



Generating peer engagement with discussion boards

This resource document provides an introduction to the principles underpinning successful discussion board use. Discussion boards (also referred to as forums/fora) can be used as a tool to generate peer engagement in a hybrid environment. They are a particularly useful tool to integrate into your teaching practice as their use does not have to take place in real-time. They offer a flexible way to facilitate discussion between students at a time and from a place that best suits students. Additional resources on the use of forums are available to you on the Academic Practice website.

Boards act to support social interactions between lecturers and students as well as peer interactions between students. The use of discussion forums in teaching practice can as a result be understood as a form of group work, with its own methodology: online interactions need to be scaffolded. You need to make clear how you expect students to interact with each other and prompt questions need to be both clearly phrased and meaningful. Good practice is to moderate forums with a 'light touch': over-moderation (e.g. too much 'teacher talk') risks killing off interactions between students themselves.

As well as fostering a sense of community, the use of discussion boards can facilitate:

1. Collaboration
2. Ideas Exchange
3. Self-reflection and peer engagement

In some ways, the use of discussion boards can be more beneficial to student learning than in-person discussion time in a lecture. Peer-led conversations around content engagement in f2f lectures and/or seminars are ephemeral: once the conversation is over, there is no guarantee that students will remember its 'meat'. Boards provide students with a concrete record they can refer back to reinforce their learning at a future point.

Discussions from boards can also inform real-time (synchronous) teaching activity. You can use them to stimulate pre-lecture thought about a topic or concept; to consolidate learning after a lecture after you have introduced students to content; or perhaps as part of a live session to address common themes that have emerged in student interactions on the board relating to disciplinary content.

Designing learning and teaching online: the role of discussion forums (Advance HE, April 2020 likely to be particularly useful for you as you consider how best to integrate discussion boards into your teaching practice). Here Tomic et al suggest that colleagues need to think to the 'deep' purpose of an activity from your existing practice and how to place bounds on that activity before transferring it to a discussion board: are you asking students to reflect, response, critique materials, work collaboratively? How long should students spend on each task? How do you see the role of the tutor in discussion forum interactions? These questions are likely to inform your own use of boards in practice.