

**Practical advice for enhancing  
your teaching and learning**

**Discussion**

**boards**

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# Why should you use discussion boards?

Effective use of discussion boards can:

- encourage students to take a more active role in the learning process.
- assist students to be more tolerant of differing viewpoints and better prepared to formulate and express their own opinions.
- help resolve small problems or inconsistencies in course related matters in a timely and effective manner.
- assist students to keep in touch with each other and the lecturer.
- provide a forum in which students can voice their thoughts, choosing their own words and knowing that others will be "listening".
- improve flexibility by allowing students to contribute at times and places appropriate to them.

# What sorts of things can you use discussion boards for?

Discussion boards, also known as bulletin boards or threaded discussions, are an educational tool using the internet to facilitate interaction and collaboration between students and lecturers.

Asynchronous (delayed) discussion boards are used more often in universities than chat rooms or synchronous (real time) discussion groups. Most lecturers also use email regularly to communicate with both individual students and the whole class.

Discussion boards can be used as a forum for:

- lecturers to enter a welcoming message to their students and provide a general overview and motivation for the course.
- students to introduce themselves, perhaps mentioning their interests, a little of their background and their expectations of the course.
- the exchange of ideas or queries relating to the course, and for feedback to the lecturer and each other.

- students to pose comments or reflections about topics, resources or contributions by others.
- social chat, especially as a support mechanism.
- students to identify additional resources, for example, journal articles, books or online material.
- collaboration on assignments in pairs or small groups.
- peer review and formative assessment of assignments in progress.

## How do face-to-face interactions compare with discussion boards?

Face-to-face discussion	Online discussion
requires an immediate response	opportunity to read, research and reflect before responding
age, gender, size, appearance, dress and cultural clues are immediately apparent	personal characteristics are secondary to point of view
physical presence makes some nervous	technology makes some nervous
words are spoken but not recorded	words are recorded (threads can be reviewed)
listener gets one shot at understanding what the speaker is saying	listener (reader) can quickly review (read) what has been said (typed)
leaving the group or non participation is obvious but outsider infiltration is virtually impossible	leaving the group or non participation (lurking) may not be noticed but outsider (imposter) intervention is very difficult to detect
assessment may be mostly impromptu, reactive and subjective	assessment may be more structured, considered and objective

## Useful tips when using discussion boards

- Let students know you will be monitoring the discussion but not necessarily contributing every day.
- Be proactive and positive, for example, congratulate those who made the deadline for the first submission.
- Ensure the discussion tool supports your learning outcomes.
- Be specific about word length and format for student submissions.
- Ensure technical support is adequate before the commencement of the course.
- Inform students in advance about how the discussion board relates to their assessment in the course.
- Be courteous, use good grammar and spell check your postings.
- Avoid using CAPITALS as this is the equivalent of shouting.

# What sorts of discussion board activities can you use?

- **Resource collection**  
Direct students to find a useful URL on a particular topic and post it on the discussion board. Students should include a few sentences to summarise the site and indicate why it is useful.
- **Reading summaries**  
Ask small groups to collaborate online (via email, chat or private discussion boards) to summarise a particular reading.
- **Frequently asked questions (FAQs) and responses**  
Pose a number of FAQs each week. Students nominate which FAQ they choose to research and answer. Responses are posted on discussion boards for others to view.
- **Assignment preparation**  
Ask students to critique a model answer that has been posted by the lecturer.

- **Student reflections and questions**  
Students review and summarise a particular set of readings and then pose a research question for discussion.
- **Issue of the week**  
Lecturer posts a comment or paragraph about a provocative issue. Students respond justifying their position.
- **Simulations**  
Students play different roles, for example, various positions in an organisation, and contribute to authentic tasks on the discussion board, such as writing memos, policies and reports.
- **Assignment key points**  
After completion and submission of an assignment, students are required to identify a number of key points and share these with fellow students on a designated area of the discussion board.

# How can you set up a discussion board?

## Planning

1. Think about why you want to use a discussion board in your course and link the discussion board's purpose to your learning outcomes.
2. Decide on whether you would like the discussions to be held with the whole student group or smaller groups (this would depend on enrolment numbers).
3. Schedule how you would like the discussion board to operate across the semester, for example, do you want the discussion board facility to be available all the time or only during certain periods?
4. Decide whether or not the discussion board contributions will be assessed or linked to assessment.
5. Clarify your role and the student's role in the discussion board activities.

## **Action**

6. Seek advice from your technical staff about what is needed to set up a discussion board. They may advise you on what software may be used, access to servers, passwords, etc.
7. Inform students of your role (to monitor, give feedback, contribute) and how often you will be available via the discussion board facility.
8. Timetable or diarise your regular involvement in the discussion board activities throughout the semester.

## **Maintenance**

9. Contribute, monitor, organise technical repairs to the discussion board throughout the semester.
10. Evaluate your experience and collect comment from students regarding the use of the discussion board. This data will influence how you use discussion boards in the future.
11. Collect examples of good discussion board activities (with students' permission) to be used in future courses as models for other students.

## **For more information**

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