

Facilitating an online discussion forum

Many of the principles involved in facilitating positive learning environments via online discussion fora are the same as for a face-to-face teaching session. The difference is that, without the usual physical cues of eye contact, voice, seating arrangements and so on, you need to find different ways of asserting your 'presence' and **encouraging constructive engagement and interactions**.

The guidance below will be relevant for whatever platform you are using and is based on the assumption that your forum will have been set up to enable asynchronous discussions: but, of course, there may be times where students are using their forum synchronously as a 'chat' facility. This is fine, but it's worth remembering that one of the intended benefits of an online forum is that students should be able to choose when they engage; learning activities should not, therefore, be designed with the assumption that they will take place synchronously.

Before all else, we would strongly recommend that you take the time to familiarise yourself with the various functions and settings of the particular platform that you are using. For more information on the specific remote teaching tools supported for use at Imperial, please see **Table 2** below plus the guidance provided by the **ICT Digital Education Team** at: <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/admin-services/ict/self-service/teaching-learning/remote-teaching-tools/>.

Top tips for facilitating effective discussions in an online forum

Preparation

- **Use a 'welcome' / 'read this first' thread to establish expectations and 'ground rules'**. This could include a short introduction from yourself and an 'icebreaker' activity or an invitation to students to introduce themselves to each other, if appropriate. Some tutors invite students here to generate their own 'rules for engagement' to create a sense of ownership and community.

It is also an opportunity to establish and clarify expectations about the intended purpose of the forum, how long it will be available for, the level of moderation students can expect from you and so on. It can also be useful here to signpost or provide links to other potentially useful sources of information – e.g. guides to 'netiquette', the module handbook or where to go for help. See also: **'Table 1: Suggestions for maximising engagement in an online forum'** below.

- **Label your threads clearly to orientate students**. It should be clear from the title of each thread what the focus of the discussion is, and it can be helpful for tutors to clarify this in an 'opening post' or description within the thread. Ideally, keep to one thread per discussion or activity as it can be difficult for students to follow (and for you to facilitate) if multiple tangents occur within a thread. Equally, think carefully about how many threads you really need within a forum... too many can be overwhelming for students or encourage unnecessary repetition; it can even serve to put students off from participating.
- **Include a 'general', 'coffee break' and / or 'anything else' thread**. As in a face-to-face learning environment, students need space to ask questions or share thoughts and ideas that you haven't anticipated. If your intention is to moderate this thread more lightly than others (to promote more peer discussion, for instance), then you need to make this clear in the description

or in the 'welcome' thread – e.g. "Please tag me directly if you would like a response from me; otherwise I'll assume that the question is for your peers!"

Those less familiar with online learning might particularly appreciate the space this thread offers for discussing their experiences of this.

Ongoing

- **Promote early, active and ongoing engagement.** Whatever sort of discussion activities your forum is intended to be used for, it helps to 'start as you mean to go on'. Early 'prompt' questions (e.g. regarding initial thoughts or ideas) can create enthusiasm for the forum and encourage students to seek and respond to their peers' contributions. If discussions start to 'wander', it can be useful to remind students of the focus of the thread or redirect them to the more relevant one.
- **Be responsive but not 'hyper responsive'.** There is no expectation to respond immediately to every post or at all hours of the night; on the contrary, responding too quickly to every post has the same effect as answering your own questions or dominating a group discussion in a face-to-face session. Students need time and space to process discussions and formulate their thoughts; responding too quickly can disrupt the natural evolution of the discussion and create the expectation that you will 'answer' every point raised: which, in turn, can discourage further contributions.

That said: contributions need to be acknowledged and positively reinforced by the tutor to encourage continued participation from that student and others, so 'dipping in' once every couple of days and responding with praise (if appropriate), a probing question or gentle redirection is ideal. [See Table 1 below for more suggestions on this.](#)

- **Address misunderstandings or inappropriate posts promptly.** As in face-to-face environments, students need to feel 'safe' to contribute and negative or confused posts which go unaddressed can quickly escalate. The dependence on 'text only' communication in online fora can lead to additional challenges occurring through misunderstandings of tone or meaning; the 'depersonalised' nature of text-only communication can provoke behaviours that wouldn't occur in a physical classroom. As with any example of disruptive or inappropriate behaviour, however, tutors have a responsibility to address incidents quickly and sensitively.
- **Monitor levels and types of participation.** Some platforms enable you to see who in a group has 'read' a thread or how many times they have posted within it. How you respond may depend on the extent to which forum participation is expected or required within your course; if participation is optional, then some of the suggestions given above might be enough to encourage 'lurkers' to contribute more to discussions. If participation is required or if you are concerned that particular students are not utilising the benefits of the forum at all, a reminder email can be useful; however, if participation is only optional then there is a limit to how much you should 'push'. In these circumstances, students should maintain the choice as to if or how much they participate.

At the end

- **Remember to 'close' the discussion appropriately.** Thank students for their participation and remind them how long the forum will still be available for posts and / or 'read only' (if at all) – and where to direct any further queries once the forum has closed.

Table 1: Suggestions for maximising engagement in an online forum

Suggestion	Further examples
Make explicit the difference between 'discussing' and merely 'responding'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share resources or reading on the value of discussion (including peer-to-peer) in learning (e.g. Mercer, Hennessy & Warwick, 2019) • Use tangible examples of the differences between 'discussion' and 'response' posts as an introductory activity
Model 'the language of discussion' in your own posts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledge students' ideas – e.g. "That's really interesting", "I hadn't thought of that" • Encourage interaction – e.g. "Can anyone build on this idea?", "Who else would like to add something?" • Probe – e.g. "Can you explain what you mean?", "What else can you think of?" • Ask for evidence – e.g. "Where did you find that idea?", "How do you know that?"
Incorporate interactive activities and / tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use open or reflection questions – e.g. "What do you still not understand about the topic?" • Link with polls or quizzes (e.g. Mentimeter or Kahoot)

Table 2: Platforms used for online discussion at Imperial and elsewhere

Imperial (currently supported by ICT)	Other options (also commonly used at Imperial)
Microsoft (MS) Teams Blackboard Learn Piazza Coursera EdX	Slack Padlet

Summary

As with face-to-face teaching, students take their cues about what is appropriate within a learning environment by what is **modelled** by the facilitator. By adhering to good 'netiquette' yourself and by demonstrating how and when posts should be composed or responded to, students will be encouraged to participate actively and the benefits offered by the forum will become clear.

References and further resources

Digital Learning Hub, Imperial College London (2020) *Foster online learning communities*. Available from: <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/digital-learning-hub/online-classroom/communities/>

Heron, M. (2020) *Facilitating discussions in an online environment*. [Webinar] Online learning: Staff-Student Collaborative Webinars. Department of Higher Education, University of Surrey, 4th June

Mercer, Hennessy & Warwick (2019) Dialogue, thinking together and digital technology in the classroom: Some educational implications of a continuing line of inquiry. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 97, 187-199. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2017.08.007>

Tomic, S., Roberts, E. & Lund, J. (2020) *Designing learning and teaching online: The role of discussion forums*. Advance HE Newsletter (April). Available from: <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/news-and-views/designing-learning-and-teaching-online-role-discussion-forums>