 semester. Most students enrolled were Speech Pathology and Audiology majors. After instructing the course in-person twice previously, the instructor opted to lead an asynchronous online section. The course is designed for synchronous delivery, in-person or virtually, and teaching asynchronously required extensive content modifications. Rather than entirely replacing small group and whole class discussions with online discussion boards in the Canvas LMS, select discussions were assigned to occur in Loom and Flipgrid and via email, while the mode for other discussions was a choice left up to the student and/or group.



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## Research Questions

• Do students prefer to respond to discussion prompts verbally, in writing, or through other interactive tools and/or technology?
• Do students prefer assignment of a designated mode for discussion by discussion facilitator (instructor) or prefer to self-select discussion mode?

## Methods

Students enrolled in the instructor's course were invited via email and through Canvas announcements to participate in a Google Forms survey. Calls for participation were sent and posted on four dates in December 2020 and January 2021. The survey consisted of 18 multiple choice, true/false, and short answer questions.

## Results

10 out of 23 students responded to the survey.

• **90% preferred responding to discussion prompts in writing** while 10% preferred verbally.
• **Canvas discussion boards were the preference for written discussion responses (60%)**, over Google Docs (40%).
• **No clear preference for verbal discussion responses (tie between Canvas Media Comment, Zoom, and Flipgrid).**

• **For all class discussions, 70% preferred that a designated mode for discussion was assigned** by the discussion facilitator.
• **For small group discussions, 70% preferred to self-select a mode for discussion.**

## Conclusions and Discussion

**Written responses to discussion prompts were overwhelmingly preferred over verbal responses.** Canvas discussion boards were the favored method for these written responses to discussion prompts, with reasoning being ease of use, consistency with other courses and the ability to read and respond to classmates' posts. While students expressed that autonomy in asynchronous discussions allowed for creativity, variety, and the opportunity to use a mode they felt comfortable with, these opinions were at odds with feelings that it was difficult to choose which mode to use and made assignments less predictable. **Small group discussions emerged as an instance where autonomy is acceptable.**