# Interactive teaching using Discussion Boards

Online discussion boards are a staple of distance learning and with well-defined links to the requirements of the module alongside an enthusiastic facilitator they can be a highly effective learning tool.

There are a number of things to consider when using a discussion board:

1. Cohort size.
2. Delivering a session - its purpose, management, roles and starting and completing.
3. Assessing the discussion board.

We consider each of these below and provide some advice and guidance about mechanisms for setting up and managing effective online discussion board events. [Technical advice about setting up Discussion boards in Blackboard can be found at this link.](https://celt.our.dmu.ac.uk/discussion-forum-2/)

## Cohort size.

Online groups of 12-15 students are considered to be the minimum required to maintain sufficient momentum to keep a discussion forum moving, although smaller groups can work effectively on tightly defined tasks. Large group numbers can be sub-divided for specific tasks and activities (see below for more detail) and are less likely to be impacted when individuals do not attend or contribute.

Larger groups can be difficult to manage, particularly if the event has not been thoroughly planned – there is more information about group management in the sections below.

Discussion board sessions can be synchronous or asynchronous at the discretion of the facilitator. However, they are particularly powerful when run asynchronously over a 5 to 10 day period. This gives sufficient time for students to manage technical issues and time away from computers without the event become too drawn out, which can then lose impact.

## Delivering a session – its purpose, management, roles and starting and completion.

### Session purpose.

Debates – Put forward a motion and nominating students to argue, either in support or against. Ensure that you provide clear guidance about your expectations regarding participation and behaviour. Whilst emotive topics are excellent for this type of activity they do need to be very carefully and often sensitively managed. Nevertheless, the outcomes often make them worth the effort.

Project work – create small groups of 3-4 students to review and provide feedback on one another’s progress. This will help to provide a studio-based environment, which is more common in some disciplines than others. The students could provide peer assessment at the end of the module on one another’s overall engagement (Brydon, 2020). Keeping the groups small stops the students from being overwhelmed and providing an end overall grade reduces the immediate pressure of having to add untimely comments (Brydon, 2020).

Discussion to develop a defined outcome – This can be a small or larger group activity where all work toward a single outcome or specified outcomes. For instance, the outcome may be a consensus document or design that provides an agreed student view. This type of work can be both rewarding and challenging for all concerned.

Preliminary discussions - The discussion board can be employed to develop background ideas and understanding in advance of a live teaching and learning event. The live event may then be followed up with second discussion board session to reinforce ideas and understanding.

Follow up to other teaching and learning event – The discussion board can be used to continue and develop facilitated learning following a DMU Replay recorded session, a live face to face event or live Blackboard Collaborate session.

Run alongside other events to give collaboration space – the forum can be used as a space for students to work together to co-create alongside other learning events.

### Session management.

It is crucial that you provide a well-defined scaffold for any session and this could include:

* Set clear rules for behaviour (netiquette).
* The format and purpose of the session (provide learning outcomes).
* The type and level of input that is expected from the participants (be aware that not all students are comfortable engaging in online discussions).
* Timing – start time for first message, the lock time to signify the end of the event and how often the moderator will access the forum (when setting the timing for an asynchronous event give sufficient time for students who may be away or have technical problems to engage (10 days tends to be a good working period).
* What can be expected of the moderator – it is often useful to indicate that the moderator will not respond to all comments made but may include one or two questions as the discussions develop (it is worth noting that input from the academic is often seen as ‘the final word’ by students and so can stifle further discussion).
* Elect students to manage different threads – rotate for a given number of messages posted.
* Elect student summarisers – to post a message that highlights the important points made in the previous 10 to 15 posts. Summaries can be posted within that thread or on a separate shared document (one drive) or wiki. This gives students the opportunity to show engagement and help to embed understanding.
* Subscribe to your forums to receive updates on activity.
* Pin threads and messages to ensure that important information is always readily available.

### Session roles.

It can be helpful to define specific roles within a discussion to help enable students’ to engage with the content. Roles (can be filled by a number of students and or rotate) that can be helpful are:

* Definition of key terms, ideas and theories.
* Identifies key components from resources given in the DMU Resource Lists.
* Finds appropriate external sources of relevant information.
* Identifies relevant ideas and theories.
* Connect to social constructs, focuses on the wider picture
* Summariser – see comments above (session management).

### Session start.

#### Preliminary (warm up) activities.

It is very useful to include some form of warm up exercise that helps students to become accustomed to using this type of space as a component of their academic practice. It can also help to build a community, which is particularly important if there is an expectation that some output will be co-created.

Always set out your expectations regarding general netiquette (online behaviour) at this stage.

Some possible warm-up exercises (can be run in a separate thread):

* Provide students with an image to write a brief serious or humorous tag line (give a word limit).
* Ask students to describe in a limited number of words what they can see out of their window. Or what they would like to be able to see out of their window (you may need to restate netiquette guidance here!).
* Ask students to describe what they have done this week that has been enjoyable.
* Ask students to describe where they would choose to go on holiday if money and time were no object.

A rule to apply: Do not ask your students to add any detail (personal or otherwise) that you would not be prepared to give yourself and of course, be mindful of GDPR and personal data. The facilitator should fully engage with the warm-up exercise and respond to the posts made by the students.

### Session completion.

Consider how you will feedback to your students after the event, both the learning outcomes and the session engagement. It can be useful to invite student feedback regarding the way that it has been run – did it work from their point of view? The latter can be particularly useful for assessments where a follow up is planned.

## 3. Assessing the discussion board.

As a general rule, student engagement with any online activity is more limited when there is no obvious link to the module outcomes. To counter this, it is useful to use the discussion board work as a formative or summative assessment. In both cases it is important to be absolutely clear with your students about the assessment and marking process.

There are a number of aspects to assessing discussion board activity that both formative and summative have in common.

Blackboard discussion boards do not limit you to text only inputs – DMU Replay video and images can be embedded in posts by staff and students but avoid large file sizes.

How is the event to be graded?:

* Students can be invited to produce a single consensus document, statement or a bulleted list as an outcome. Is this consensus to be developed in a separate thread, wiki or one drive document?
* Grading input to the discussion – number and quality of comments made (it is useful let students know that the forum discussions should be similar to a face to face conversation. The speaker will tend to respond to one comment made by another and make one point of their own. It is worth clearly stating that ‘essays’ that try to cover all possible points or ideas will not be highly marked – word limits are useful for this.
* If there are a limited number of points to be made it can be useful to asks students to evidence their thoughts – this can offer greater variability the group.

As a general rule – Address one point, Make one point, Evidence one point.

* If evidence is to be provided is this personal or from research.
* Researched evidence to support a point may need to be referenced in the forum message – and graded.
* If students are to be invited to write an extended / descriptive answer outside of the discussion it can be useful to invite them to provide an overview of their own input to the discussion and how it impacted the outcome, if at all.
* It may be appropriate to ask students to describe how and if (citing the messages / evidence) that caused them to change their views of a particular subject.
* Students can be invited to self or peer mark all or certain aspects of the event.
* If you have a very large group, do you want all students to undertake the same discussion as one group or split. The large student group may be split to work on different aspects of a problem where each group has a separate outcome for consideration further consideration.
* Do you want or need an alternative for those students who are unable to contribute through personal or technical reasons.
* Provide a clear rubric for the marking process.

Specific aspects related to formative and summative assessments are considered below:

### Formative assessment

Is this to be a practice event for a summative assessment based on discussion board work that is to come?

Will the outcome link to a separate summative assessment?

Structure the discussion to provide options that clearly promote learner autonomy or co-creation.

Formative assessments give students with poor writing skills a chance to practice, particularly important if this aspect is to be graded in summative work.

### Summative assessment

It is always useful to provide a formative or test assessment that will give your students a taste of what is to come.

You may decide that input to a formative assessment can be used if technical issues stop a student from interacting in the summative version. (The student would still be able to answer written questions associated with the summative forum by reading all posts).