

# Transitioning Teaching Online

## Engaging students in discussion forums



Discussion forums in your unit site are an important place for peer learning and for you to develop and maintain connections with students studying online.

### Top 10 tips for facilitating discussion forums

#### 1. Set up a discussion forum for each week or topic

This will help students know where to look for discussions on the current week or topic so they can participate in the learning community. You could start with a relatively informal discussion prompt to encourage students to get involved – for example, you might ask students to add a picture of, or describe their study space before you move into discussions requiring critiquing of ideas or evidence informed opinions.

#### 2. Set expectations early

Let students know what kind of things they can post in each forum – is this for discussing key concepts or more of a social space, or is it both? What kind of enquiries should be posted in the forum, and what should be emailed to you or another member of the teaching team? Be explicit in terms of the tone you expect students to use (formal/informal), how long posts should be (shorter is better) and develop a shared understanding of acceptable online interaction (ie. netiquette).

#### 3. Start the week with a News Post

Your students might be feeling lost in the online environment, without the structure of their usual timetable to help them plan out their week. You can help them by explaining how you're going to teach in this environment and what the week is going to look like. What do students need to do and when do they need to do it by?

#### 4. Respond, but not to everything

It's important to signal to students that you are present in the discussion – research shows that students are more likely to participate if they think you'll see it. But you don't want to overdo it – if students know that you'll respond to everything, they probably won't. Obviously there are some posts you need to respond to, to clarify misconceptions or answer questions. But you can also half-answer questions before inviting other students to respond e.g. 'Does anyone have a different example of this they'd like to share?' or 'Does anyone have a different perspective on this?' You can also make a summary post to respond to several students at

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once – ‘Thank you to everyone who has shared misleading advertising materials – some great examples here. The cosmetics examples are particularly interesting, especially those that refer to statistics and scientific tests – does anyone know why that is?’

## **5. Signal wait time**

Students may be studying and posting in the discussion forums at all hours of the day and night but that doesn't mean you need to be – while it's important that students get timely responses, they don't need to be immediate. Let students know how often you'll be online, and when they can expect a response. For example, on a post calling for students' opinions on a topic, you may signal that you're looking at the posts but standing back for now by saying 'Great posts so far – I'll check back in a couple of days and add my thoughts'.

## **6. Link to synchronous content**

It's important to highlight to students the links between the posts in the discussion forums and the other aspects of their learning experience, including any synchronous sessions and other learning material within the LMS. For example, 'that's a great point, we'll be discussing this concept in the BbCollaborate Ultra session on Wednesday so please raise that again in the session so we can talk about it more'. You can also refer back to the discussions in seminars, videos or classes – another signal to students that you value student contributions to the discussions.

## **7. Remember that 'lurking' is ok**

Not everyone will post in the forums, but it doesn't mean they're not engaged or not reading the posts. 'Lurking', or reading posts without actively posting or responding, is a common and valid way of using discussion forums. Some students may feel they don't have anything additional to add to the forum because their comments or questions have already been posted by others; others may not feel comfortable posting their thoughts publically. Creating a safe space to express different perspectives, ask questions or make mistakes can help, but some students will still prefer not to post – and that's ok. If you want to try and get a clearer idea of how many students are actually present in the forums, you could try posting a poll in which students can vote anonymously. You can also create smaller discussion groups that ask students to work together in a small group before contributing one 'group post' to the larger discussion forum.

## **8. Finish the week with a wrap-up post**

At the end of each week or topic, summarise the key points or discussions from that week. Ask students to share one thing they learned this week that interested or surprised them, or something that they'd like clarified. You can refer back to these replies next week, or in seminars or videos.

## **9. Foster peer learning**

Your student cohort is a valuable source of knowledge so encourage students to share their experiences and perspectives, answer other students questions and use prompts to move the conversation to a higher level of complexity. For instance, ask students to build on the previous student's post, to offer an alternate piece of evidence or argue a contradictory point.

## **10. Repeat the process next week/topic!**

Being consistent in your approach each week or topic will help students understand what is expected of them and help them form the habit of participating in discussions. You'll also be able to refine your approach each time so it will get easier and less time-consuming.

## Additional supports available during this time

- Faculty CloudDeakin Support Teams:
  - SEBE: [Sebe-clouddeakinsupport@deakin.edu.au](mailto:Sebe-clouddeakinsupport@deakin.edu.au); [SEBE support website](#)
  - Health: [Hedu@deakin.edu.au](mailto:Hedu@deakin.edu.au); [Health support website](#); Pod email: [dlf-healthpod@deakin.edu.au](mailto:dlf-healthpod@deakin.edu.au)
  - Business and Law: [bl-learninginnovations@deakin.edu.au](mailto:bl-learninginnovations@deakin.edu.au); [B&L support site](#)
  - Arts and Education: [artsed-digital-learning@deakin.edu.au](mailto:artsed-digital-learning@deakin.edu.au); [A&E support site](#); Pod email: [dlf-artsedpod@deakin.edu.au](mailto:dlf-artsedpod@deakin.edu.au)
- Check in with the [Transitioning Teaching Online](#) website for current information during COVID-19
- Subscribe to the [DTeach newsletter](#) for updates on teaching and learning, and COVID-19 information