LEADER GUIDE

1. **Welcome and Introduction**
   a. Title of Session, Name, Place of Work
2. **Introductory Activity**
   a. Different tables – some have paper
   b. The groups that are having the more traditional oral discussion, just try to keep it down a bit so as not to distract the other groups.
   c. The online discussion groups are not to speak during the exercise. Instead, you should write your comments on the paper in front of you. Then you can pass your paper around the group and others will comment on what you've written and either give it back to you or pass it on. There should be no oral conversation among your group. You each have 5 minutes.
   d. Discuss the issue of play in Kindergarten. There is increasing criticism that play is being taken out of K more and more and some feel there will be repercussions for the children. There are a lot of opinions and ideas around this issue so I would like you to discuss this either verbally or in writing with each other. You have 5 minutes – Go.
3. **Review**
   a. Method of discussion. I would like each group to now formulate a few pros and a few cons to their method of discussion.
      i. How did it work?
      ii. What worked well?
      iii. What made it difficult?
   b. Take a few minutes and then I would like to hear what you've come up with. (5 minutes). Ok, who would like to share what you've decided are a few pros and cons to your method of discussion. [Write them up].
   c. My pros and Cons. This information was compiled based on my own experience, analyzing the discussion boards of seven classes, using survey results from a short survey that I created in order to get feedback on how to make my discussion boards more effective and informative.
4. **Go over my pros and cons –**
   • **Pros**:
      o *Time* –Students have a week to go through comments and continuously think things over, go back to ideas, and mull

over different opinions rather than 3 hours class time a week approximately a third of which is not discussion-based.

- o *Comfort Level* – Some students suggested that they were less apt to speak in class as they felt self-conscious, but they felt comfortable in an online discussion because they had time to formulate their thoughts and didn't feel judged or like they would be cut-off or fight for the floor.
- o *Planning and Meaning* – when in a live class discussion, students speak out their ideas quicker often saying one of the first things that comes into their head when they answer a question or have a comment. Generally, comments are short and one-dimensional and have to be probed by the faculty. In the discussion board, for the initial posting at least, students comprehensively formulate their thoughts without anyone interrupting or pulling the conversation away. Because they are not there to clarify their idea, they are more thorough and may plan their comments more thoroughly and the presentation of their ideas
- o *Participation & Exposure to Experiences* –All students must participate rather than some slipping through the cracks and hiding at the back of the room, therefore we are able to get more perspectives than in some live classes. Because of total participation required, students are exposed to others' ideas and experiences that they might not have been and by default can learn about how their classmates' experiences affect the way they teach and their beliefs. This may cause them to question or challenge their own beliefs or ideas thereby either reaffirming or expanding their view.

- **Cons**:
  - o *Lag time* – in the classroom, I can probe something with a student quickly going back and forth asking them to clarify, give more details, or explain why they are saying what they are. On the other hand, in an online class, there are less back-and-forths possible as students come online and write their comments, then may check back only 2-3 more times or may not be able to check back after for whatever reason. Therefore, it takes longer to get to where you can get to in a live class, and some questions may remain unanswered.
  - o *Lack of Spontaneity*

- *Meaning* – similarly, meaning can sometimes get confused in online forums and what a person writes can get misconstrued. This can cause some people to take offense or feel like their comments are picked on. Additionally, students may be accustomed to typing differently than the way that they speak as online technology such as instant messaging, message boards, social networking sites, and emails have different styles and lingo.
- *Formality* –While in a live discussion, we can maintain a certain amount of informality, the online discussion board sometimes lends itself toward more formality as students are writing their posts for a grade. Therefore, they may be more careful then usual making it difficult to get a real candid discussion going.
- *Lecture* – I generally use my lecture and notes (from the textbooks) as the framework to bring students experiences and ideas into class. This grows organically as the class progresses. In the discussion board in my online classes, students are given a question or two to answer, however, I am less able to steer the conversation in the same way I can in a live discussion.
- *Repetitive* – because there is usually an assignment to begin with – answer a question or two from the chapter – and because students want to make sure they are covering all their bases, I find that sometimes the posts are repetitive in their content.
- ***Simple rather than complex ideas*** – because students are being required to post a certain number of times, some of the postings are very simple such as "I agree with you that parent involvement is important" which adds very little to the discussion in terms of content. Additionally, it can be easy to write thoughts and ideas without backing them up, supporting them, or explaining what it looks like in practice (i.e. Parent involvement is essential to the classroom as the students benefit when their parents are involved. We need to work to ensure parents are involved in the classroom as much as possible so our students are able to reach their potential). In the example, the students hasn't really defined what it is or what it can/should look like.

5. **Best Practices**

- **How can we best utilize the discussion board in an online early childhood class?**
  - Make it a discussion board
    - From the surveys, it was clear that one of the most effective parts of the DB as well as the class was that they were able to learn from their peers (need to have students post thoughtfully to other posters) and from the professor (need to actually read each one and comment and probe further).
    - Online students say that the most effective part of the DB is 1) learning from other students and responding to them, 2) learning and applying from real life experience, 3) learning from the professor and her comments/questions
  - Try to give choices in the topics for the week and allowing for a variety of responses and encouraging students to back up their assertions with their own experiences. This will help to make sure that each person's post is not the same. When we ask for papers or make the topic so rigid, we often get the same thing over and over which isn't that beneficial to the student, and also doesn't lead to further discussion because even if students are asked to comment, the discussion is often stagnant because it's the same thing over and over.
    - Some online students mentioned repetition or "spitting back the textbook" rather than really posting their understanding of the topic at hand and their own experiences.
  - Have rules and deadlines to promote discussion. In order to get students to comment thoughtfully and actually have a discussion (back and forth on a topic), try having a deadline for an initial posting and then a deadline for the comments. This will ensure that students are online several times over the week and then may go back and forth on ideas and truly create a discussion. I generally have students do their initial posting 3 or 4 days before the week's assignment ends (when all posts for that week must be completed).
    - Some online students mentioned that the fact that the deadlines and requirements were clear was an important factor. Additionally, many students posted that they were most informed by other students and

the professor and the discussion that ensued meaning so setting up the class where discussion is imminent is important. Before I did this, students would come online once and not again for the week.

- o Close the discussion board for a short time at the end of each week. While many students are initially frustrated with this, I tend to close the discussion for a week while 1) I grade it, but also 2) I help them move into the next topic. While many would like to continue the conversation in that moment, I have found that treating it like a live class discussion (which is finite and ends when the 3 hours ends) helps keep the students moving through the material. I also don't open the next discussion board until the week begins. Again, some students want to do their work ahead, but I find that keeping students in the current week's material all together helps focus them and gives them some of the benefits of a live class. This would not work for professor's that allow students to complete their work at any time throughout the semester. For students that do want to work ahead, I encouraged them to go ahead and do so for their initial post but save their work in a file to be pasted later when the DB opens.
  - ▪ Some online students were not happy with this aspect, but in this case I have chosen to overrule the few comments because I see an overall benefit. This is another point about doing this type of simple research or just getting feedback – we don't always need to take all of it if we feel we have valid reasons for doing what we're doing. We just need to make sure the reasoning is sound and in the best interest overall of everyone involved.
- **Based on getting lots of feedback from my students, I have concluded that ideally, the professor's role in a discussion board (to ensure efficient and effective learning) should be:**
  - o In an online course:
    - ▪ Make sure assignments are appropriate to build discussion
    - ▪ Respond at least once each assignment to each student
    - ▪ Acknowledge/praise something within the comments if appropriate, and elicit further information (i.e.

questioning the student about something he/she said, asking for the student to elaborate or expand on an idea, asking the student to clarify, or challenging the student's assertion by presenting an alternate viewpoint)

- Model the above so students also respond in this way (instead of "I agree" or a response that does not add to the discussion.
- Also, model the appropriate type of language balancing the formal with the informal
  - There is a balance to be created when it comes to formal vs. informal language and that connects with the outcome of the discussion board. While some students are comfortable with informal electronic communication growing up in an age of email, text messaging and instant messaging, others don't have email and have no experience writing anything on the computer except formal papers. I think the best approach is somewhere in the middle. For the discussion board, I like to have students write a write in complete sentences with proper spelling and punctuation, but each paragraph does not need to be indented. Students should cite if they are using a source, but they do not need to cite or use APA for paraphrasing. I require them to comment on chapters so I know that they are using ideas from the chapters. If they directly quote or take very specific ideas, then they should abide by the APA, but if they are trying to follow too many rules (must quote or cite so many times or so many sources, must do so many words or characters, etc.) I find that the discussion can suffer.

- **What features of the discussion board are useful to integrate into live early childhood classes?**
  - **Why**
    - I have found that while there is discussion *time* in a live class, it is not always adequate as class time also includes lectures, presentations, projects, etc. Additionally, as shown earlier, some students feel very

comfortable speaking out in class and contributing, others do not.

- ▪ ***Giving students a voice*** that might not be comfortable sharing information in class as much as others. Through class, I had a certain impression of students. Some students are more vocal and eager to share their opinion and experience. Others are more reserved and it can be difficult to really get a handle on whether they understand and relate to the material that is being taught. However, I found that while some of the students who were more vocal in class were also more participatory on the discussion board, I also found that some of the more quiet or reserved students would post comments that would really give me a good sense of their thoughts on the topic which was very helpful as a professor. Additionally, I was able to bring some of those comments back into class and use them as a springboard for more input from them in the actual live class. While part of my grade is participation, this gave me a new way to evaluate.
- o ***Preparation*** - Have students write their comments before class so that you can draw from the discussion board in class. It prepares students and helps to bring in students that might not feel as comfortable speaking in class. This was mentioned over and over as a benefit of integrating the discussion board.
- o ***Variety*** – because students do have a forum for discussion already and do have access to the professor and her ideas during the week, the DB should have several options for questions and focus on what the topic means for them.
- o One ***barrier*** is that, some students do not seem to have access to technology or are not comfortable with technology. Second, some felt very nervous about putting their ideas in writing.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations
  a. Practice-based research and everyday research and evaluation