Overview

A discussion board is an online communication tool that lets students and teachers take part in discussion in a virtual environment.

The tool creates a virtual community of enquiry, allowing peer-to-peer discussions at any time and wherever Internet access is available, so that people don't need to meet face to face in real time. Students can post comments, questions and responses, and the discussion board constitutes a record of the discussion.

Available as stand-alone applications or as built-in tools in Learning Management Systems (LMSs) such as Moodle, discussion boards typically allow you to group multiple threaded discussions into a forum.

Discussion boards have become one of the most popular online learning tools, and are valuable in the design of assessment-as-learning as they engage students actively in discussion.

When to use

Discussion boards can be used throughout a course and students' contributions assessed at the end of semester, or they can be set up as summative assessment activities.

Discussion boards must be well integrated into the learning process and be clearly an appropriate tool for the learning activities they are intended to serve. Conceptual discussions and group problem-solving tasks can be facilitated very effectively through discussion boards.

Tasks requiring students to post personal reflections to the tutor or to showcase their individual performance are better fulfilled using tools such as a journal or blog.

To help you decide whether to use a blog, a wiki or a discussion forum, visit the page Blog, wiki or forum—which should you use?

Benefits

- You can use a discussion board to assess a broad range of learning outcomes, including conceptual understanding, generic skills (e.g. reasoning, communication) and interpersonal and teamwork skills.
• Because discussion can take place at any time and in any place, students have a chance to ponder the discussion and produce in-depth and considered reflections, and to review the evolving discussion as often as they like.

• Where the immediacy of a face-to-face discussion in a classroom may alienate some students—for example, those who are new to studying in an Australian university—a discussion board can feel more inclusive, in that students have time to read and review the exchanges of views.

• Students can see and evaluate their peers’ posts, and this helps develop a community of enquiry and a more democratic assessment process.

• When their discussion board activities can earn them a grade, students are more inclined to contribute actively and productively to discussion. Richer class discussions result, as well as increased opportunities for students to demonstrate the depth of their learning.

• A discussion board provides a record of students' online contributions, so that assessors can review each student's performance at their leisure.

• Discussion threads can be archived for future use, for example, as a stimulus for further discussion, or to justify grades in the case of appeals.

Challenges

• Assessing discussion board contributions sometimes results in students spending excessive time preparing polished contributions around assessment deadlines, rather than engaging in dynamic and generative discussion and debate throughout the semester.

• Contributing regularly to discussion boards can be time-consuming for students, particularly when it entails following the threads of multiple discussions.

• Online discussions do not suit all learning styles. Some students may be unfamiliar with this tool, or uncomfortable using it. For example, students whose first language is not English may be unsure what tone they should adopt in a discussion post.

• Technology-related issues such as system maintenance, outages or unreliable Internet access can disrupt discussion.

• Discussion board formats may not be customisable to particular users' requirements, for example, the need to upload video presentations.

Strategies

Design for assessment with discussion boards

When designing assessments that use a discussion board, consider these basic questions:
What is the objective of the assessment task? Is it, for example:
- to engage students in creatively proposing and exploring ideas on a topic in preparation for a formal face-to-face class seminar?
- to enable students within a small group to generate ideas towards the development of a group position paper on a topic?

What learning outcomes will be assessed by the task, and in what combinations and proportions? You might be seeking, for example:
- a demonstrated understanding of subject-related concepts
- skill in communicating ideas effectively
- the ability to contribute productively to a socially-negotiated group outcome
- demonstrated leadership in facilitating or moderating a group discussion.

For assessment, what will you require of students, in terms of their engagement in the discussion board? For example:
- How much, how regularly, how frequently, how spontaneously should students contribute?
- Should students engage in the discussion as individuals or as representatives of a group?

How will you prepare and support students to use the discussion board, particularly before a high-stakes graded assessment? For example, will you provide:
- early practice with low-stakes discussion topics?
- tutorial activities about discussion board etiquette?

Who will initiate, guide, maintain and moderate the discussions?
- Will students be required to take the initiative in identifying topics or trigger questions?
- Will the tutor act as an e-moderator, determining how discussions begin, develop and conclude?
- Will e-moderators be rotated between groups to balance out differences in approach?

What criteria will guide the assessment process? For example, will you focus on
- the quantity of students' contributions
- the quality of their contributions, or
- a blend of quantity and quality?

If the assessment is to be graded, who will interpret and grade students' contributions?
- Will students assess their own or their peers' contributions?
- If teachers assess, will they do so individually or in teams?
- Will other people assess them, such as workplace supervisors? You might have to make the live online discussion available to these other parties.
How will assessment feedback on discussion board tasks be provided?
- As formative feedback using the discussion board tool to engage students in a reflective dialogue about the quality of their discussion?
- As generic feedback to the class about the most common strengths and weaknesses in discussion board responses to tasks?

Manage assessment with discussion boards

The following table summarises strategies for discussion board based assessment. Most of these strategies are equally applicable to assessing participation in face-to-face classroom learning activities.

*Figure 1: Strategies to engage students in more active and productive discussion board tasks for assessment (adapted from Williams & Wache, 2005: 6)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Action</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provide incentives to contribute.</td>
<td>Assign a proportion of the grade to discussion board contributions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarify assessment criteria and marking rubrics.</td>
<td>Be clear and unambiguous as to how you will assess contributions and what weight the discussion board component will have in the overall grade.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensure that students have early access to the discussion board.</td>
<td>Provide opportunities to practise prior to summative assessment work. This will help students establish their own online identity and start building an online community (Salmon, 2000). Technical access issues can also be identified and resolved in a low-stress context.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plan a starter task to get students engaged early.</td>
<td>A simple and engaging starter task can get students socialising online and becoming familiar with the tool. Regular practice and formative feedback will help get students used to using a discussion board before you employ it in a summative (graded) assessment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarify the role of the e-moderator.</td>
<td>The e-moderator must take care to ensure that groups are provided with equivalent levels of support and guidance. They may need to give specific direction to the discussion, such as providing trigger questions or prompts.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Invite students to reflect on discussions. | Students can be encouraged to reflect on the processes and outcomes of discussions as part of their assessment. You can incorporate self and peer assessment into the grade.

Prescribe a lifespan for discussion topics. | By planning when to conclude discussion on a topic, you can ensure that there is time for students to engage sufficiently deeply, without discussion dragging on for too long.

Explain expected standards of behaviour. | Define appropriate behaviour, giving examples and showing how behaviour is reflected in the assessment criteria.

Deal with unacceptable behaviour privately. | Non-participation, aggressive or potentially disruptive behaviour can disrupt students’ learning and assessment and unfairly disadvantage others in the discussion. At the outset, provide clear information about what behaviour is unacceptable, and how it will affect assessment. Deal with unacceptable behaviour quickly and by private email.

**Suitable assessment tasks**

**Reflect on discussion**

Ask students to reflect on how a discussion is evolving or has evolved. The discussion can be their own or a sample discussion thread (if using a sample, make sure the sample participants have been made anonymous).

This reflective exercise is useful in encouraging students to identify what makes discussions effective, and to think about the relationship of discussions to the assessment criteria for individual contributions.

Students can move from this reflective activity to self and peer assessment, either for formative feedback or to contribute towards the summative grade. Students can develop their own analytical framework or use one that is provided, such as that outlined below, and relate this to the assessment criteria.

*Figure 2: Analysing different types of discussion board contributions*
Posts can:

- explain how they are related to the previous thread of the discussion
- comment on or express an opinion on a topic
- provide a reason or rationale for the post
  provide substantiating evidence (including the source)
- contribute an example that illustrates a point in the discussion based on reading or personal experience
- contribute a link to related reading or other material
- ask for clarification of a post by someone else, or comment on their post
- provide a summary of the discussion thread so far
- analyse the main perspectives being presented by different participants
- pose a new but related question that will take the discussion deeper.

Small group reports to the whole class

Sub-groups discuss particular topic areas, then prepare a summary of their group discussion as a contribution to the whole class discussion. Many variations are possible: sub-group members can visit other discussions to share outcomes; individual contributions or jointly constructed syntheses can be the subject of assessment.

Role play discussion

Students adopt particular roles, which they first research and then represent in the discussion. For example, they might present the perspectives of diverse stakeholders seeking funding to advance a community initiative.

Lead or moderate a discussion

Students facilitate or e-moderate, leading a discussion on a particular topic. For example, you could require a student to provide a brief summary of a particular reading, pose some critical questions, monitor the ensuing contributions, and then synthesise the key points to emerge. The assessment criteria should reflect the leadership and management aspects of the role.

Case studies and scenarios

Students engage in discussion analysing a given case study or scenario. Sub-groups pursue particular aspects of the case or scenario, collaboratively prepare summary posts and report their findings.

Retrospective commentary on learning

Ask students to retrieve all their discussion board posts for the course and prepare a reflective account, commenting on:

- how their understanding of concepts and skills has developed, and
- how they have contributed to the learning community of their class.
This can be used to substantiate their self-assessment of their learning performance.

Ensure fairness

Assessment using discussion boards is intrinsically fairer for many students, particularly shy students or students in remote locations. But it can disadvantage others, for example, students with a visual impairment. Ensure that you set up discussion conditions so that all students have an equal chance of success. For example:

- Advise students of any flexibility that is available in the assessment plan to accommodate special needs.
- Ensure that students have access to the discussion board, and that they understand how to use its features to engage actively in the discussion. Give them practice in a low-stakes activity before you require them to participate in a high-stakes summative assessment discussion.
- Appropriately limit the proportion of the grade that derives from discussion board contributions, in accordance with its role in the assessment design.
- Monitor discussion board activities to ensure that students are appropriately inclusive in their discussions.

Figure 3: Rubric for assessing discussion board contributions (Nandi, Chang & Balbo, 2009) - Content

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CRITERIA</th>
<th>POOR</th>
<th>SATISFACTORY</th>
<th>GOOD</th>
<th>EXCELLENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clarification</td>
<td>Regurgitation of information</td>
<td>A clear explanation of available information</td>
<td>Explaining available information using relevant examples</td>
<td>Articulating available information to expand on ideas presented, including the use of examples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justification</td>
<td>No justification of points</td>
<td>Justification based on personal opinion</td>
<td>Justification using existing cases, concepts or theories</td>
<td>Justification using existing cases, concepts or theories and providing clear discussion of implications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretation</td>
<td>Misrepresentation of information</td>
<td>Basic paraphrasing of available information</td>
<td>Clear interpretation of available information</td>
<td>Critical discussion of available information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRITERIA</td>
<td>POOR</td>
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<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Critical discussion of contributions</td>
<td>No engagement with other learners' contributions</td>
<td>Some basic discussion about other learners' contributions</td>
<td>Consistent engagement with other learners' contributions and acknowledgement of other learners' comments on own contributions</td>
<td>Contributing to a community of learners, with consistent engagement and advancement of each other's ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New ideas from interactions</td>
<td>No evidence of new ideas or thoughts from interaction</td>
<td>Some new ideas developed as a result of interaction</td>
<td>Some solutions and new ideas as a result of interaction</td>
<td>Collaborative approach to solution seeking and new ideas developed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 4: Rubric for assessing discussion board contributions (Nandi, Chang & Balbo, 2009) - Interaction Quality*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>EXCELLENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participation rates</td>
<td>None or fewer than 2 posts per week</td>
<td>Between 2 and 5 posts per week</td>
<td>Between 5 and 10 good quality posts per week</td>
<td>More than 10 good quality posts per week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistency of participation</td>
<td>Rarely posts with occasional activity</td>
<td>Occasional activity</td>
<td>Consistent activity</td>
<td>Consistent and productive activity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Additional information**

**External resources**

- Create a forum in Moodle
- Assess student participation in Moodle discussion forums
**Further readings**


**Acknowledgments**

The contributions of staff who engaged with the preparation of this topic are gratefully acknowledged, in particular Dr Shawn Ross in the School of History and Philosophy.