

Benefits of Discussion Boards

Benefits derived from using discussion boards

Why is this case?

Students are more likely to utilize critical thinking skills

Discussion boards are reflective in nature. They force students to read other perspectives and carefully consider a response.

The social aspects of the face-to-face classroom are very intimidating for many students, especially for ESL speakers, new students, and those who are simply shy or quiet.

Students participate more regularly and in a more thoughtful manner than they would normally do in a face-to-face instructional setting, especially in large-enrollment classes

Online discussion boards offer these individuals a tool through which they can actively participate in the class without feeling the overwhelming anxiety they may feel with many sets of eyes on them.

In addition, large-enrollment classes often suffer from a lack of student participation. Online discussion boards provide these classes with a tool through which conversations may take place more fluidly than in a lecture hall of 100 students.

Because there is a greater propensity for students to interact with one another on a discussion board than there is in a face-to-face setting, class community is often shown to be enhanced.

Students develop a stronger class community

Positive growth in class community is reflected through a sense of cohesion with other students, a higher degree of trust between students, an increased number of inquiries and questions between students and the instructor, and a general sense that the class is valuable and applicable to student needs (Rovai & Lucking, 2000).

As students reflect upon what they want to write in a discussion board posting, they often integrate research or class readings with which they are familiar. This occurs much more frequently in discussion board postings than in face-to-face discussions, largely because of the extra time a student has to think about their response.

Students are more likely to cite research and class readings

The use of discussion boards is an active method of learning, contrasted with the traditional lecture model that is much more passive. As many research studies have shown, active learning is more powerful than passive learning at getting students to learn, retain, and apply

Students achieve greater cognitive and exploratory learning

course content to novel and practical situations.

This active engagement with course content gives students an enhanced sense of empowerment (Kassop, 2003; Kubala, 1998), ultimately leading to a more interested, motivated, and participatory student.

Faculty members spend less time answering questions

In face-to-face classes, questions are almost always posed, sometimes repeatedly, to the instructor, unnecessarily tying up their time. When using a discussion board, however, students often answer each other's questions with little or no prompting from the instructor.

Students have a greater sense of race and gender-based equality

Race and gender-based bias can often creep into face-to-face classes more readily than it can into discussion boards. On a discussion board, the only distinguishing characteristic from which race and/or gender might be drawn from is a participant's name.

In discussion boards the bias often exhibited towards non-whites and women in face-to-face classes is reduced, resulting in a more instructionally agreeable environment.

<http://www.wpi.edu/Academics/ATC/Collaboratory/Idea/boardbenefits.html>

Improving the Use of Discussion Boards

Teaching Goal

Increase the regularity with which students post to class discussion boards, in addition to enhancing the depth and quality of comments they make in those postings.

Benefits of Addressing - Research and Theoretical Base

Considerable research indicates that the effective use of discussion boards results in...

- Greater cognitive and exploratory learning (Haggerty et al., 2001);
- Increased student-to-student conversation and collaboration (Kassop, 2003; Rovai, 2004);
- More developed critical thinking skills (Collison et al., 2000; Eklund & Eklund, 1996; Newman et al., 1999; Shapley, 2000);
- Greater student empowerment (Kassop, 2003; Kubala, 1998);
- An enhanced sense of race and gender-based equality in the class community (Hiltz & Wellman, 1997; Markel, 2001; Sullivan, 2002).

Method 1. Practice good discussion board moderation techniques

Primary Techniques	Examples/Rationale
Ask questions to guide student comments and the direction of the discussion.	Open-ended questions are particularly useful in discussion boards, and should be used in lieu of closed-ended questions whenever possible. Play "devil's advocate" by asking probing questions, using contradictions and counterexamples, and challenging students to apply their learning to novel situations, practical scenarios, and prior learning.
Weave student comments into your postings as a means of summarizing and subtly assessing.	Quoting student comments goes a long way towards providing confidence and satisfaction in your students, and spurs more frequent posting.
Use role playing as a means of stimulating discussion.	Discussion boards are an ideal venue for students to role play different perspectives and vantage points because of the reflective nature of the tool. Make your presence known in the discussion boards, but do not dominate them or be overwhelming by posting too often. Posting too frequently leads to short discussions and fewer student postings; posting too infrequently leads students to believe the instructor is disinterested or absent (Mazzolini & Maddison, 2003).
Balance and presence are key aspects of a successful discussion board.	The appropriate rate of posting depends upon the context of the discussion, which should be closely monitored. Encourage student-to-student learning first and foremost on the discussion boards as a means of enabling students to attribute learning and success to themselves. Student questions directed to the instructor should be answered within 24 hours.
If the discussion board supplements your in-class activities, be sure to draw clear connections between the in-class material and the online discussions.	Extend discussion you have in class to the online venue, asking students to consider alternate perspectives and other criteria which may challenge their assumptions, beliefs and findings.
Empower students by allowing them to facilitate discussion forums through myWPI.	When a student facilitates a discussion board, they feel an increased sense of ownership over their own learning, and the learning of their fellow students - they are more invested in the

Encourage your students - especially those who do not normally speak out in class.	learning process. Regularly reinforce positive behavior and strong comments on the discussion boards through both personal correspondence and by weaving student comments into your own postings.
Resist the temptation to make declarative statements.	Instead of commenting "That's right!" or "Not exactly" in your responses, pose questions asking students to analyze the context of their perspective, or project their perspective onto a novel situation.
Use multiple short paragraphs in lieu of one or two long paragraphs in your postings.	Students spend considerably more time reading shorter paragraphs online than they do longer ones, and remember more of the content (Outing & Ruel, 2004).
Manage flaming quickly and decisively through private emails.	Because discussion boards lack facial gestures and body language, misunderstandings between students can take place. Address them through private emails.
Limit the number of students posting to a single discussion forum.	No fewer than three (3) and no more than seven (7) students should be posting to a single discussion forum. Too few will limit the perspectives on the forum, and too many often makes the conversation difficult to follow.

Method 2. Define a rubric by which student comments will be assessed

Primary Techniques	Examples/Rationale
<p>Clearly identify what varying degrees of success look like. Rubrics usually consist of three essential features: evaluation criteria, definitions of what constitutes mastery at each level, and either a holistic or analytical scoring strategy.</p> <p>In terms of what to grade in the rubric, you might consider addressing the degree to which other student comments are weaved into the comment, as well as the timeliness, relevance, accuracy, depth, and mechanics of the comment.</p>	<p>Rubrics may be used to grade either individual student comments, or a series of comments from a student.</p> <p>A very simple four-point scale might look like this:</p> <p>4 Points - The posting(s) integrates multiple viewpoints and weaves both class readings and other participants' postings into their discussion of the subject.</p> <p>3 Points - The posting(s) builds upon the ideas of another participant or two, and digs deeper into the question(s) posed by the instructor.</p> <p>2 Points - A single posting that does not interact with or incorporate the ideas of</p>

other participants' comments.

1 Point - A simple "me too" comment that neither expands the conversation nor demonstrates any degree of reflection by the student.

0 Points - No comment.

Method 3. State clear expectations to students for discussion board participation

Primary Techniques	Examples/Rationale
Require students to post a set number of times per week and discourage last minute posting.	<p>Typically, this requirement includes both original comments and responses to other student comments.</p> <p>The specific number of comments a student is required to post varies depending on the purposes served by the discussion board. As an instructor, you might include the following point as a guidepost for your students:</p> <p>Students are required to post three substantive original comments by mid-week and three responses to other student comments by the end of the week.</p>
Provide sample postings representative of each scoring category listed in the rubric.	<p>Generate an array of sample responses illustrating the range of scoring on a rubric. Use student postings from past courses (with their permission) illustrating the range of scoring on a rubric.</p> <p>As an instructor, you might include the following points as a guidepost for your students:</p>
Use good Netiquette by being explicit about your expectations for the tone and content of student comments.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Please participate in online discussions as you would in constructive face-to-face discussions.• Please be professional and courteous.• Online communication lacks the non-verbal cues that provide much of the meaning in face-to-face conversations. Choose your words carefully, phrase your sentences clearly, and keep your sentences and paragraphs brief.• State the main topic of your posting in the Subject line.• State your purpose for writing at or near the beginning of your message whenever possible.• Proofread what you post. You may want to use a word

processor to draft what you intend to say, check your spelling and grammar, and then paste your text into the Message section of your posting.

- Please do not use all capital letters. It makes it hard to read, and it comes across as though you were shouting.

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<http://www.wpi.edu/Academics/ATC/Collaboratory/Idea/boards.html>

Using Online Discussion Boards to Enhance Learning in Your Class

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If you are an instructor wanting to engage your students using an online discussion board, you may have questions about benefits and best practices.

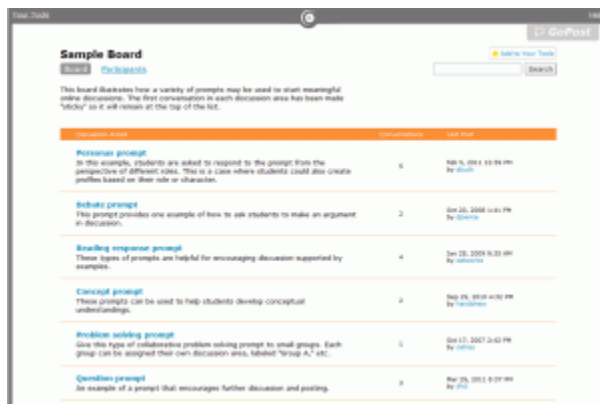
The benefits of using an online discussion board for your class are numerous. Some key advantages include:

- **Builds connections and class community** by promoting discussion on course topics and more informal discussion
- **Contributes to the development of cognitive, critical thinking, and writing skills**
- **Allows time for thoughtful, in-depth reflection on course topics.** Much like traditional writing exercises, students have more time to think about, research, and compose their thoughts before contributing to the discussion.
- **Facilitates exploratory learning** by allowing students to review and respond to the work of others and approach learning in diverse ways
- **Empowers students to express themselves.** For students with different learning styles, an online discussion board can be a venue where they feel more comfortable contributing to group discussions. With positive reinforcement from interactions on the discussion board, an increase in in-class participation may also occur.

Best Practices

Becoming informed about best practices will help make you and your students' experience with the discussion board a rewarding experience and one that contributes effectively to learning. Here are some quick tips:

- **Establish and communicate discussion board ground rules.** What are your expectations for writing styles in the online forum? Are students expected to adhere to general [rules of netiquette](#) or does anything go? Including an introductory post that outlines your expectations for students will benefit you and your students.
- **Determine and communicate how you will evaluate students' participation.** Students must know how their contributions will be assessed in order to make effective responses; otherwise, they may misunderstand your directions or become unsure of what is expected of them – leading to a frustrating and ineffective learning experience.
 - What are your guidelines for giving students credit for discussion board participation? Do they need to post a certain number of times? How often? Any specific length? Is there information they should include or reference? What are your specific evaluation criteria?
 - Encourage students to contact you if they don't understand the assignment or are having technical difficulties with the board.
- **Engage your students by asking good questions to get discussions going.** Use open-ended questions and questions that challenge thinking. In-depth guidelines for writing good discussion prompts are included in the Additional Resources section below.
- **To encourage informal interaction and connection amongst your students,** create an area in your discussion board for personal introductions and discussions. Your students may learn more about their peers than they would in the classroom — opening new doors of connection and community.



Sample prompts:

Personas prompt—In this example, students are asked to respond to the prompt from the perspective of different roles. This is a case where students could also create profiles based on their role or character.

Example: In Charles Dickens' Hard Times, the conflict between reason and emotion dominates much of the narrative. For this discussion, you will speak from the perspective of one of the novel's main characters (see list below for character assignments). Using evidence from the novel, explain whether or not you (as your character) think Louisa's decision to leave Bounderby was a valid response to her situation. Be sure to use "I" and to speak in the manner and tone of the person you have been assigned.

(List student names after each character)

- Louisa Gradgrind
- Mr. Bounderby
- Sissy Jupe
- Mr. Gradgrind
- Mrs. Gradgrind

Debate prompt—This prompt provides one example of how to ask students to make an argument in discussion.

Example: In higher education, there are more female than male students. At the University of Washington, 47% of undergraduate students are male and 53% are female. The growing gender gap has caused schools around the country to look at their admission process and consider options for attracting more male students.

For discussion, debate the following statement:

"The University of Washington should make changes to its admission process to reduce the gender gap."

- If your last name begins with A-L, you will support this statement in the debate.
- If you last name begins with M-Z, you will argue against this statement.

Use evidence from our readings to support the position you have been assigned.

Reading response prompt—These types of prompts are helpful for encouraging discussion supported by examples.

Example: During the time in which Jane Austen's Emma was set, the Napoleonic Wars were tearing Europe apart. Yet, her novel focuses on the trials and tribulations of young, wealthy people falling in love. Due to this choice of focus, critics have commented that the novel lacks a significant message and does not address the important issues of the day (think of Charlotte Bronte's critique).

For this discussion, you will identify important issues that are discussed in Emma. Find a passage (6-8 lines) that you feel captures the central message of the novel. Type the passage at the beginning of your post. Then explain why you selected this passage and discuss what it reveals about the novel's message. At the end of your posting, use your analysis of this passage to respond to the critique that Austen does not discuss important issues. You can agree or disagree with this criticism.

Concept prompt—These prompts can be used to help students develop conceptual understandings.

Example: Using the criteria we have developed in class for a true "revolution," provide an example of a historical event that you believe either meets these criteria or does not. Then respond to a classmate's post: categorize their event as an example or non-example of a revolution and include your reasoning (you may need to do some research). The goal of this discussion is to expand and strengthen our understanding of what constitutes a revolution in history.

Question prompt—An example of a prompt that encourages further discussion and posting.

Example: Post a question for your classmates. After you have posted your question, read and respond to at least three questions that your classmates have posted.

Sample student question to classmates: Are private or public schools better? Do you think that there are more benefits in a private school or a public school? Is one safer than the other? Does one have more opportunities than the other?

Open forum—Creating a permanent discussion area on your board for open discussion of anything related to your course is a good idea.

Example: You can use this area to discuss any topic related to the course or seek clarification about readings or assignments.

<http://depts.washington.edu/swedtech/2011/04/21/using-online-discussion-boards-to-enhance-learning-in-your-class/>