Have you tried
Discussion Boards

THE UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE AUSTRALIA

Why use discussion boards

Discussions boards are one way to build a social learning environment in online spaces. This social space allows students to explore a diversity of viewpoints and to share their knowledge with peers.

Collaboration and community building in the online space can also have social and emotional benefits that engage students on a personal level and allow them to extend themselves to higher order engagement, critical thinking and knowledge building.

Discussion boards can also benefit teaching staff as the burden of answering every student question is dispersed amongst the learning community (with oversight and moderation of instructors), and answers posted by instructors are able to benefit all learners monitoring the boards.

Common discussion board topics

- **Course Logistics** – At the beginning of the course create boards where students can ask questions about the running of the course eg. Clarifying field trip dates, due dates for assessments, etc.
- **Weekly discussion topic** – where a new discussion board is opened each week and students answer a given question and respond to 2-3 other students
- **FAQ for course topics** –boards that allow students to ask questions about specific course topics throughout the semester
- **Group assignment discussions**– students are placed in groups where access is restricted to those in an assignment group.
- **Discussion as Assessment** – assessment boards can be used as an assessment item. This can encourage students to participate in social engagement while also providing guidance and modelling for how to participate in an online discussion

Encouraging participation

Tip	Details
Acknowledge first responses quickly	Create momentum in discussion to build the online learning community
Foster a warm environment	Help students feel relaxed. Use students' names. Be outgoing, positive, and visible. Encourage an informal, conversational style, stimulate a bit of social chit-chat to help build relationships.
Respond to comments that have not received a response	Help move the discussion along with questions for other students to consider and ensure that all contributions are validated. Nobody likes to be left hanging.

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Model how to be a productive participant and encourage student interaction	Group members look to you to set the tone, style, frequency, and depth of discussion. Be the first to post and say something provocative or ask a probing question to get the ball rolling, connect different students' ideas, and point out contrasts.
Model how to give feedback	Critiques of postings should say something positive first and end with suggestions for further thought.
Be present	A strong leader is checking in and making postings at least 2-3 times each week. But try not to dominate; let the group have a voice, too.
Ask probing questions	- How are you defining the term....? - What reasons/evidence is there for that point? - Why do you agree/disagree with that point? - Could you clarify your comment? - What alternatives are there to your idea? - If you were to take the other side of the argument, what evidence might you raise? - If you were [name an influential figure discussed in class] what might you say about that point?
Encourage reluctant participants	Find out what the problem is [e.g., technical issues, lack of interest, or lack of confidence]. Praise any efforts made and show them they are not anonymous. If lack of confidence is the issue, engage in a private email exchange about the topic until they make a comment that you can encourage them to post in the discussion [this takes time and effort – feel free to involve TA or instructor in this process].
Focus dominant participants' energy	Recognise the outstanding contributions and enthusiasm of vocal participants. Ask them to reflect longer before posting. Assign them as mentors to less active students.
Reward quality over quantity	Tell good contributors when they've done a good job. Encourage contributions that further the discussion and stimulate thinking, rather than number of postings.
Summarise discussion	Weave comments together regularly, refer to specific comments, interpret main points of view, and provide a general summary to give a solid feeling of one discussion ending before the next begins.