Instructors sometimes feel hoodwinked by a promise of student interaction in online discussion forums that, quite frankly, doesn’t happen. The discussion forums are flat – students make their required post, responders reply with their required responses. End of discussion.

CECH professor Dr. Janet Zydney has co-authored a book that works to fix that problem through a concept called protocols. A protocol (in this sense) is a set of steps or “rules of engagement” to follow in a discussion forum. The structure of the discussion forum promotes student engagement.

Here’s an example.

### Protocol: Save the Last Word For Me

**Goal:**

Interpretation of a particularly puzzling or complex portion of text

**Steps:**

- **Part 1:** ½ of the students (say with last names M-Z) post a thread with a portion of the text that they found puzzling or confusing. No explanation.

- **Part 2:** All students then post replies to 2 threads giving their interpretation of the passage – what it means and why it matters, etc.

- **Part 3:** Original students then reply to their original postings, revealing their interest in the passage and what they learned from reading the reactions (replies) from their classmates.

You can even out the work by performing this activity a second week, using the other half of the class as the original contributors. I have more details about this protocol and others in copies of the book.

Compare this to your typical discussion forums in the area of constructive thinking and collaborative learning – how does it stack up?