

# Reasons to Use Online Discussions

## Students are more likely to utilize critical thinking skills

- Discussion boards are reflective in nature. They force students to read other perspectives and carefully consider a response.
- Online interaction allows for further discussion of a topic. It also provides students with “think time” to reflect on course material and post more thought-out comments to the discussion board.
- Students and instructors often think of comments or questions after the lecture and can post them and discuss these inquiries online.
- Students expand their personal knowledge-base through the back-and-forth engagement and interaction with other classmates sharing insights, perspectives, points-of-view, as well as their personally held information and knowledge.
- Effective forum topics are open-ended and designed to encourage students to take a position on issues. To respond to a forum topic requires organized thought and synthesis of concepts introduced in class. If a student's views were challenged, he or she typically adds carefully considered reasons to back up previous comments.
- Because the forum discussions occur completely online, students have the flexibility to add their input when they are prepared. Some choose to answer questions immediately, while others prefer to consider the responses of others first. Undergraduate students are often much more comfortable discussing topics online after reading the viewpoints of the more experienced students. Students are encouraged to revisit past topics during the course, as their opinions changed.

## Students participate more regularly and in a more thoughtful manner than they would normally do in a face-to-face instructional setting, especially in large-enrollment classes

- Instructors who have used the online format frequently report that more students are able to participate in online forums than in large group classroom discussions.
- In any class of 25-30 students, there will be dominant personalities, and students who may feel intimidated or unmotivated to speak. Therefore discussions, even in small groups, do not allow equal time to all students. In the online forum, each student has a voice that will be heard by anyone who chooses to read his or her comments.
- Students who do not volunteer in class often become “vocal” during online discussions.
- The social aspects of the face-to-face classroom are very intimidating for many students, especially for ESL speakers, new students, and those who are simply shy or quiet.
- Online discussion boards offer these individuals a tool through which they can actively participate in the class without feeling the overwhelming anxiety they may feel with many sets of eyes on them.
- In addition, large-enrollment classes often suffer from a lack of student participation. Online discussion boards provide these classes with a tool through which conversations may take place more fluidly than in a lecture hall of 100 students.

## Students develop a stronger class community

- Because there is a greater propensity for students to interact with one another on a discussion board than there is in a face-to-face setting, class community is often shown to be enhanced.
- Students also have a greater sense that their contributions to the class are valued by their peers and the instructor increasing their connections to each other and facilitating the learning process.
- Positive growth in class community is reflected through a sense of cohesion with other students, a higher degree of trust between students, an increased number of inquiries and questions between students and the instructor, and a general sense that the class is valuable and applicable to student needs.

## Students are more likely to cite research and class readings

- Online discussion provide students opportunities to directly reference course materials, especially if required to do so, resulting in better grounded discussion contributions.
- Online students have access to a wealth of resources to enrich their comments, especially if prompted to incorporate the support of outside sources into their postings.
- As students reflect upon what they want to write in a discussion board posting, they often integrate research or class readings with which they are familiar. This occurs much more frequently in discussion board postings than in face-to-face discussions, largely because of the extra time a student has to think about their response.

### **Students achieve greater cognitive and exploratory learning**

- The use of discussion boards is an active method of learning, contrasted with the traditional lecture model that is much more passive. As many research studies have shown, active learning is more powerful than passive learning at getting students to learn, retain, and apply course content to novel and practical situations.
- This active engagement with course content gives students an enhanced sense of empowerment, ultimately leading to a more interested, motivated, and participatory student.
- Students experience a professional communication process. Participants experience personal and academic gains as result of their communication with their peers. A goal is for the students to value such professional interchange, and seek it out among their colleagues, and for electronic communication to facilitate the process.

### **Students benefits from more individualized learning without instructors having to provide individualized instruction**

- Faculty members spend less time answering questions while providing greater individual access to those answers. In face-to-face classes, questions are almost always posed, sometimes repeatedly, to the instructor, unnecessarily tying up their time. When using a discussion board, however, students often answer each others questions with little or no prompting from the instructor.
- Student comments can be read and validated fairly quickly, showing that you are invested in their ideas.
- Personal responses to forum topics are not limited in time or the length. Students have the freedom to continue dialogues about the topics that interested them most.
- Students have the flexibility to reflect on their thoughts and read the responses of others. Many students have stated that they routinely discussed the forum topics with friends, family and colleagues outside of class before putting their comments online.

### **Students have a greater sense of race and gender-based equality**

- Race and gender-based bias can often creep into face-to-face classes more readily than it can into discussion boards. On a discussion board, the only distinguishing characteristic from which race and/or gender might be drawn from is a participant's name.
- In discussion boards the bias often exhibited towards non-whites and women in face-to-face classes is reduced, resulting in a more instructionally agreeable environment.

### **Other instructional and administrative benefits**

- The online environment lets you easily create small discussion groups within a large class.
- The online format is a convenient way to archive and preserve your course discussions.
- Online discussions can give you feedback prior to or after a class; this feedback may indicate what content students understand and what requires further clarification.
- Online discussions provide a means to effectively evaluate class discussion in ways generally not possible in face-to-face discussion.
- Distinct discussion topics can be managed as individual threads or individual forums to help better manage course content.
- A 45-hour semester places severe limits on the quality of discussions and experiences possible in a course. Often a course is the only one of its type required in a program. The instructor is thus under extreme pressure to provide extensive and meaningful learning. In a three-hour class meeting of an average class size, an equal division of time allots only 5 minutes of discussion per student. Regular forum discussion adds hours of interaction over a semester.
- A forum is available at all times of day or night to accommodate school, work, and family demands. The forum is accessible from any Internet connection. Since students can participate even when they are sick or traveling, accommodations for these students are unnecessary nor is concern that they will miss valuable learning opportunities.

[http://www.bestlibrary.org/digital/files/ITBL\\_ReasonsforOnlineDiscussions.pdf](http://www.bestlibrary.org/digital/files/ITBL_ReasonsforOnlineDiscussions.pdf)

<http://www.wpi.edu/Academics/ATC/Collaboratory/Idea/boardbenefits.html>

[http://tilt.colostate.edu/guides/tilt\\_onlinediscussions/benefits.cfm](http://tilt.colostate.edu/guides/tilt_onlinediscussions/benefits.cfm)

[http://drscavanaugh.org/discussion/online/benefits\\_of\\_a\\_discussion\\_forum.htm](http://drscavanaugh.org/discussion/online/benefits_of_a_discussion_forum.htm)