

Introduction to E-Moderation

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1. Why introduce online discussion?

With its time independence, online discussion allows students to participate in class interaction when and where they choose. Online discussions are typically used to encourage students to explore issues in greater depth; share resources; exchange feedback with peers and teaching staff; and pose questions when difficulties arise. Responses to students' questions are of course visible to all students.

The inherent time lag between students being posed a question and then formulating a response can foster greater reflection, and there are benefits for students who need extra time to compose a response due to needs related to disability, language or learning preference. Further, online discussion is conducive to students integrating their own experiences and introducing topics of interest which may improve motivation.

Online discussions also support 'guest appearances' from external experts and practitioners irrespective of their location, allowing students first-hand interaction. The discussions also serve as documented records of class communications which can be revisited for revision or drawn upon in other class-based activities or assessments.

Example activities

- In-depth discussion of content issues, prior to or following class-based sessions
- Communication on administrative or housekeeping issues
- Frequently asked questions (FAQs)
- Debate and argumentation
- Role play, perhaps with rotating student moderation roles
- Research quests, critique and reporting, and
- Peer review

Blackboard tools

Discussion board, comprising separate forums dedicated to different topics or functions.

Journal (blog), an online journal displaying posts in reverse chronological order, with the option to control viewing and commenting.

Teams (wiki), a collaborative website allowing levels of editing, viewing and commenting, with all versions remaining accessible.

For guidance on **setting up, configuring** and **using** these tools, please refer to the respective guides on the VLE Training and Support site > Guide Finder.

2. About the Discussion Board

Discussion Board structure

Discrete **forums**, which you set up and name, provide the discussion 'spaces' within the Discussion Board. Each forum can be prefaced with instructions for the discussion and settings chosen to enable, for example, anonymous postings, editing and removal of posts, forced moderation etc. Each contribution to a forum is referred to as a **post**.

Discussions unfold via **threads** - sub-topics of the overall forum topic that both instructors and students can initiate (if allowed). Students should be actively encouraged to respond to existing threads to keep the discussion focused and logical. Large numbers of unnecessary new threads make the discussion very hard to follow, and students new to online discussion often begin a new thread each time they post.

You can **model** threaded discussion by replying to existing threads, and only creating new threads when introducing new topics. A gentle reminder to students might be needed until they get into the swing of it.

Communicating online

Key to asynchronous communication online – with its absence of visual cues and immediacy – is participants' respect for '**netiquette**'. Netiquette promotes goodwill online and deems offensive, aggressive, sexist or otherwise discriminatory comments unacceptable. As moderator, you are in a position to model respectful, encouraging and constructively critical comments that are aimed at issues rather than individuals. Some moderators ask students to suggest and agree upon such ground rules as an **icebreaker** activity online to achieve a class commitment upfront.

Typically, online discussion thrives on a conversational '**speaking-in-text**' style, where both projecting your personality and encouraging social interaction actually foster meaningful on-topic discussion. Persisting with an overly formal style will likely be a turn-off for students accustomed to texting and online chat. They do need however to be aware of **context** in that the language appropriate to online discussion would be inappropriate for an essay or report.

3. Preparing students for participation

Students need a clear purpose for participating in online discussion, and they need to be prepared to participate, through:

- orientation to the aims and objectives of the module including what they will likely get out of their online participation

- technical induction to the VLE and its tools so they can confidently use the discussion board, and
- preparatory activities which introduce them to netiquette and contributing their views and ideas 'publicly' online.

Simply introducing online discussion into a module and expecting students to participate rarely succeeds. **Clear links** are needed between **online** and **class-based activities**, in addition to an assessment strategy that provides students with the motivation to participate.

Asking yourself how your time can most effectively be spent with students and how you might provide improved feedback is one way to help decide how class-based and online activities might complement each another – resulting in some degree of reorganisation of your module.

Set expectations too about your own availability i.e. how often you will be logging in and your turnaround time for feedback, to help students with their own time management.

4. Moderating online discussion

There is a wide consensus that online discussion – with its goal of enhancing student learning through collaborative knowledge building – involves a marked shift in role for the lecturer. “Rather than presenting in the classroom or lecture theatre, the lecturer becomes a **facilitator of learning**, encouraging and guiding rather than telling and leading. A positive and friendly attitude online goes a long way towards encouraging participation and keeping students motivated” (Creanor, 2004:2).

Describing the characteristics of an online moderator, Salmon (2000:54-5) identifies five **key qualities** :

1. understanding of the online process and challenges students face online
2. technical skills i.e. in using the VLE and its tools
3. online communication skills
4. content / topic expertise, and
5. personal commitment to support online community development.

How the role changes over time

Online moderation needs to be appreciated as a phased process over the duration of the module, which can be broadly articulated as below, starting from the bottom:

MODERATOR ROLE	STUDENTS' PROCESS
5. Link learning to wider context →	Apply new knowledge
	↑
4. Facilitate discussions →	Engage with peers' contributions & learning materials
	↑
3. Support the set task/s →	Exchange ideas, information & resources
	↑
2. Highlight common links →	Form the online community
	↑
1. Welcome & encourage →	Log in & make contact

Adapted from Creanor (2004: 6)

At risk of stating the obvious, the online moderator's goal **is not** to respond to each and every contribution. Rather, a contribution is directed to the group and makes succinct reference to a number of students' postings – drawing out common themes and contrasts or highlighting connections to resources / current events / activities in class, or posing probing questions. In some cases a quick reply to a student's question would be in order. In others, you would want to read through a whole thread before posting a considered response in order to contrast and connect as described above.

Ensuring that you acknowledge a range of students' contributions in each of your postings **early** in the discussion – irrespective of how valuable you judge the contributions to be – is essential for including participants; demonstrating your own awareness of what is going on; and valuing the act of contributing. As the discussion progresses you can challenge higher level thinking from students, as elaborated below.

What are students encouraged to do?

Your module's learning outcomes should be driving your moderation of the discussion however, an awareness of a range of **contribution types** that you can seek from students could help you to further target your efforts. Salmon (2002:178) identifies the following contribution types from students:

Individual thinking

- offering up ideas or resources and inviting critique of them
- asking challenging questions
- articulating, explaining and supporting positions on issues
- exploring and supporting issues by adding explanations and examples
- reflecting on and re-evaluating personal opinions.

Interactive thinking

- offering a critique, challenging, discussing and expanding the ideas of others
- negotiating interpretations, definitions and meanings
- summarising and modelling previous contributions
- proposing actions based on ideas that have been developed.

If you reconsider the five broad phases of the moderator role described in the table above, you will appreciate that more complex interactive contributions would be appropriate later in the discussion, prefaced by simpler, 'individual thinking' tasks.

5. All things in moderation

Skills and confidence in moderating online discussion and activities are something you can expect to build over time and students' actual participation online is one good initial indicator of how you are fairing. Equally, some students will be more comfortable working online than others who also may need time to build confidence.

Feeling comfortable with the tools **first** will leave you more leeway for actively supporting the broad moderation phases outlined earlier of:

- welcoming and encouraging
- highlighting common links
- supporting set tasks
- facilitating discussion, and
- linking learning to the wider context.

It is simply not realistic to expect to master all the communication tools in Blackboard in your first module. Our advice is to **start out on a relatively small scale** – perhaps with a few discussion forums or a group activity. It is widely acknowledged, for example, that the synchronous tools in Blackboard are more demanding of both moderators and students, and should students be logging in from outside the university network, firewall-related connection problems can arise.

Remember too that you don't need to replicate class-based contact and online time with students. Online discussion and collaboration are not the poor cousins of face to face interaction, but they are different and demand different skills.

Above all, have a go and enjoy what could be a really valuable learning experience for you and for your students!

References

Creanor, L. (2004) E-Learning Guide No.5: Moderating Online Discussions. Accessed 8/11/2005 at <http://www.learningservices.gcal.ac.uk/apu/eguides/emoderating.pdf>

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