

A New Look at Managing Online Discussions

Discussion forums are ubiquitous in online classes. A real benefit of online discussions is that afford every student the opportunity to participate. Like any tool, they can be used in a variety of ways:

- Facilitate class introductions
- Monitor student understanding of key concepts
- Verify reading assignments or pre-work completed
- Engage students in a topic
- Activate prior learning
- Promote student reflection
- Foster collaboration & cooperation
- Stimulate debate
- Encourage meta-cognition
- Support peer review
- Advance critical thinking



Guiding Questions

- What are different tools and strategies I can use to manage my class?
- How can I apply them in my classroom?
- Where can I go to learn more?

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A New Look at Managing Online Discussions

Overview

Discussion forums in an online class are an essential tool. Discussions are a shared space that allow both instructors and students to share information with each other. In some learning management systems, a discussion may be the only way for students to share information with each other. In D2L, discussions are organized as forums, topics, threads, and replies.

- **Forums**

A forum is a simply a grouping of topics. A forum is required before a topic can be created.

- **Topics**

Topics are what starts a discussion. It is a written prompt defined by the instructor.

The screenshot shows the 'Discussions' page in D2L. At the top, there are navigation links for 'Discussions List', 'Subscriptions', 'Group and Section Restrictions', and 'Statistics'. Below these are buttons for 'New' and 'More Actions'. A filter section shows 'Filter by: Unread Unapproved' and a 'Hide All Topics' dropdown. The main content area is titled 'General Issues or Questions' and 'FORUM'. It displays a table with columns for 'Topic', 'Threads', 'Posts', and 'Last Post'. Two topics are listed: 'DISCUSSION: General Questions' with 6 threads and 13 posts, and 'DISCUSSION: Preliminary Questions' with 14 threads and 30 posts. Each topic has a brief description and a 'Start a New Thread' button.

- **Threads**

Threads are created when a student responds to the topic prompt provided by the instructor. Instructors can add threads as well.

The screenshot shows a detailed view of a thread within a 'DISCUSSION: Preliminary Questions' forum. The thread is titled 'Prelim Question - Jay' and was posted by Jay Patel on Jul 6, 2018 at 10:59 AM. The content of the thread asks, 'Is there a certain setback for those whom have not taken Admin Law?'. Below the question, there are statistics: 0 Unread, 1 Reply, and 11 Views. The thread was last posted on Jul 6, 2018 at 3:05 PM by Creighton Miller. Below the thread, another thread titled 'Julie Michael - Question' is visible, posted by Julie Michael on Jul 5, 2018 at 10:04 PM. The thread content reads, 'I met with Barbara before enrolling in the course. She gave me good insight and answered my questions then. I don't have anymore questions...yet.'

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- **Replies**

A reply is created when a student or instructor responds to a previous student's posted message or thread.

The screenshot shows a discussion forum interface. At the top, there are navigation links for 'Discussions List', 'View Topic', and 'View Thread'. A user profile for 'Jay Patel' is shown next to the thread title 'Prelim Question - Jay'. The thread content asks, 'Is there a certain setback for those whom have not taken Admin Law?'. Below the thread is a 'Reply to Thread' button. A reply from 'Creighton Miller' is shown below, dated 'Jul 6, 2018 3:05 PM'. The reply text discusses the difficulty of understanding administrative law without prior knowledge and mentions the APA (Administrative Procedure Act) and its role in promulgating rules.

A discussion forum can be used throughout a course to serve different purposes at different times.

Learning Experience Outline Component	Possible Use of Discussion Board
Preparation	An ice breaker can be used to prepare students to work with their other classmates.
Engagement	A low stakes discussion can be used for fun to engage students in a topic.
Introduction	A discussion can be used to activate prior learning or to help the instructor discern gaps in students' foundation of prerequisite skills or knowledge.
Knowledge	Discussions can be used to convey or distribute informational items collected by students.
Understand	Students can view a video and discuss the relationship with other course materials.
Apply	Students can work as a group to prepare an assignment as part of a jigsaw to share with the group.
Show	Students can demonstrate a learned skill to share with their peers.
Analyze	Students can investigate a topic and provide their conclusions for discussion with their peers.
Evaluate Content	Students can post projects for peer review.
Create/Synthesize	Students can record presentations and post videos.
Interact	Students are encouraged to reply and respond to their peer's posts.
Summarize	At the end of the unit, a discussion can be used to summarize key take-aways.
Self-Reflection	At the end of a course, students can provide a reflection on application of course content and intended future use.
Assessment of Student Learning	The depth and breadth of student understanding can be assessed.

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Role of the Instructor

It's important for the instructor to establish guidelines to students on their expectations for participation in the class discussions. Some areas to consider include:

- **Rubric**
Provide a rubric for discussions
- **Informal vs. formal writing**
Define how formal the writing needs to be in student posts.
- **Citations**
Determine whether formal citations are required
- **Netiquette**
Provide guidelines on appropriate netiquette

Instructors can engage with discussions at different levels. In most cases, students benefit from instructors participating in discussions.

- No intervention
- Corrections Only
- Redirection
- Leading discussion
- Socratic method

Role of the Student

By default, it is the student's role to read posts and to reply to their classmates. Students may also:

- Moderate discussions
- Summarize or recap discussions

For students who finish a discussion early, it can be beneficial to remind them to return to the discussion subsequent posts to gain a full view of the entire discussion.

The Ice Breaker

In an online course, interaction between instructors and students does not happen organically. Extra steps must be taken to allow relationships to develop. It is best practice for students to participate in an ice breaker at the beginning of an online course.



Exploration

1. Visit the three sites below or websites you've found to identify different ideas for online ice breakers.
 - **Adult Virtual Icebreakers**
<https://sites.google.com/site/adultonlineteachingstrategies/virtualicebreakers/adult-virtual-icebreakers>
 - **Ice Breaker Activities**
<https://ce.uwex.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/IceBreaker.pdf>
 - **5 Creative Icebreakers Assignments for the Online Classroom**
<https://adjunctworld.com/blog/5-creative-icebreakers-assignments-for-the-online-classroom/>
2. Share the ideas you found most interesting in a wiki or shared document:
<https://tinyurl.com/ybn9jv3z>

Selecting Topics

A well-constructed discussion forum and associated topics should directly support the outcomes for the course or the module. The best discussion topics are often open-ended and encourage debate among students.

In many cases, discussions are used to guide student's beyond just reading the textbook and listening to a lecture. Using the levels of Bloom's taxonomy as a guide, you can begin discussion prompts with words that elicit responses from students that demonstrate higher-order thinking skills.

Analyze

determine, appraise, analyze, deconstruct, compare, infer, conclude, distinguish, examine, criticize, focus, debate, distinguish, solve, discriminate, relate, contrast

Evaluate

justify, interpret, recommend, decide, assess, grade, estimate, support, select/choose, criticize, summarize, compare, conclude, debate, evaluate, appraise, relate, contrast, judge, discriminate

Create/Synthesize

create, propose, discover, prepare, generate, modify, imagine, arrange, deduce, explain, construct, argue, suppose, present, pretend, formulate, compose, design, improve, revise, reconstruct, produce, predict, perform, combine, relate, invent, answer, devise, hypothesize

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TYPES OF INEFFECTIVE QUESTIONS

Here are some examples of poorly structured questions from Stanford University (n.d.):

Simple Yes-No

Produces little discussion and encourages guessing.

Example: "Is the Aunt expressing a desire for Gigi to marry?"

Elliptical

Too vague; it is not clear what is being asked.

Examples: "What about the aunt's sexual history?" "Well, what do you think about the Don Juan's values?"

Leading

Conveys the expected answer.

Example: "Don't you think that Colette is condemning the Don Juan figure for his lack of caring?"

Slanted

Closes down student who may not agree with the implied assumption.

Example: "Why are Colette's young women so corrupt?"

Discussion Forum Models

There are many different models or variations for setting up a discussion forum.

Open Forum

In an open forum, there is no prompt set by the instructor. A general issues or questions forum is a type of open forum. In an Accounting class, an open forum might be set up for each module to allow for questions from the students on that week's topic.

Post First

In some cases, instructors do not want students to read what others have posted before the student makes his or her initial post. Discussions forums or topics can be set up to require students to post prior to seeing the rest of the discussion.

Post – Reply

The most commonly used model is where students post a thread in response to an instructor prompt, and their peers reply to their post.

Post – Reply – Respond

In this model, students make a post to start the discussion. Classmates reply with questions, and the initial author of the post responds to the questions.

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Peer Review

Students post as individuals or a group project for review. Other students review the project and offer feedback.

Unfolding Discussions

In this model, a series of discussions are set up to mimic stages of Socratic questioning. Students must respond to the first set discussion prompts before continuing to the next set.

- Clarification
- Probing Assumptions
- Probing Rationale
- Questioning Viewpoints
- Probing Consequences
- Questions on the Question

Class Management

Discussions can be used as tool to implement class management techniques online.

- One Minute Paper
- Muddiest Point
- Focused Listing

These last two models have been documented by Bagshaw (2016).

Delphi

Each student poses a question. Students respond to the questions. Students comment on the responses. Students review and reflect on questions, responses, and comments.

Debate

Students research topic and post individual statement. Students work in groups to post supporting or opposing arguments. Students respond to arguments. Students vote and review conclusions.

Managing Discussions

- **Form Discussion Groups**
If the course has more than 10 students, groups features in the learning management system should be used to create discussion groups of 5-8 students.
- **Stagger Due Dates**
If students are only given one due date, they tend to wait until last moment before posting. As a result, there aren't enough posts to sustain an actual discussion. It is beneficial to have an early date for the initial posts and a later date for the replies. For example, in a one-week module, the initial post to discussion post is due Thursday at midnight, and all the replies are due on Sunday.

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Facilitating Discussions

In a discussion, the instructor can scaffold the discussion and help students deepen their understanding by prompting students to clarify their posts, provide evidence, consider cause and effect, probe assumptions, compare and contrast, provide perspective, share personal experience, and consider implications and consequences. The list below was compiled by B. Jean Mandernach (2016).

Clarification Prompts

- Do you see gaps in ___ reasoning?
- I'm not sure I understand ____. Could you explain it another way?
- Tell me more about ____. Can you give me an example?
- What makes you think ___?
- What do you mean by ___?
- Could you explain that further?

Evidence Prompts

- Can you give an example of ___?
- Does this question lead to other questions or issues?
- How do you see ___ in everyday life?
- What evidence/reasons can you give ___?
- Can we break this question down further?
- Why did the author ___?

Cause and Effect Prompts

- Do you think ___ could happen again? Why or why not?
- How could that have been prevented?
- What are some reasons ___?
- Why do you think ___ happened?

Probing Assumption Prompts

- What does this answer assume?
- Is this always the case? What assumptions does this include?
- Imagine that you had to take another perspective on ____, what would the other side say?
- What assumptions does this argument entail?

Compare/Contrast Prompts

- How are ___ and ___ alike/different?
- How does ___ remind you of ___?
- What is ___ similar to?
- Reason and Evidence Prompts
- Can you give me an example of this?
- Are these reasons sufficient?
- What evidence exists to support this claim?

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Perspective Prompts

- ___ expressed a different opinion. Are there others?
- What would someone who disagrees say?
- Do you have a different interpretation?
- Suppose ___. Would that still be true? Why or why not?
- What do you think ___ was thinking when ___?
- Would that still happen if ___?

Personal Experience Prompts

- Has anyone else had a similar ___?
- Has anything like ___ ever happened to you?
- In what way are you alike/different from ___?
- What are some of the reasons this was/was not a good idea?
- What better choices do you think could be made?

Implications and Consequences Prompts

- What does this answer imply?
- If this was true, what else would have to be true?
- What is an alternative to this perspective?
- What effect would that have?

Video Discussions

Video features in D2L

In D2L, students can include a video in their discussion posts. Whenever students are presented with a D2L edit box, they can click on the first icon to **Insert Stuff**. Next, they can click on **Video Note**. They can record a 3-minute video.

FlipGrid

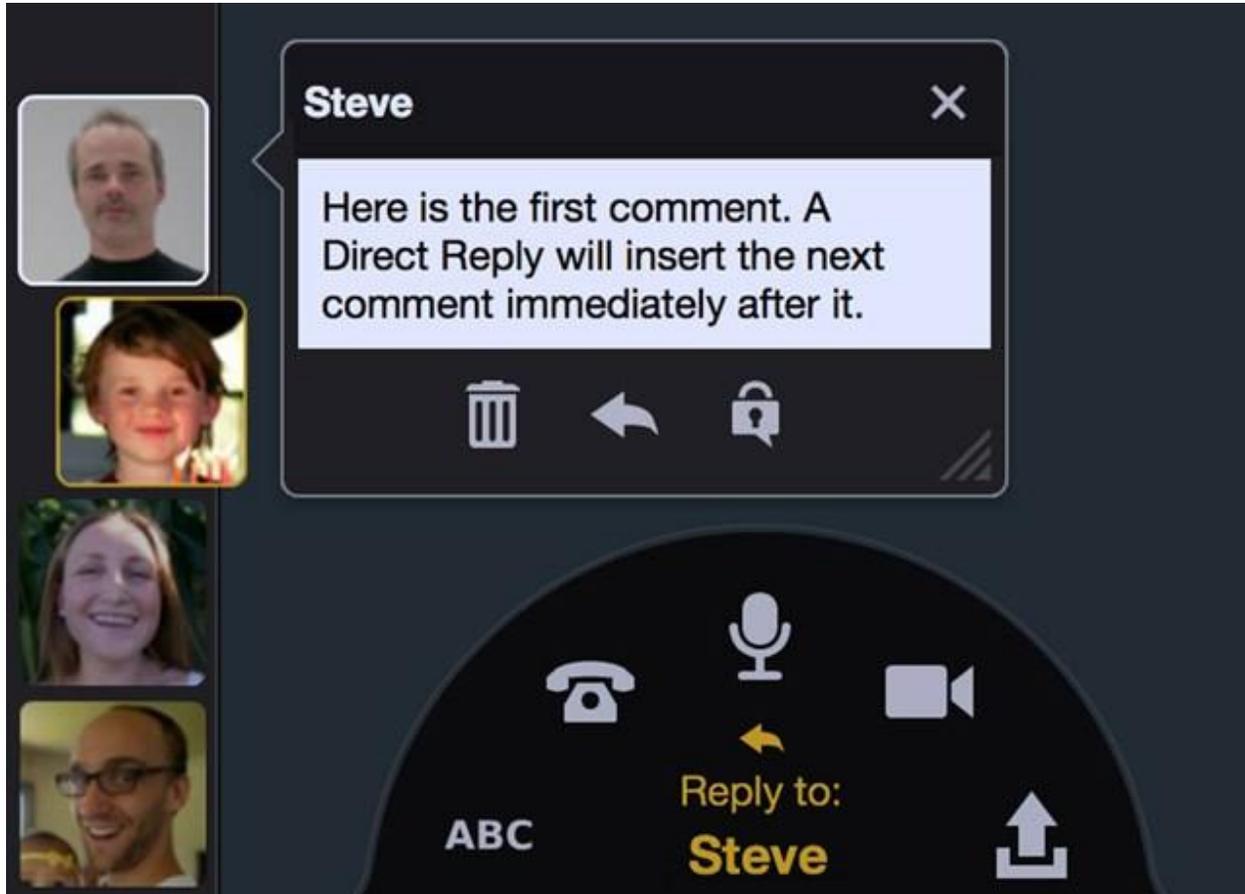
FlipGrid is a free online tool that supports video discussions (<http://www.flipgrid.com>).



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VoiceThread

VoiceThread is a subscription-based service that allows for multimedia threaded discussions (<https://voicethread.com/>).



Other Tips

- Create a General Issues or Questions forum
- If students are new to online learning, provide resources on posting to discussion forums.
- Give students individualized positive feedback. Guide them to better performance.
- Remember to check discussion group enrollment at the start of a new class.

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Resources

[The Importance of Ice-Breakers in Online Classes](#)

From Jessica Mansbach, Northwestern, School of Professional Studies, guidance on using online ice-breakers.

<https://dl.sps.northwestern.edu/blog/2015/07/the-importance-of-icebreakers-in-online-classes/>

[Adult Virtual Icebreakers](#)

A compilation of ideas for online ice-breakers by Dr. Kerry Rice, Boise State University.

<https://sites.google.com/site/adultonlineteachingstrategies/virtualicebreakers/adult-virtual-icebreakers>

[The Core Rules of Netiquette](#)

Netiquette rules excerpted from the book *Netiquette* by Virginia Shea.

<http://www.albion.com/netiquette/corerules.html>

[Improving the Use of Discussion Boards](#)

From Worcester Polytechnic Institute, Academic Technology Center, guidance on improving the use of discussion boards.

<https://www2.palomar.edu/users/hdavis/psyc100/Blackboard/Bb@Palomar/Improving%20Discussion%20Boards.PDF>

[Mastering Online Discussion Board Facilitation: Resource Guide](#)

A very comprehensive overview of managing discussions forums developed by TeacherStream, LLC and provided through Edutopia. (This is an older resource, so many of the internal links no longer work.)

<https://backend.edutopia.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/stw/edutopia-onlinelearning-mastering-online-discussion-board-facilitation.pdf>

[Moderating Effective Online Discussions - 39 Tips](#)

From Arizona State University, College of Extended Education Distance Learning and Technology, instructive tips of moderating discussion forums.

resources/39_Tips_Moderating_Online_Discussions.pdf



Exploration

1. Take a few minutes to conduct your own search related to discussions.
2. Share with the group any insights you gained from the experience.

References

- Bagshaw, M. (2016). Activities Using Discussion Forums. Retrieved November 11, 2019, from <https://blogs.staffs.ac.uk/bestpracticemodels/2016/05/11/discussion-forum/>
- Mandernach, B. J. (2016). What are the Best Questioning Strategies for Enhancing Online Discussions? Handout from Magna 20 Minute Mentor presentation.
- Rice, T. (n.d.). Adult Virtual Icebreakers. Retrieved November 11, 2019, from <https://sites.google.com/site/adultonlineteachingstrategies/virtualicebreakers/adult-virtual-icebreakers>
- Stanford University. (n.d.). Designing Effective Discussion Questions. Retrieved November 11, 2019, from <https://teachingcommons.stanford.edu/resources/teaching/student-teacher-communication/designing-effective-discussion-questions>.

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Example Rubric

Criteria	Excellent	Good	Needs Improvement
Quality of Discussion	Response reflects student knowledge of the content and evidence of deeper reflection and analysis. Provided thought-provoking comments to further the conversation. 10 pts.	Response reflects student knowledge and evidence of having completed assignment. Interacts freely. 8.5 pts.	Response does not reflect evidence of student knowledge. Does not participate; seems indifferent. 0 pts.
Supporting Evidence	Provides at least one outside resource and clear reasoning to support his or her position or comments. 7 pts.	Uses personal experience, but not references to readings or research. 5 pts.	Includes no references or supporting evidence. 0 pts.
Etiquette and Respectful Communication	The student response reflects respect towards other students. Encourages and promotes the ideas of others. 2 pts.	The student response reflects respect towards other students. 1 pt.	Student responses could be misinterpreted or taken as offensive. 0 pts.
Timeliness	Initial post made at least 48 hours before the due date. 2 pts.	Initial post made 24 hours or fewer before due date/time. Replies made to two or more classmates. 2 pts.	Initial post late. 0 pts.
Participation	Replies made to two or more classmates. 2 pts.	Reply made to one classmate. 2 pts.	No replies made. 0 pts.
Writing Style/APA use	No grammatical or spelling errors. Citations used APA style. 2 pts.	One or two small errors in grammar, spelling, or APA style. 1 pt.	Several grammatical, spelling, or APA style errors. 0 pts.