TEACHING & LEARNING:
GUIDE TO ONLINE DISCUSSION BOARDS

Learning Design & Netiquette

INTRODUCTION

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& NETIQUETTE**

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Discussion board design

The specific goals of the discussion boards are important. When incorporating online discussion boards into your curriculum, make it clear to the students the goals of the discussions by outlining the generic and the specific aims and outcomes.

Student Voice regarding design of online discussion boards:

> "Good idea, but needed a little more specificity regarding a student's obligations over the 3 Modules"

CXA309 student at the University of Tasmania (2014)

Points to consider include in relation to intended learning outcomes include allowing students to:

> Own some of the responsibility for the active functioning of the board;
> Be able to situate theory/abstract concepts into authentic contexts;
> Allow the application and extension of content provided in a unit through written reflections or critiques;
> Uncover/highlight their own and other student misconceptions;
> View the discussions as preparation for assessment items in the unit;
> Actively engage the student and facilitators in a shared learning experience.

Social connectivity through Discussion Boards

Because they are usually asynchronous (unless specific times are scheduled for their use as part of the curriculum), social connectivity in online discussion boards is reduced.

To enhance social connectivity, schedule specific blocks of times when students can post and, a facilitator will be present in real time to respond. Alternatively, inform students when you will be reading and responding to their posts so that they can choose to come online at that point in time.

Types of Discussion Boards
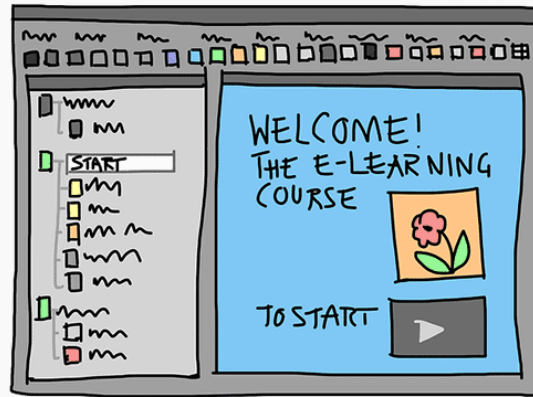
Students react positively when allowed a certain amount of control over the how, when and where they post and to whom the posts are visible. Consider, when you design discussion boards, whether or not students can post anonymously.

Discussion boards can be set up with respect to specific content areas in your unit, specific assessment items, as forums where student can ask the unit coordinator questions or as group discussion boards. They may be facilitated or non-facilitated, depending on the purpose of the discussion board, and may be accessed by the whole unit cohort or just small groups of students within the unit.

You may want to have an alternative space for students to post information unrelated to the specific topic of discussion. Creating a discussion forum where students can connect without distracting from the main content of the discussion is a useful alternative. You will not necessarily post to this discussion board as it will be a student discussion space, but you may need to moderate this board for netiquette.

Resources

❯ Elgort, I., Smith, A. G., & Toland, J. (2008). Is wiki an effective platform for group course work? *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology, 24* (2).

❯ Irwin, C., Ball, L., Desbrow, B., & Leveritt, M. (2012). Students' perceptions of using Facebook as an interactive learning resource at university. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology, 28* (7).

❯ Conole, G., & Alevizou, P. (2010). A literature review of the use of Web 2.0 tools in Higher Education. *A report commissioned by the Higher Education Academy* .

❯ McLoughlin, C., & Oliver, R. (2000). Designing learning environments for cultural inclusivity: A case study of indigenous online learning at tertiary level. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology, 16* (1).

❯ Pelz, B. (2010). (My) three principles of effective online pedagogy. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks, 14* (1), 103-116.

❯ Wise, L. Z., Skues, J., & Williams, B. (2011). Facebook in higher education promotes social but not academic engagement. *Changing demands, changing directions. Proceedings ascilite Hobart* , 1332-1342.

- Wright, S., & Street, J. (2007). Democracy, deliberation and design: the case of online discussion forums. *New media & society, 9* (5), 849-869.
- Designing Online Discussions' Key Questions (Brown University) https://www.brown.edu/about/administration/sheridan-center/teaching-learning/course-design/learning-technology/designing-online-discussions-key-questions
- Getting Started with Online Discussion Forums (Teaching Commons - Stanford) http://www.centenaryuniversity.edu/academics/academic-resources-advising/online-coursework-tips/sample-online-discussion-guidelines/
- Asynchronous Discussion; Best Practices (American Public University System) http://www.uwex.edu/disted/conference/resource_library/proceedings/08_12701.pdf
- How to Prepare and Moderate Online Discussions for Online Learning (Contact North Canada) http://teachonline.ca/sites/default/files/tools-trends/downloads/how_to_plan_for_and_moderate_online_discussions.pdf
- The Guide to Fostering Asynchronous Online Discussion in Higher Education http://fold.org.au/guide_intro.html

Netiquette

Netiquette may be narrowly defined as 'etiquette online'. However, in the context of academic online discussion boards, it is more useful to consider it as an outline of expectations, or the setting of clear 'rules of engagement' for this particular learning tool. A typical guideline might incorporate a 'discussions etiquette' paragraph among other advice and expectations for online discussion. For example:

> "Just as courtesy and respect are expected in a face-to-face class or meeting, this same behaviour is expected in online discussions. However, when there are only words to interpret messages, you need to be especially careful in what you say — there is no voice tone or body language to help the 'listener' interpret your message."

(University of Tasmania, 2014, *Guidelines for Participating in Discussions* . MyLO document for the unit HSP105).

Such advice underlines a key difference between face-to-face class discussions and those conducted online. Getting netiquette right can help effect a smooth transition from the traditional classroom environment to the online one, and can mean the difference between a collection of disengaged lurkers, and a thriving online learning community.

It is important to take time to establish the social environment before embarking on unit content in your discussions. Salmon (2011) places 'online socialisation' as the second step of e-moderated learning (after welcoming students to the unit), and characterises it as the building of bridges between 'cultural, social and learning environments'.

A set of clear rules that everyone understands and can follow at the outset is essential: "Online communication is most effective when all the participants are following the same approach and 'rules' for positive interaction." (University of Tasmania, 2017).

Student Voice regarding netiquette in relation to online discussion boards

> "At times I felt uneasy sharing my opinions, many of which have a political agenda that i dont [sic] feel comfortable discussing"

> "I found the overall tone of the discussion to be fake/false designed to achieve a pass mark and nothing else"

> "I personally don't like posting in case I sound uneducated or silly"

> "I think the discussions could benefit from the lecturer's contributions; to steer the topics and prevent students from discussing too many personal issues"

Netiquette tips for your online discussion board

› Include a netiquette guide in your unit and introduce students to it at the start;
› Set clear guidelines for online discussion, particularly where topics invite the sharing of personal experiences;
› Consider a separate netiquette guide for staff. Ensure tutors/facilitators understand the rules or guidelines for discussions, and are clear about their roles in initiating, responding, presence online, moderating and intervening where required;
› Invite students to help set rules for the discussion board;
› Model the online behaviour you expect students to follow;
› Allow time to establish a social learning environment with a sense of community before starting content-based discussion threads;
› Monitor activity on the board, and respond quickly to inappropriate posting;

> Use a rubric (criterion referenced assessment) if the discussions are to be assessed; If not, make purpose and expectations of the discussion board explicit and transparent.

Resources

> Downing, J, Sharon Pittaway, S & Osborne, P, 2014, Guidelines for Online Facilitation, University of Tasmania.

> Salmon, G, 2011, E-Moderating: The Key to Online Teaching and Learning, Routledge: New York.

> University of Tasmania [2017]. MyLO: Guidelines for Online Communication http://www.University of Tasmania.edu.au/mylo/staff/staff-resources/general-advice/guidelines-for-online-communication.

> Mastering Online Discussion Board Facilitation (edutopia) https://www.edutopia.org/pdfs/stw/edutopia-onlinelearning-mastering-online-discussion-board-facilitation.pdf

> Best Practices in Managing Online Discussions (The University of Rhode Island) http://web.uri.edu/online/best-practices-in-managing-online-discussions/

> The Guide to Fostering Asynchronous Online Discussion in Higher Education http://fold.org.au/guide_intro.html

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