

Using online discussion forums

The discussion forum is one of the most frequently used tools in online learning and teaching. Indeed, online course designs that facilitate student engagement and interaction create pre-conditions for learner success and retention (Rienties & Toetnel, 2016; Weidlich & Bastiaens, 2017).

The problem

It is a challenge to create and maintain discussion forum activities that foster meaningful, active, engagement. Effective management of discussion forums may also require considerable work for the teacher.

The solution

Consider the following strategies to help with the effective and efficient design, implementation, and management of your course online discussion forums.

- **Establish discussion protocols** to ensure posts are constructive and respectful. Students could be invited help co-create protocols as an introductory activity.
- **Identify a clear purpose** for the forum activity. Forums commonly are used for a range of activities, including: student introductions; critical discussion of or reflection on a reading, process or topic; and, to provide a collaborative space for peer learning, peer reviews and group work tasks.
- **Structure discussion activity prompts.** Specify the task aim, description, and stages for students.
 - » Use action verbs (e.g. describe, explain, compare, identify, find) in wording your discussion board prompts
 - » Specify how, where, when, and to whom students should respond (Yilmaz & Karaoglan Yilmaz, 2019).
- **Require variation in student responses.** Typical discussion forum activities focus on questions or topics where there are range of acceptable answers or approaches:
 - » **Different question types.** These enable you to target different forms of learning: interpretation, evaluation, application or problem-solving, and argumentation or debate
 - » **Jigsaw prompts.** Ask students to find, describe or identify something no one else has found, or in a way that no one else has done
 - » **Snowball prompts.** Require students to brainstorm or build onto information another student has shared
 - » **3C & Q method** (created by Jennifer Stewart-Mitchell). Ask students to respond in ways that always include the following: a compliment; a comment; a connection, and a question
 - » **Controversy.** Post a disciplinary or professional controversy, or an incorrect or partly correct response to trigger student critical thinking and discussion
 - » **Assign roles.** You can increase student participation by assigning different roles: eg. starter, moderator, arguer, source searcher and summariser (Yilmaz & Karaoglan Yilmaz, 2019).

- **Allow different submission formats.** Students can respond to discussion prompts in other formats (e.g. PowerPoint presentations, videos, concept maps, photos). This can make the discussion board a more engaging space and develop a wider range of skills and attributes.
- **Use groups.** This strategy is particularly useful for large classes, or for online teamwork.
 - » Divide students into groups (eg. 6-8 students) and allocate the group its own discussion forum. A smaller group will make it less intimidating for students to interact with each other, and will also allow you to manage student discussions effectively and efficiently
 - » Students may be required to work only with their assigned group, or groups can also post a brief of their work to the main course discussion board.
- **Emphasise quality over quantity of responses.** Consider fewer, well-timed discussion forum activities that support student completion of formal assessments:
 - » Too many may inhibit meaningful, in-depth, student contributions and create increased work for the teacher
 - » If discussion forums are assessed, develop simple criteria that assess student thinking, and how their post advances discussion.
- **Be present.** Teacher online presence is key to student success (Parks-Stamm, Zafonte, & Palenque, 2017) and is particularly important in increasing forum participation in smaller classes (d'Alessio et al., 2019).
 - » Actively monitor and facilitate online discussion
 - » Prompt deeper learning by using follow-up questions
 - » In larger classes provide summary feedback on a discussion thread, acknowledging each students' contribution at least once a semester. You can also ask a student or group to summarise the main points from the discussion.
- **Offer choice.** Student motivation to complete any learning activity is higher if they can choose between, or choose their own topics, tasks or questions (Tian & Wu, 2019).

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Office for the
Advancement of
Learning and Teaching

@ oalt@usq.edu.au

📞 07 4631 1600

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