Using Online Discussion Boards

Practice Guide

Why use discussion boards in your online learning design?

Peer interactions in an open and caring environment promote the sense of community, belonging and wellbeing leading to student engagement. Belonging is generally easier naturally in face-to-face settings. In online and blended learning, planning is required to build an engaging and trusting environment. An online discussion board is one of the best tools for building a learning community.

What typically hinders student learning?

Based on a number of discussion board studies, Wang and Chen (2008) listed four typical problems that impede student learning in online discussions:
- Non-participation
- Postings do not reflect critical thinking skills
- Limited interactions among participants
- Topic digression to unfocused task

Some general rules for successful online discussions

Consider moving some of the information typically shared via an announcement (resources, videos, notices of interesting/relevant news) into the discussion board. In an announcement, students feel like we are talking **at** them. The discussion board provides students with an opportunity to **reply** and for you to encourage further engagement.

Manage student expectations: provide students with clear guidelines on when you will check the online forums (e.g., every Monday and Thursday afternoon), book the times into your diary and follow through on the response time. If something gets in the way of meeting the deadline, let students know when to expect a response. Consider exceeding this promise during the first few weeks of studies in order to achieve a connection with, and between students. In addition, encourage students to help and support each other (e.g., share resources, answer questions). Celebrate and thank those who do.

Discourage emails unless the matter is private/personal. Anything else must be posted into the discussion board forums. Not having to answer the same question over and over saves time and ensures that everything to do with the course is transparent and available to everyone. If a student emails a question about the course, post the question and the response in the discussion board, letting them know this.

Consciously work on building the three presences: social, teaching and cognitive (Garrison et al., 2000), see the LTO Community of Inquiry Practice Guide for specific suggestions.

Do not overuse discussions: provide an authentic reason for students to post, because students detest unnecessary busy work (Dyment et al., 2020). A few well chosen, interesting (useful, controversial, topical) forums, outside the assessment submission times, are better than requiring a weekly submission (i.e., do not use the discussion board as a means to check students are doing the work set).

Become engaged in every forum: commend someone's excellent contribution, highlight the important point, correct erroneous facts, clarify muddy concepts, provide a summary - be very visible to students so that they feel supported.

Encourage multiple means of engagement: text is not the only medium. Respond (and inspire students to do the same) with videos, images, voice recordings, recorded presentations.

Specific rules for successful online discussions

Wang and Chen (2008, p.162) designed the following rules based on experiments that showed that the object and rules in an online discussion task significantly influence its success. The table below lists the rules and explains the rationale for each:

Rules	Rationale
Start dates Cut off dates	Level playing field Facilitate student planning
Tell students to:	
Minimal number of posts — You need to comment on at least two other groups	Increase number of posts critical mass
Support your arguments with evidence (established theories, empirical data, thought experiments, etc.)	Prevent garbage messages Promote meaningful cognitive engagement Increase quality of posts
Keep one point per short message	Increase clarity of the structure of messages
If no one answers your posting, you can send invitations to three students for responses	Legitimacy for response Shortened waiting time
You are encouraged to build on existing ideas by quoting and paraphrasing other people's messages	Build on each other's ideas Virtual "body language" Expand perspectives of the discussed issues Reduce tension between active and lurking participants
You must always reply to comments to your posts	Increase interaction Greater ownership of discussion
If you have nothing more to add, wrap it up nicely with a concise summary	Every message matters Proper closure Clarify more ideas Increase student synthesis skill Open new directions for discussion

Types of online activities that work well as a discussion

- Icebreakers where each student introduces themselves:
  - Provide students with a clear format (i.e., what to include in the introduction) and lead by example: make an introductory posting following the format
  - Include an invitation to share something stimulating, as appropriate for the level of study (e.g., an interesting fact about themselves, a study tip, a link to a useful/interesting website with an explanation of why they like it, a link to their LinkedIn profile).

- General discussion:
  - Use to capture any general questions, comments, ideas or suggestions and to share resources, including students sharing with peers (see LTO how-to guide)
  - Consider extending this forum to include feedback ('General Discussion & Feedback Forum') and use it to post general whole-cohort feedback such as worked examples, exemplars, clarification of concepts based on typical student errors, common strengths and weaknesses, etc.

- Debate:
  - Students choose a viewpoint, post their argument, wait for a response from a peer, reply with a rebuttal. This may be run either in pairs or as a group (group pairs) where each group is assigned a viewpoint
  - The structure must be well considered and a due date set for each part of the activity:
    - The original viewpoint
    - Response to the opposing view
    - The rebuttal.

- Provocation:
  - Provide a controversial topic (case study, news item, ethical issue) and ask for a response
    - If this task is marked, consider using a "special view forum" where students must create a thread in order to view other threads. This will stop those submitting at the last moment 'appropriating' the earlier-posted views and ideas.

- Shared resource depository:
  - For assessment tasks encourage students to share links to useful/interesting/germane resources about the task.

- Anonymous "Please Help!" forum:
  - It is important that students feel conformable sharing new ideas, asking for help or clarifying a concept
    - Anonymous discussion may help students feel safe to share imperfection, confusion, ignorance and struggles

- Private group discussions forums inside the Group Pages:
  - Small assessment-based groups can use private discussion boards to collaborate on a final draft before posting it to the all-class discussion board.

- Discussion as an assessment task:
  - Clear expectations are essential and all details must be clearly explained
  - Provide students with a rubric containing clear criteria for quality of participation

> Further resources created by the LTO:
> - Innovative and creative Ways to use Discussion Boards (Spotlight)
> - Create General Discussion (how-to guide)
> - Create Discussions in Blackboard (video)

References:

Dyment, J., Stone, C., & Milthorpe, N. (2020) Beyond busy work: Rethinking the measurement of online student engagement, *Higher Education Research & Development*, 39(7), 1440-1453, 10.1080/07294360.2020.1732879

Garrison, D. R., Anderson, T., & Archer, W. (2000). Critical inquiry in a text-based environment: Computer conferencing in higher education. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 2(2-3), 87-105.

Wang & Chen (2008). Essential elements in designing online discussions to promote cognitive presence — A practical experience. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks,* 12(3-4), pp 162-2