

Facilitating effective online discussions using IVLE

Instructors who are new to using online discussions often wonder:

- When and for what will an online discussion be useful?
- How do I get the students actively involved in online discussions?
- How do I keep my students engaged in these discussions?
- Is there an acceptable delay before one can expect replies to a question?
- How long should I wait before I interfere in a discussion?

When facilitating and managing online discussions, it is important to strike a balance in your interaction to make the forum focus on learning issues while keeping it interesting. Students may value online discussions if it increases the level of confidence to actively engage in extended discussions and debate, and can interest them to pursue ideas beyond the 'boundaries' of the module itself.

Balancing your workload

The first time you start using a discussion forum would demand more of your time when compared to your subsequent attempts. You can manage your discussion forum by:

1. Preempting questions

Make regular announcements or provide relevant text and readings to the module.

2. Taking time to induct students to the forums during the first two weeks

Be prepared to spend some time during the first week helping students access and navigate the forum. Do not expect all your students to be successfully reading and participating in the first week of the term.

3. Setting aside specific times to monitor/ respond to the postings

This can help you to plan how much time you will take to respond to posts. Logging in more than once a day can be ineffective as there may not be any new contributions to read while waiting several days may result in an overwhelming number of discussion contributions to read. Responding (where necessary) within 24 hours is one way to demonstrate faculty presence in the module.

4. Developing an FAQ section

Supplement your module with an FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) section and regularly update this section throughout the semester as you receive individual questions of relevance from students.



Designing activities for an effective discussion

1. Use structured discussion topics

The use of structured discussion topics allows for a focused development of discussion threads led by the facilitator or appointed moderator and facilitates instructor-learner communication. This type of discussion presents a standard format with established boundaries of (a) presence of a weekly discussion question, (b) prescribed participation, and (c) presence of a moderator. In structured discussions, the instructor provides the topic for discussion, linked to what is happening in the course and effectively setting the agenda on what would be discussed and the parameters of how broad the discussion would be.

2. Use questions that stimulate higher order thinking skills

Use clear, open-ended questions that tap into the higher-order thinking levels of application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation to start conversation threads. In order to support a deep and meaningful dialogue, the initial discussion questions need to be interesting – perhaps even controversial – and allow for multiple perspectives that your students can provide from their own experience. When students have responded to the initial posts and are familiar with the environment, then encourage them to move into more challenging discussions by adding challenging follow-up questions, scenarios and examples.

3. Use groups

Divide your students into small groups of 4-6, using the class groups, tutorial groups, project groups or section groups. The small size makes it easier for all students to participate. Such groups can conduct their own in-depth discussion as a part of a class-wide topic or a topic in its entirety. They could then post their response(s) to the discussion forum which is open to the whole class. Assigning students to a specific workgroup for the duration of the course and giving them the opportunity to participate in various roles during the term – coordinator, time manager, and reporter, for instance, would give the students a good learning experience.

4. Encourage student-generated discussion topics

Encourage student-generated topics as they will increase motivation and support a learner-centered environment. Depending on your classroom dynamics, you might consider providing an alternative space for very informal discussion/conversation of general questions – a virtual coffee shop, for example.

5. Achieve social interaction and community building

Create discussion threads that will allow students get to know each other personally and intellectually.



Recommended practices when using online discussions

1. Create forums for specific topics

Create individual forums for specific topics to reduce cognitive overload and to keep online discussions focused. For example, you could create a general discussion forum (titled “Questions & Answers” or “Help!”) for students to post general questions that they may have about the course to this forum or even a social forum for off-topic discussions. If students submit such general course questions via email, you can ask them to post their questions in the designated forum. Answering the questions in this public discussion forum allows other students to benefit from the responses, eliminates the duplication of email responses, and makes it possible for students to help one another. Make discussion forums available as needed rather than making them all available at the beginning of the course.

2. Don’t plan to respond to all postings

Only respond to those posts that are directed to you, or if your response will contribute to the quality of the discussion.

3. Provide clear and specific requirements for participation

Create “discussion forum guidelines” that addresses requirements related to length, quantity of posts, quality of post, relevance of posts and timeliness. Always grade the topics based on these guidelines.

4. Model expectations when writing your responses

Ensure that the quality and length of your posts are those you expect of your students.

5. Post a summary/feedback comment

Consider posting a summary or feedback comment when the discussion has been going for a few days. You could also rephrase the question if the discussion goes off the topic.

6. Specify due dates for required contributions

If participation or student contributions in an online discussion are required, include the due dates for initial posts and responses in the description.

7. Save discussion threads for viewing offline

You could save all discussion threads or specific topics in a forum to read student contributions offline. These can then be printed or saved for offline viewing.

