



Discussion Forums

Discussion forums are one of the most commonly used online tools by instructors, which means that they are often dull and unexciting for online students. There are several ways to make your discussion forum stand out.

The Instructor's Role

Berge (1995) identified four roles for online faculty. Each of these roles needs to be present in the best of classes. Some instructors have gone so far as to create separate avatars for each type (rather like wearing a different hat for different questions).

Instructional facilitator: In this role, you have to have clear learning outcomes for students, but need to be flexible enough to accommodate individual learners. You need to make learning relevant and design a variety of student activities that will approximate authentic practice while maintaining a safe learning environment. You need to shape writing prompts that will engage students in higher order thinking in your discipline, and summarize and expand upon threads of student conversation.

Social leader: In this role, you need to create a friendly and safe learning environment. Establish a code of etiquette for the course, and consider allowing students to help create this code or contract. Introduce yourself with either audio or video (video is best if you feel comfortable with it) and have the students do the same. Build a sense of community in the class. Have synchronous office hours when students can come and chat. Be wary of humor that can be misinterpreted. Avoid sarcasm. Model collegial participation and praise students who emulate that behavior. Immediately address student comments that seem to breach the etiquette you have set for the course. Mabrito (2004) talks about this in greater depth.

Administrative Manager: In this role, you need to keep the course on schedule and handle tangents appropriately. Clarify student responsibilities and balance your participation so your presence is acknowledged but does not discourage student responses. Allow students time to respond. Respond to student questions in a timely manner, and let students know how long it will take for your response. Above all, manage your time carefully. Online discussions take time to prepare, facilitate and transition.

Technical Support: In this role, you must ensure that students get the technical support they need. Expect technical difficulties and plan for alternative means of instruction. Encourage students to help each other overcome technical issues but be prepared to provide front line technical support to students if necessary. Limit the number of technical tools you use. Even if you are comfortable with the tools, remember that students may not be.

Know Your Alternatives

Discussion Forums were one of the first ways for people to communicate online, but there's a lot of new ones. One of these might fit your needs better, and offer a change for your students from the normal discussion forum.

Synchronous Communication <i>for office hours or workgroup meetings</i>	Asynchronous Communication <i>for more thoughtful interaction or when working with a variety of time zones</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chat rooms like the one in GullNet. • Instant Messaging (IM) like Skype, Google Talk, Blackboard IM, Windows Messenger, Yahoo Messenger, etc. IM Aggregators can allow you to gather IMs from a variety of platforms. These aggregators include Digby, Adium, Meebo, Trutapp, Nimbuzz, and many others. • Texting with cell phone or computer using an IM tool. • Online conferencing with Blackboard Collaborate or other tools. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blogging tools like Wordpress or Blogger. RSS feeds can be aggregated also. • Forums with audio and video options like Voicethread. • Wiki tools like Wikispaces or GoogleDocs. • Hold a group discussion on a Twitter channel. • Online portfolios like Picasa or Flickr.

Variety in Types of Discussion Forums

Discussion forums can be differentiated by a variety of criteria, namely:

- Was the work done by individuals or by the group?
- Was it graded or ungraded?
- Was it shared with just the instructor, or with their small group, or with the class as a whole, or some combination of those groups?
- Were the other group members or class members expected to give feedback on the work?
- Was feedback by other students to be collected and/or graded?

The minimum time required for an assignment is an essential consideration when designing a course in a compressed six or eight week format. If one only has six weeks in the course, then the minimum time required determines how many or how often discussion forums can be used. If one wants to design a course that can be taught in both a fifteen week format and a six week format, the course should be chunked initially in its six week format and then expanded to the fifteen week format, rather than starting with the fifteen week format first.

The following page lists potential assignment protocols for discussion forums, building on the idea of parallel and sequential assignments from Salmons (2011).

Assignments Protocols for Discussion Forums

Type of Assignment	Tools used	What is the assignment?	Follow-up Assignment?	Where is it submitted?	Minimum Time Required
<i>Critique</i>	Discussion Forum or Blog	Go to the class discussion forum or blog and critique the work placed there by the instructor.		All-Class discussion forum or blog	1-2 days
<i>Write-Share</i>	Discussion Forum or Blog	Write a paper individually.	Share it on the group forum or blog and comment on each other's work.	File Exchange <i>and</i> Group discussion forum or blog	1-2 days
<i>Sequential Group Presentation</i>	Discussion Forum or Blog	Do a Write-Share, then have next person in group do Write-Share based on yours, etc, until all group is done	Comment on other group papers.	File Exchange <i>and</i> All-Class discussion forum or blog	1-2 days per person in group
<i>Write-Share-Compare</i>	Discussion Forum or Blog	Write a paper individually	Comment on other group papers. Binary grade for completion.	File Exchange <i>and</i> Group discussion forum or blog	3-6 days
<i>Jigsaw Group Presentation</i>	Discussion Forum or Blog	Do a Write-Share on different topic for each student. Put the individual writing together to complete the group assignment.	Comment or Critique on other group papers.	File Exchange <i>and</i> All-Class discussion forum or blog	3-6 days
<i>Group Presentation</i>	Wiki	Work in Wiki or Google Docs to write a paper together	Comment on other group papers in discussion forum or Blog.	Wiki or Google Docs <i>and</i> All-Class discussion forum or blog <i>and</i> File Exchange	at least 3 days
<i>Team Meeting</i>	Chat Room	Work in chat room to brainstorm ideas for project	Report to instructor on results through File Exchange	Chat Room <i>and</i> File Exchange	2 days

Establish a Rubric for Student Responses

Sharing a rubric with students will help them know what you expect. This rubric could address the posting itself, like this:

Unsatisfactory 12 points	Needs Work 14 points	Satisfactory 16 points	Very Good 18 points	Excellent 20 points
Entries are based on personal beliefs without evidence from the readings or argumentation based on those readings.	Entries give 1-2 pieces of evidence in support of the argument. The argument does not hold together.	Entries give 2-3 pieces of evidence in support of the argument. The argument is clearly reasoned.	Entries give 3-5 pieces of evidence but the argument is one-side and does not look at multiple interpretations of the evidence.	Entries give 3-5 pieces of evidence. The argument addressed multiple interpretations of the evidence, selects a preferred interpretation & explains why.

Or it could address the student's response to other postings, like this:

Unsatisfactory 12 points	Needs Work 14 points	Satisfactory 16 points	Very Good 18 points	Excellent 20 points
Responded to only 1 other post. Failed to demonstrate knowledge of evidence and arguments in the assigned readings.	Responded to 2 other posts but failed to demonstrate knowledge of evidence or arguments in the assigned readings.	Responded to 2-3 other posts. Demonstrated knowledge of evidence or arguments from the readings.	Responded to 2-3 other posts. Demonstrated knowledge of evidence and arguments from the readings.	Responded to 2-3 other posts. Demonstrated and expanded upon evidence and arguments from the readings.

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