

Assignment Type: Discussions

What is it

A discussion forum, also known as a discussion board, is an online location for asynchronous written communication. Each discussion is typically defined by a specific function (such as “I need help” or “Water Cooler Chat”) or focused on a specific topic from the course. As participants post messages containing their original thoughts as well as responses to posts from other class members, a threaded written dialogue develops.

In traditional campus-based courses, online discussions may be used to continue and extend conversations beyond the confines of the physical classroom. In fully online courses, many of the types of interactions that would normally occur in class can be moved online. The format allows the instructor to set standards that would be hard to maintain in real-time conversations, as well as to create new types of assignments based on dialogue between students.

It is worth mentioning that online discussions offer some distinct advantages.

- Every member of the class gets to contribute directly to a conversation, which is impractical in most other circumstances due to time constraints.
- When grading class participation in a traditional classroom, it may be difficult to judge how much a given student has contributed relative to others if they raise their hand less frequently but share greater insights whenever they do speak up. Online discussions, on the other hand, provide a permanent record that displays both the amount and quality of participation.
- Students who prefer to deliberate for a little longer or consult reference materials before responding are able to take the time needed to develop high quality responses.
- Those who normally feel less comfortable participating verbally in a public setting often find their voice online.
- The work of stronger students serves as a model to others, and some students will put in extra effort knowing that their own work will be viewed by peers.
- The format allows for regular practice working with course concepts at the middle to higher conceptual levels. Students can analyze, interpret and reflect on what they are learning while you observe both their progress and current level of understanding. This type of formative assessment allows you to intervene more quickly or adjust your instruction as needed. It is also less effortful and less obtrusive to students, so it can be employed more frequently than major summative assessments.

Why use it

It is widely accepted that learning is facilitated through interaction with others. Course material is learned at a deeper level when you mentally work with the subject matter, explain your interpretations to others, reflect on their perspectives, and develop shared understandings together. In the physical classroom, this leads to instructional techniques such as Q&A during lecture and seminar-style discourse. In the online course, discussions are commonly used for the same purposes.

Discussions and other means of interaction between students also create a sense of social presence and community. These are considered critical components of a supportive environment that is conducive to learning. Fully online courses intentionally designed with such human interaction in mind can be very engaging for both students and instructors.

How to use it

Blackboard Learn contains an integrated discussion tool that makes it easy to utilize discussions within any course. An instructor can set up as many graded and ungraded forums as needed. A range of settings are available including whether students may post anonymously, edit their own existing posts, rate each other's posts, and attach files.

In most courses, these types of non-content related forums are valuable for both instructors and students:

- **Introductions:** This type of forum allows students and instructors to meet the people they will be working with online all semester. It is common for students to want to connect with each other based on things they have in common that are identified through this forum. It sets the stage for collaboration throughout the course. Participation is generally required during the first week of class. This allows students to become familiar with this central communication tool early in the semester in a non-threatening and low-stakes context. A best practice is to provide concrete prompts or at least topical suggestions to guide what students might include in their personal introductions such as reason for taking the course, areas of professional interest, career aspirations, major and/or class standing.
- **Ask a question about assignments or course logistics:** It is a best practice to set the expectation that students must post all non-personal course related questions here. Additionally, it is helpful to tell students that they may assist each other by providing answers when possible. It builds community, cuts

down on the number of emails from students, eliminates the need to answer the same question multiple times, and students may get the answers they are looking for faster.

- **Social area:** It is not unusual for students to want to engage in conversations with classmates about topics that are not directly course related. Providing a designated forum for such activity allows the natural processes of relationship and community building to proceed without diverting focus away from content-related discussion threads.

Some tips about content-focused discussions:

- Will you be using discussions primarily as a means of instruction or as a method of assessment? Your overall approach should drive the design of your discussion topics and any other types of assignments you plan that will use the discussion board tool as a delivery mechanism.
- Good discussion prompts guide students to interpret what they are reading about, explain how they link the content to other things they know or have experienced, and think critically about the subject matter. Questions with a very factual “right” answer, on the other hand, do not give students many ideas to explore together.
- Prompts that may generate productive discussion and increase comprehension of course content include those that ask students to:
 - apply what they’ve learned,
 - reflect, question and probe,
 - analyze or synthesize information, or
 - support a position they hold after evaluating an issue.
- Outside materials can be used as the basis for a discussion by attaching articles or placing links to outside websites in your discussion prompt. Likewise, the incorporation of outside materials may breathe new life into a discussion that is starting to slow down. Instructors and students alike may attach files or embed links within discussion board messages.
- Are controversial topics okay for discussion prompts? Controversial topics can lead to productive and engaging discussions that help students understand the course content and achieve your stated learning outcomes. However, just as in the traditional classroom, all discussions should be monitored and there may be times when behavior must be managed. When you set up a controversial discussion or can reasonably anticipate that a conversation may naturally move that direction, it helps to explicitly remind students of your expectations for their behavior during discussions.

Considerations

- The discussion tool is Blackboard is not difficult to use, but providing explicit technical instructions is a best practice. A very short screencast video is an ideal way to demonstrate the tool for students.
- Will you expect every student to read every discussion post? Or are you more interested in having students participate in the conversation and get the gist of what their peers have shared? As with any other type of instructional activity, making your expectations clear to students is critical. When your intent is for students to read all posts and replies, consider the volume of messages that will be involved. One way to control the workload may be to assign students to smaller discussion groups within Blackboard.
- Do you envision a conversational dialogue in your discussion boards, similar to the casual style of traditional class participation? Or do you picture a more formal academic style for your students' posts, including properly formatted citations to primary source materials? The purpose of your discussions will guide you in writing appropriate instructions for the students about the format of their posts.
 - The conversational approach may allow students to interact more naturally, creating a more "personal" feeling in your course and a greater focus on integration of new knowledge with previous experience. You may find that discussions flow more easily and that students feel more comfortable "talking" to each other about course content when you use this approach.
 - More formal approaches place a greater deal of emphasis on the mechanics of the students' participation. This may be appropriate when one of your primary goals is socialization of advanced undergraduates and graduate students into your discipline, or perhaps when mastery of the written conventions used in academia is an important outcome. With some audiences, it can be challenging to create an environment for dialogue when employing this approach. Participation is also more effortful and time consuming for students, which may impact your point awards and the use of other activities and assignments.
- The role of the instructor in online discussions may vary with the type of forum or topic being discussed. At a minimum, instructors must monitor netiquette, answer questions that students can't resolve amongst themselves because they require advanced subject matter expertise, and correct student misconceptions about content. However, too much instructor participation can hinder the flow of conversation between students and limit the peer-to-peer teaching that occurs in discussions. Let the learning outcomes associated with the assignment inform your philosophy and approach for each discussion. For instance, when intellectual exploration of a topic or demonstration of higher order thinking are important, the instructor may need to limit their own participation and let students take the lead. To maintain a presence in such

- cases, the instructor can facilitate learning by occasionally highlighting key insights posted by the students.
- Most people adapt fairly quickly to this type of written communication. Clear expectations about manner of writing, length of posts, and timing should be provided to guide students. The nature of a given discussion assignment may help to define whether an informal, conversational style versus a formal academic style with citations of source materials is more appropriate. Sample discussion posts from the instructor may help those are new to the process, but experienced students will also model desired behaviors by populating the discussions.
 - A range of common online participation patterns have been documented well beyond the online classroom. Have you ever heard the term “lurker” used to describe someone who reads blog or social media posts without ever posting an original contribution themselves?
 - Stated requirements for a number of original posts and replies that must be authored--by specific dates--will serve as a guide to your expectations and ensure a minimal level of interaction between students. This has become common practice. In the absence of such instruction, many will post thoughts at the last minute which does not leave time for replies, choose not to contribute to the discourse even though they read what others have posted, or to post their own opinions without engaging in any actual dialogue.
 - However, this will not guarantee that students are actively engaged in the discussion process or that learning is taking place. The best tactic is to craft engaging discussion prompts designed to facilitate learning and provide incentives to encourage target behaviors (such as grading based on quality versus participation). Some instructors also prefer to give students a degree of choice and control over the discussions they join (for instance, by requiring participation in at least 10 out of 15 weekly discussions).

Instruction and assessment

- Some instructors like to assign roles in discussions to further engage and empower students, provide additional structure to the experience, encourage exploration of multiple perspectives, and help manage participation. Typically, roles are rotated with each discussion board. They may include facilitator, devil’s advocate, and summarizer (responsible for summing up the entire discussion). This technique may be particularly valuable if your approach is to use discussion boards primarily as a method of instruction.
- Whether your approach is to use discussion boards as a means of instruction or primarily for assessment purposes, clarity of expectations for students and

transparency of grading can be improved through the use of rubrics. Rubrics may also make grading faster and easier for you!

- A single rubric applied to all discussions throughout the semester may be appropriate. This works well when you would like to award a few points to encourage quality participation—sort of the equivalent of “attendance/class participation” points.
- Separate rubrics may also be tailored to the requirements of specific assignments. If you are using the discussion board as a platform for delivery of assignments that reach beyond the typical class discussion, strongly consider the use of rubrics!
- Many good sample rubrics (for discussions and assignments) are available online. A few links are provided in the Resources section at the end of this document to get you started.
- Assignments that utilize the discussion board tool as a delivery platform do not have to be limited by what we think of as a typical class discussion to check for understanding. The asynchronous format and communication-centered nature of the tool provides an opportunity to build discussions around application-oriented activities and inquiry-based learning techniques.
 - Imagine having the time for each student to do an in-class presentation each week about an investigation performed outside of class; that can be approximated on a discussion board.
 - You might even consider using the discussion tool as a process element in an assignment rather than the product. Much of the coordination and work involved in group projects can be conducted via discussion board.
 - Any discussion prompt can ask students to investigate some aspect of a topic on their own, identify salient aspects or emerging issues, and share their findings with the class. The discussion board can be used to debrief assignments, share and evaluate peer work, or link content to current news coverage and real-life examples discovered by the students.
 - It may even be the case that many of your goals for traditional group projects can be realized through the use of smaller discussion board-based projects. As described above, the discussion board can be used for assignments that require students to conduct individual investigations on different aspects of a topic then share what they’ve learned. In a discussion group of 2-5 students, participants should have ample opportunity to discuss how all of their findings relate—and the integration of knowledge takes center stage as the “product” of the assignment. Removing the focus from the “group paper” or some other large piece of physical output means that logistically you may be able to utilize these types of activities more often throughout the semester.

Level of Bloom's Taxonomy: Sample Action Verbs

Assignments using the discussion board are probably best constructed to work toward accomplishment of learning outcomes at the middle levels of understanding. Here are a few examples of action verbs from relevant levels of Bloom's cognitive domain:

- Understanding: Describe; Explain; Defend; Rewrite
- Application: Demonstrate; Illustrate; Interpret; Criticize
- Analysis: Predict; Compare; Examine; Analyze
- Evaluation: Argue; Assess; Judge; Rate; Support; Critique

Resources

- [KSU's Blackboard Self-Help Documentation on Discussion Board \(Forums\)](#)
 - Task aids provide information on how to set up and use the built-in Discussions tool in your online Blackboard course.
- [The Online Discussion Board – Research Article](#)
 - If you would like a little peek into the research on discussion boards but are really more interested in the in the implications of what we know for your teaching practice, this chapter is for you. It is a great place to start.
 - **Reference:** Levine, S.J. (2007). The online discussion board. *New Directions for Adult & Continuing Education*, 113, 67-74. doi: 10.1002/ace.248
- [Examples of Discussion Board Etiquette for Online Courses](#)
 - SUNY-Stony Brook has gathered up several examples of Netiquette statements for courses. Other examples may be located easily by Googling “netiquette and online course.”
- [Generating and Facilitating Engaging and Effective Online Discussions](#)
 - The first few pages of this booklet from the University of Oregon Teaching Effectiveness Program are worth skimming. They contain tips for instructors new to online discussions, including a few tips about managing your workload.
- [Mastering Online Discussion Board Facilitation](#)
 - This 15-page Resource Guide from Edutopia (2009) is a nice primer to help you get started. It contains many examples of strategies and techniques for successful discussions.

- **Reference:** TeacherStream. (2009). Mastering online discussion board facilitation. *Edutopia*. Retrieved from <http://www.edutopia.org/pdfs/stw/edutopia-onlinelearning-mastering-online-discussion-board-facilitation.pdf>
 - [Questioning Styles for More Effective Discussion Boards- Research Article](#)
 - In only a few paragraphs, Faculty Focus walks you through how to think about the purpose of your discussions plus six general questioning approaches that will help you write discussion prompts that are specific to your content and learning goals.
 - **Reference:** Kelly, R. (2009, November 20). Questioning styles for more effective discussion board. *Faculty Focus*. Retrieved from <http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/asynchronous-learning-and-trends/questioning-styles-for-more-effective-discussion-boards/>
 - [Rubrics for Discussion Boards from the Learning, Teaching & Innovative Technologies Center at Middle Tennessee State University](#)
 - This document contains three rubric examples along with samples of instructions for participation so the students understand what is expected.
 - [Sample Discussion Board Questions That Work](#)
 - This four-page document from McMurry University explains seven approaches to discussion prompts. Each includes a one-paragraph rationale and an example.
 - [Time Students Spend in Discussions – Research Article](#)
 - Reports the results of a study that suggests that the amount of time spent participating in discussions (2 hours crafting and posting messages plus 1 hour reading them) approximates the 3 contact hours per week of a traditional 3-credit course. The study examined 21 sections representing six fully-online courses from Instructional Technology and Curriculum Studies graduate degree programs at four universities. The courses presumably used weekly discussions as a primary method of instruction and interaction.
 - **Reference:** Brown, A.H., & Green, T. (2009). Time students spend reading threaded discussions in online graduate courses requiring asynchronous participation. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 10(6), 51-64. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ869424.pdf>
 - [Considerations on Interaction in Discussion Boards – Research Article](#)
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- Reports the results of a study showing that students did not interact with one another on a discussion board unless responses to others were required, and a high level of instructor participation in the discussion may have hindered student-student interactions.
- **Reference:** An, H., Shin, S., & Lim, K. (2009). The effects of different instructor facilitation approaches on students' interactions during asynchronous online discussions. *Computers & Education*, 53(3), 749-760. doi: 10.1016/j.compedu.2009.04.015
- [Learning vs. Lurking – Research Article](#)
 - Reports the results of a study that indicates students may be learning even when they are not actively posting in a discussion board. It is food for thought as you consider whether to require a certain level of participation in your discussion boards, which is important for a variety of reasons (e.g., to keep the conversation going for students that learn well through interactions with others, to build a learning community full of the types of social presence that keep online students from feeling isolated, and to allow you to assess how well students are understanding the course content).
 - **Reference:** Dennen, V.P. (2008). Pedagogical lurking: Student engagement in non-posting discussion behavior. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 24(4), 1624-1633. doi: 10.1016/j.chb.2007.06.003