Discussion Board

Generating, Facilitating, and Assessing
Engaging Online Discussions

BLACKBOARD
9.1 SP 9

Mastering Online Discussions

Many experts on student-centered online learning agree that the discussion board is the place where some of the most important learning can happen. Discussion boards are one of the most common tools used in online learning. But as teachers and facilitators, we have to find ways to support students in "driving" that learning.

Educators who use discussion boards successfully estimate that their interaction with students can be as much as three times the interaction with face-to-face students, and that peer-to-peer interaction is even many times more than that.

For instructors facilitating a robust discussion board, the fervor of activity may prove overwhelming. How do you make the most of this new form of learning experience? And what if your discussion board is more like a ghost town than a boom town? How can you get students to participate thoughtfully and frequently?

When you are managing an online discussion, it's important to strike a balance in your interaction with the students so that the board has a focus on learning and is interesting enough to pull learners into the conversation, but at the same time is not so dense and complicated that learners are overwhelmed. It's important to manage the time that you and other participants spend interacting, and to make sure that the interactions on the board are enriching and relevant.

Benefits of using online discussion boards can include:

- building an online learning community
- promoting critical thinking skills
- developing student writing skills
- providing more time to formulate responses
- allowing all students to contribute

Highlights

Getting Started

1. Establish a set of guidelines for appropriateness.
As an introductory assignment, have students follow a link to a netiquette guide or create their own.

2. Be very specific about the quality and level of posts you expect.
Be prepared to demonstrate and reiterate what you want in several ways for students who are unfamiliar with online discussions.

3. Consider dividing questions or directions into discrete units to make your expectations clear.
 • Length of message
 • Level of formality
 • Criteria for an acceptable response, along with grading criteria (ex: do you want citations?)
 • Resources you expect students to consult (provide a hyperlink or article name)

4. In the first week, work on establishing community.
Encourage a good level of socializing or construct icebreaking topics so students begin to feel invested in the culture of the discussion board.

5. Set early deadlines for postings.
Keep discussions on track by having quick deadlines for initial posts and follow-ups so students are moving at the same pace when pursuing their assignments.

Managing Your Workload

The first time you manage a discussion board for a particular course, it is likely to take more time. You can manage your workload more effectively by:

• Setting aside specific times to read and respond to the discussion board.
• Pre-empting questions by making regular announcements and providing news and information relevant to the students and the course in an Announcements section on the discussion board.
• Developing an FAQ section (frequently asked questions). Hang on to these for future section offerings.
• Being prepared to spend some time during the first week helping students access and navigate the discussion board. Don't assume they know how to participate.
• Setting limits and being explicit with students as to your availability. Let them know how frequently you will respond to discussions and questions and the time frame by which you will answer questions.
• Encouraging students to post questions, rather than emailing you. Encourage students to use the discussion board to share knowledge when they have it, and to ask for what they need.

Preliminary Competencies Required:

☐ Understand the differences between a discussion forum and a discussion thread

☐ Understand how to Reply to a discussion posting in Blackboard

☐ Understand how the discussion settings impact your students' experience

☐ Gain a deeper understanding of planning different types of discussion questions based on course content

☐ Identify how discussion forums will be integrated within a course

Planning

Meet with an instructional designer to plan your discussion forums.

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Sample Activities

Brainstorming

Students set forth a series of ideas on a given topic.

Problem-Solving

Small groups work out a solution to a problem.

Writing Groups

Students work together in groups of four or five to share drafts and provide peer response and peer editing.

Case Analysis

Students work independently on a common case by group analysis on the discussion board.

Collaborative Writing

Workgroups work together to create a single document - proposals and analytical reports work well - which they then post to the larger group for critique.

Cooperative Debate

Workgroups present perspectives on a particular issue, followed by a whole-group consensus-building discussion.

Discussion of Course Readings

Instructor creates threaded discussions around assigned readings. Threads may include pre-reading activities, interpretations, evaluations, etc.

Research Bank

Students and instructor contribute links and citations to a common area for a class research topic.

Writing Good Discussion Questions - As you prepare questions for a discussion, think about what is most important that students know and understand about the topic. Shape your questions with that goal in mind. Avoid questions that prompt a yes or no answer. If you get that kind of answer, ask the student to go further and justify their response. Ask them to refer to the reading they were to do for support for their statements. ideas and opinions.

Convergent Thinking	Divergent Thinking	Evaluative Thinking
Begins with… • Why • How • In What Ways…	**Begins with…** • Imagine • Suppose • Predict… • What are some of the consequences…	**Begins with…** • Defend • Judge • Justify… • What is your opinion about…
Examples: How does gravity differ from electrostatic attraction? How was the invasion of Grenada a modern day example of the Monroe Doctrine in action? Why was Richard III considered an evil king?	**Examples:** Suppose that Caesar never returned to Rome from Gaul. Would the Empire have existed? What predictions can you make regarding the voting process in Florida? How might life in the year 2100 differ from today?	**Examples:** What do you think are the advantages of solar power over coal-fired electric plants? Is it fair that Title IX requires colleges to fund sports for women as well as for men? How do you feel about raising the driving age to 18? Why?

Doing
Create a forum

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Creating a Discussion Forum

1. Go to the LIU Blackboard website (http://blackboard.liu.edu).
2. Enter your LIU username (e.g. jsmith) and password (same as your email account).
3. Click the Courses link at the top of the page to display all of the courses you are teaching.
4. Click on any course name to enter that coursesite.
5. Locate the Course Management and Control Panel section, located at the bottom left of your screen.
6. Locate the Course Tools section and click on the Discussion Board link.
7. Click on the link that should be the same as the Blackboard title of the course (ex: EDU_500A_001_RI_FALL2013)
8. A new Forum must be created to house the threads of discussion. Create a forum by clicking the Create Forum button. While only instructors can create new forums they can enable students to manage a forum once it is created.
9. Type a Title and Description for the new forum. The title might be the question or topic to discuss. Use the description section to specify details about the quality and level of posts you expect.
10. For the Forum Availability you can set the date/time a forum is available and the date/time it will be displayed until.
11. Select the appropriate Forum Settings. **See next page for more details.

Creating a Discussion Thread

1. Click the Forum title to enter the discussion.
2. Click the Create Thread button.
3. Enter the Subject and Message you would like to post in the appropriate text boxes.
4. If you want to upload a file as an attachment to your message, click the Attach a file link then locate and select the file for uploading.
5. Click the Submit button to post your message (Note: If you click on Save Draft the message will be saved, but will not be posted for other participants to see.).

Reading and Replying to Messages

1. Be certain that you click on the subject of the message you would like to respond to.
2. Click the Reply button.
3. Enter the appropriate information in the text fields.
4. Click Submit to post your message. Your message is posted as a reply to the original thread and is indented under the original post.

Create it

Forum Settings

Blackboard provides customized settings for discussion forums.

Users may quote previous posts in their reply.

Students will be allowed to attach files to their individual posts/replies.

□ Allow Anonymous Posts
□ Allow Author to Delete Own Posts
    ○ All posts
    ◉ Only posts with no replies
□ Allow Author to Edit Own Published Posts
□ Allow Post Tagging
☑ Allow Users to Reply with Quote
☑ Allow File Attachments
☑ Allow Members to Create New Threads

Subscribe
    ◉ Do not allow subscriptions
    ○ Allow members to subscribe to threads
    ○ Allow members to subscribe to forum
        ○ Include body of post in the email
        ◉ Include link to post

□ Allow Members to Rate Posts
□ Force Moderation of Posts

Grade
    ◉ No Grading in Forum
    ○ **Grade Discussion Forum:** Points possible: [ ]
    ○ Grade Threads

Alignments
    ○ Forum alignments
    ◉ Thread alignments

Note: You have the option of allowing or not allowing students to start threads. Generally, the purpose of the forum dictates whether or not the students can start threads.
Ex. A moderated, graded forum used to evaluate student performance is usually tightly controlled, and therefore members cannot create threads. Other forums are designed for students to share opinions and thoughts on tangential or unrelated topics. In this case, you may wish to allow students to create threads and spark discussions.

Students can subscribe to threads and be notified via email when a forum is updated.

Before a post is published, the instructor must approve it.

Forums or individual threads may be graded.

http://blackboard.liu.edu

Video Tutorials
- Creating a Discussion Board Forum

- Changing Discussion Board Forum Settings

- Creating a Discussion Board Thread

Assessing

Within a learning management system, instructors can grade online discussions by assigning a point value or using a rubric to assign a grade. Student learning can be assessed by using holistic or analytical rubrics. Rubrics can provide both faculty and students with clear expectations and grading criteria for participation in online discussions. Rubrics can take the guess work out of grading.

Holistic rubrics use a single scale with all criteria summarized. The instructor assigns a single grade.

Analytical rubrics provide a grid in which criteria are separated and levels of achievement are identified. Some common criteria used by instructors to assess online discussions may include frequency, quality of initial and follow-up post, timing, and mechanics of writing.

Middle Tennessee State University offers three examples of discussion board rubrics in holistic and analytical formats at www.mtsu.edu/ltanditc/docs/Discussion_Board_Rubrics.pdf.

Some tips on using rubrics:
- Provide models for students. Show examples of previous student assignments (with names removed) to demonstrate different quality levels of work.
- List and explain the criteria within the rubric. Use the discussion of previous student work to begin a list of what counts in quality work.
- Articulate gradations of quality. Describe the lowest and highest levels of quality, then fill in the middle levels based on your knowledge of common student problems.
- Allow students to practice on models. Have students use the rubrics to assess examples of previous student work.
  http://commons.ucalgary.ca/sites/default/files/tipsheets/rubrics-for-student-assignments.pdf

Criteria	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Frequency				
Quality				
Timing				
Mechanics				

Discussion Board Rubrics. Retrieved from Middle Tennessee State University at www.mtsu.edu/ltanditc/docs/Discussion_Board_Rubrics.pdf

Hayek, C. (2012). How many faculty discussion posts each week? A simply delicious answer. Retrieved from http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/online-education/how-many-faculty-discussion-posts-each-week-a-simply-delicious-answer/

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LIU's Online Teaching Resources Library Guide located at http://liu.cwp.libguides.com/boi

Stavredes, T. (2011). Effective online teaching. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

University of Calgary Teaching and Learning Centre. http://commons.ucalgary.ca/sites/default/files/tipsheets/rubrics-for-student-assignments.pdf