



# Online Discussion Forums

## Planning and facilitating for good quality discussion

### Why consider group discussion?

Educational benefits of group discussion:

- Many people find it more **motivating** to work with others - particularly for online-only courses, where students may feel isolated
- Relating the topic to students' different experiences provides opportunities to illustrate how to **apply principles to different contexts**
- People learn better when required to **explain ideas in their own words** and to compare them to **contrasting viewpoints**
- People learn better when they receive **feedback**; it is rarely possible to give all students personal feedback, but in a group, they may receive feedback from peers and can observe the feedback others receive too.
- Good **communication and argumentation skills** are valuable in their own right, and will make future discussion more effective.

### Is a 'blended' approach possible?

Consider providing opportunities for both face-to-face and online discussion:

- Different people find it easier to express themselves via different media. Sometimes, people who are shy in a group are much more confident sharing their thoughts in writing - they may find it easier to have time to consider what they want to say.
- However, students with slower reading or writing speeds, or who speak English as a second language, may find it off-putting to have to read so much text. It takes much longer to write than it does to speak.
- Face-to-face meetings offer better opportunities for learners to develop social connections and build group cohesion.
- Online discussion allows more time for reflection and critical thinking.
- Online forums are a searchable archive to refer back to. This may inhibit some students from posting semi-formed ideas. On the other hand it's an opportunity for them to practice the kind of thinking and language expected of them in this subject.
- Online forums give learners greater flexibility to participate where and when it suits them; but some students may have difficulty finding an appropriate time and space to concentrate and prefer having a scheduled time.
- Teachers often end up dominating face-to-face discussions as students look to them to provide the correct information for them to record and learn. In an online discussion, it may be easier for the teacher to initiate discussion and then step back, just prompting or correcting when necessary so that as many students as possible express their ideas.

### Group size

Aim for **8 to 15 people** in an online discussion group – this should provide enough diversity of opinion, without generating too much text for all the participants to read.

## Decide on the purpose of your discussion... and therefore the structure/task

Which of the potential benefits described above is a priority for your course or programme? Try to focus on something that will also have obvious value to the students as well (see Motivation below).

### Why is a task needed?

Students often 'talk past' each other in discussion groups: they may offer their own opinions and experiences without really engaging with other people's; they may just offer superficial feedback on other people's contributions without engaging in critical debate - often people feel it's politer to agree and be positive.

Setting a task to complete or roles to play helps push them to really engage with the material in ways that help build conceptual understanding: explaining ideas in their own words and trying to integrate different theories or viewpoints.

### Ideas for different ways to use discussion forums and tasks to set:

#### ✓ Quick wins:

- *Building conceptual understanding*, e.g. **summarising readings**; or **applying principles** to real life - helps if group has varied personal experiences.
- *Peer feedback* e.g. students share their project plan and comment on at least two peers' plans.
- *Simple information-sharing*, e.g. general FAQ; place to share links and resources.
- *Building sense of community* e.g. sharing personal / professional experiences; study skills support



#### Next steps:

- *Building complex conceptual understanding*, e.g. **dilemma/open problem/case studies** comparing and trying to resolve *different viewpoints or theories*
- **Competitive debate** - good for *critical thinking* but less effective than more constructive tasks above, as the focus on winning can distract people from considering all ideas put forward properly.
- *Practising a task or skill* that will be set as a marked assignment – e.g. **critical review of a paper / critical reflection on professional experience** – *peer feedback* helps people identify strengths and weaknesses of their own attempts/performance too.
- **Complex problem solving** – comparing own approach to other people's (if there's not just one right way) ; people could be prevented from viewing others' posts until they've submitted one themselves.
- *Critical thinking or reflection* – try to clarify what this means in your subject and set specific requirements.



#### Effective investment

- *Collaboration* e.g. working on a **complex problem in small groups**.
- Understanding and integrating *different perspectives*, e.g. **case study with role-play by disciplines** (students each assigned a professional role)
- **Conversational roles**, i.e. assigning roles such as elaborator, summarizer, devil's advocate, new ideas.

## What will motivate students to use the discussion forum?

- **Clear purpose that relates to course aims**
- **Coaching and encouragement** – self-confidence plays an important part in motivation.
- Responses from other students can be very motivating.

### Will you assess?

The benefit of assessing contributions is that students may take the discussion more seriously, and be given clearer criteria for good quality contributions. A simple **participation mark/requirement** is also common.

The risk with either approach is that students become more strategic in their contributions instead of engaging genuinely with the topic. Small credit may not be sufficient motivation for the effort required to engage fully.

## What do students need to know before they start?

### 1. Clear expectations for the task

- **How much** to contribute? E.g. two short posts could take around 30 minutes (excluding preparatory reading).
- **By when** should they post their contributions? Does that allow time afterwards to read and respond to others?
- Should they attempt to read everything posted? E.g. reading two posts of 12 other group members could add 2 hours to the task!
- **How often** should they log in? How quickly do they need to respond to each other?
- Tips on technical features that could help avoid communication overload? E.g. switching to daily digest emails, using lists of activity since last log in; using search feature.

### 2. Guidance and examples on what makes a good post in this subject

✓ **Quick win:** Share anonymous examples of good (and *nearly good*) posts from the previous year

👣 **Next steps:** Devise an assessment rubric, e.g. see <http://rhchp.regis.edu/hce/hce430/discussionrubric.pdf>  
Set an initial activity asking them to create their *own* rubric

### 3. General netiquette

✓ **Quick wins:** Share a few essential bullet points / link to a video on netiquette  
Acknowledge that online discussion may be new or uncomfortable for many students, even if they are used to interacting online socially, and encourage members to support one another.

👣 **Next steps:** Set an initial activity asking them to create their *own* netiquette guidelines

- Adapting to informal but permanent medium - some may be hesitant to express themselves, others may need to re-read before posting to ensure their writing is clear and the tone is appropriate.

### 4. General discussion and argumentation skills and issues

- **Criticism** - importance of challenging ideas constructively and respectfully, and accepting feedback constructively.
- **Personal beliefs** – how appropriate is it to bring political or religious values into an educational forum? Is it a matter of *how* opinions are expressed?
- **Confidentiality** - what should students expect? How are they permitted to use each others' comments?

💰 **Effective investment:** If discussion forums become a key teaching technique throughout the course, it may be worth investing time in a generic critical thinking and argument skills session at the beginning.

## Setting the right social climate for discussion

Some preparatory exercises are needed to help participants establish connections with other group members and build some trust in the group, especially if they only know each other online.

The aim is not necessarily that lasting friendships form, but that the students will feel comfortable enough to engage in *critical discussion* – to *express their ideas* and have them challenged - the aspects of group discussion most likely to drive learning.

The tutor may need to explain why these warm-up activities are important and also model the type of interactions that help build the right kind of climate.

### ✓ **Quick wins:** Choose an icebreaker exercise that helps establish commonality and respect

For a new group, discovering something in common with other group members, whether in backgrounds or interests, helps spark conversation and rapport. Knowing other group members have similar professional/personal backgrounds can make people feel more comfortable interpreting others' posts or sharing examples from their own context.

Respect becomes particularly important in cases where there is nothing obvious in common, and if a natural rapport doesn't spark up.

- For a group with diverse backgrounds, ask them to talk about their aims for the course - **shared aims** can help them draw together as a group
- It can be useful to spend a bit of time exploring any differences in common terms or professional systems used in different regions to avoid misinterpretation later in the discussion.
- Ask people to share something about themselves they're proud of to help spark **respect**.



### **Next steps:** Consider a further exercise to help build trust

If you're planning to get the students to tackle difficult or controversial topics, it could help to include another social exercise to help build trust a few weeks later. The purpose is not to encourage them to start sharing personal secrets, just to feel safe enough to take more intellectual risks, e.g. ask a silly question, admit confusion or test out semi-formed ideas, and to develop a 'thicker skin' to tolerate disagreement.

- You might ask them to share what they've found most difficult about the course so far and try to help another person with a topic they've found difficult.

## What kind of coaching and support might students need?

As well as explicit instructions and examples at the outset, students may need ongoing prompts and demonstrations of how to engage with other people's ideas in a critical, yet respectful way, plus feedback on how well they're doing.

The challenge is to establish a 'restrained presence'. Students often look to the teacher for the 'right' answer and the teacher may need to really take a step back to allow students the space to answer each others' questions and take intellectual risks, without feeling too closely monitored.

### Questioning techniques

- Use questions to prompt the students to explain their thinking and challenge each others' thinking
- Try to direct their attention to the important aspects of the problem or key concepts, rather than outright explaining or summarising for them.
- Push for further detail in their explanations, and clarifications.



**Effective investment:** Train postgraduates to help with these coaching tasks.