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## Using Discussion Boards

### Explanation:

A discussion board is an online tool which allows groups to communicate asynchronously, a discussion board is made up of forums which are folders containing messages on a particular subject, forums contain threads which are a series of messages relating to a particular question or topic and each individual contribution to a conversation is called a message.



### Benefits of Using Discussion Boards:

- Students can continue an in class discussion outside normal time-tabled classes.
- All students can participate so they are democratic.
- Some students are not confident enough to speak out in face to face classes but are willing to contribute to discussion boards.
- They give students time to reflect on their thoughts before contributing.
- They allow students to work on their reply and check for grammar and spelling before posting - particularly useful for students whose first language is not the one used in the discussion.
- They allow students to practice their writing skills in a more informal way.
- They offer peer learning opportunities - and this takes some of the workload away from the tutor.
- They foster a learning community, "As new technologies emerge, instructional designers and educators have unique opportunities to foster interaction and collaboration among learners, thus creating a true learning community." (Beldarrain, 2006, p.140).

### Good Practice Using Discussion Boards in Education:

- Model good practice – put the first post up yourself to encourage students to contribute model the language, style, length, etc that you would like the student to adopt.
- Make expectations clear, let the students know how often you want them to contribute and make it clear when you will be checking and responding.
- Access the discussion forums each day in order to keep up with the conversation.
- Post frequently to suggest postings are being read however, allow learners time for reflection postings can be as simple as expressing appreciation, agreement, support and encouragement you should avoid being sharp or overly critical.
- Maintain a focused discussion and periodically summarize what has or needs to be done.
- Encourage student dialog by asking thought-provoking questions that stimulate in-depth reflective discussions and hold students responsible for their thinking.
- Do not respond too quickly to a posting in order to provide the opportunity for students to respond first.
- Instead of mostly making statements or directly answering questions which will likely terminate productive discourse ask probing questions and provide encouragement.
- Provide closure to discussion threads after discussion topics have run their course or assign specific students responsibility for providing closure, attend to problems that can disrupt student discussions particularly aggressive communication that can silence some students.
- Deal tactfully and privately with students who dominate discussions or who remain silent perhaps by phone conversation or e-mail in order to create a more equitable communication environment.
- Get students to know each other and learn about their respective backgrounds and learning goals.
- Create a variety of social learning activities that allow multiple opportunities for demonstrating knowledge and skill proficiencies designed to address the diverse range of learning preferences and communication patterns that students bring to instructional environments.
- Recognise and respond to communication patterns that can silence some students for example, recognise putdowns and alienating or competitive dialog and respond privately to offending students to encourage them to be more inclusive.



- Encourage all students to participate in discussions use the telephone or e-mail to privately confer with students who remain silent in order to determine the cause.
- Encourage use of a connected voice and teamwork for example, a grading rubric can be used to describe instructor expectations for students to use a connected voice where cooperation and interdependence are stressed over competition and independence.
- Discourage competition among students as competition creates both winners and losers, competition and comparisons can create hurt feelings and alienate and silence sensitive students encourage and reward group activities and collaborative efforts, Damon and Phelps (1989) for example provide empirical evidence that collaborative peer learning activities are most likely to generate productive discussion and create close engagement when competition is discouraged and collective planning and discussion are encouraged.
- Intervene indirectly to equalize students status in the classroom by raising the status off those students with lower status by recognizing the importance of their roles and creating problems or discussion topics that require multicultural perspectives.
- Publicly recognize the work students have accomplished paying particular attention to low status students through actions such as giving praise, citing student contributions and assigning significant roles in group projects
- Online courses need to be designed so that they provide motivation for students to engage in productive discussions and clearly describe what is expected perhaps in the form of a discussion rubric additionally, instructors need to provide discussion forums for socio-emotional discussions that have the goal of nurturing a strong sense of community within the course as well as group discussion forums for content-and task-oriented discussions that centre on authentic topics. In order to facilitate discussions effectively instructors should generate a social presence in the virtual classroom, avoid becoming the centre of all discussions by emphasizing student-student interactions and attend to issues of social equity arising from use of different communication patterns by culturally diverse students," (Rovai, 2007, p.77).

### Pitfalls to Avoid When Using Discussion Boards:

Although asynchronous CMC has its strengths such as reflective versus spontaneous discussion, Mason and Lockwood (1994) identify several potential weaknesses of these computer conferencing systems, such as an overwhelming number of messages to read, frequent domination of discussions by a small number of students, increased chance of misunderstandings and reduced student motivation to interact. However, skilful facilitation of online discussions by the instructor can minimize and even eliminate these weaknesses." (Rovai, 2007, p. 78).

### Useful Links to Websites or Resources

[Written guide on how to create a Discussion Board in UniLearn](#)

[Written guide on how to use a Discussion Board in UniLearn](#)

[Screencast on how to create a Discussion Board in UniLearn](#)

[Screencast on how to use a Discussion Board in UniLearn](#)

Promoting learning through asynchronous discussion:

<http://cammybean.kineo.com/2010/02/edtechtalk-episode-5-promoting-learning.html>

Discussion management tips for online educators

<http://elearnmag.acm.org/featured.cfm?aid=1621155>

Extending the Classroom into Cyberspace: The Discussion Board

<http://www-usr.rider.edu/~suler/psycyber/extendclass.html>

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