WHY USE DISCUSSION FORUMS?

A Moodle discussion forum is an activity that can be used for online communication, collaboration and engagement as it enables users to read and post messages that can be seen by other people enrolled in the same site.

Online discussions are a great way to get to know your students and for them to get to know and learn from each other. Interaction in a face-to-face classroom can be intimidating for some students. An online discussion can level the playing field and allow students to take time to think about their responses as it is an asynchronous communication tool. A discussion can facilitate general classroom dialogue, targeted learning activities and group collaboration spaces (Communication and Collaboration).

The forum activity module enables participants to have asynchronous discussions i.e. discussions that take place over an extended period of time.

There are several forum types to choose from, such as a standard forum where anyone can start a new discussion at any time; a forum where each student can post exactly one discussion; or a question and answer forum where students must first post before being able to view other students' posts. A teacher can allow files to be attached to forum posts. Attached images are displayed in the forum post.

Participants can subscribe to a forum to receive notifications of new forum posts. A teacher can set the subscription mode to optional, forced or auto, or prevent subscription completely. If required, students can be blocked from posting more than a given number of posts in a given time period; this can prevent individuals from dominating discussions.

Forum posts can be rated by teachers or students (peer evaluation). Ratings can be aggregated to form a final grade which is recorded in the gradebook.

Forums have many uses, such as

- A social space for students to get to know each other
- For site announcements (using a news forum with forced subscription)
- For discussing site content or reading materials
- For continuing online an issue raised previously in a face-to-face session
- For teacher-only discussions (using a hidden forum)
- A help centre where tutors and students can give advice
- A one-on-one support area for private student-teacher communications (using a forum with separate groups and with one student per group)
- For extension activities, for example ‘brain teasers’ for students to ponder and suggest solutions to

The effectiveness of online discussion forums is dependent on the way they are created and implemented. The purpose, the assessment method and the outcome for the student need to be clearly articulated. Guidelines for Teaching and Learning Forums

View an infographic (web) that maps out a few solutions to engage students in an online discussion forum.

HOW TO SET UP A DISCUSSION FORUM

A discussion forum contains topics arranged as a list, and each topic is made up of posts and replies. When you post in a forum, you will have a short time to edit your message in case you have made a mistake.

To add a discussion forum to your Moodle site:

1. Click Turn editing on.
2. Locate the section you want to add your discussion forum to.
3. Click on Add an activity or a resource and select Forum and Click on Add.
Figure 1 – Select Forum Activity

Figure 2 – Adding a new Forum screen
EDITING DETAILS IN THE ADDING A NEW FORUM SCREEN

GENERAL

Enter a name for the Forum that describes and easily identifies this forum. Enter a description for the forum, that will help clarify to students what the forum is about. You can also choose to select the option of “Display description on site page”.

There are 5 forum types to create and choose from:

- A single simple discussion - A single discussion topic which everyone can reply to (cannot be used with separate groups)
- Each person posts one discussion - Each student can post exactly one new discussion topic, which everyone can then reply to
- Q and A forum - Students must first post their perspectives before viewing other students' posts
- Standard forum displayed in a blog-like format - An open forum where anyone can start a new discussion at any time, and in which discussion topics are displayed on one page with "Discuss this topic" links
- Standard forum for general use - An open forum where anyone can start a new discussion at any time

ATTACHMENTS AND WORD COUNT

These settings include details such as the largest size of file that can be attached to a forum post, the maximum number of files that can be attached to a forum post and whether the word count of each post should be displayed or not.
SUBSCRIPTION AND TRACKING

When a participant is subscribed to a forum it means they will receive forum post notifications. There are 4 subscription mode options:

- Optional subscription - Participants can choose whether to be subscribed
- Forced subscription - Everyone is subscribed and cannot unsubscribe
- Auto subscription - Everyone is subscribed initially but can choose to unsubscribe at any time
- Subscription disabled - Subscriptions are not allowed

Note: Any subscription mode changes will only affect users who enrol in the site in the future, and not existing users.

Read tracking enables participants to easily check which posts they have not yet seen by highlighting any new posts. If set to optional, participants can choose whether to turn tracking on or off via a link in the administration block. (Users must also enable forum tracking in their forum preferences.) If 'Allow forced read tracking' is enabled in the institution administration, then a further option is available - forced. This means that tracking is always on, regardless of users' forum preferences.

**Figure 5 – Subscription and tracking options for a new Forum**

RSS

To enable the RSS (Rich Site Summary) feeds for this activity, select either discussions or posts to be included in the feed. This setting specifies the number of articles (either discussions or posts) to include in the RSS feed. Between 5 and 20 generally acceptable.

**Figure 6 – Rich Site Summary Feed options for a new Forum**

POST THRESHOLD FOR BLOCKING

Students can be blocked from posting more than a given number of posts in a given time period. Settings include specifying the maximum number days and posts which a user can post in the given time period. Students can be warned as they approach the maximum number of posts allowed in a given period. This area can be used to specify after how many posts they are warned. Users with the capability mod/forum:postwithoutthrottling are exempt from post limits.
GRADE
Grade category controls the category in which this activity's grades are placed in the gradebook. Grade to pass determines the minimum grade required to pass. The value is used in activity and site completion, and in the gradebook, where pass grades are highlighted in green and fail grades in red.

RATINGS
To submit ratings users require the moodle/rating:rate capability and any module specific capabilities. Users assigned the following roles should be able to rate items.

The aggregate type defines how ratings are combined to form the final grade in the gradebook.

- Average of ratings - The mean of all ratings
- Count of ratings - The number of rated items becomes the final grade. Note that the total cannot exceed the maximum grade for the activity.
- Maximum - The highest rating becomes the final grade
- Minimum - The smallest rating becomes the final grade
- Sum - All ratings are added together. Note that the total cannot exceed the maximum grade for the activity.

If "No ratings" is selected, then the activity will not appear in the gradebook.

Select the type of grading used for this activity. If "scale" is chosen, you can then choose the scale from the "scale" dropdown. If using "point" grading, you can then enter the maximum grade available for this activity.
GROUPS AND VISIBILITY

Choose whether groups are visible or hidden. Next set an ID number, which provides a way of identifying the activity for grade calculation purposes. If the activity is not included in any grade calculation then the ID number field may be left blank. The ID number can only be set and edited on the activity settings page.

There are 3 options for setting Group Mode:

- No groups - There are no sub groups, everyone is part of one big community
- Separate groups - Each group member can only see their own group, others are invisible
- Visible groups - Each group member works in their own group, but can also see other groups

The group mode defined at site level is the default mode for all activities within the site. Each activity that supports groups can also define its own group mode, though if the group mode is forced at site level, the group mode setting for each activity is ignored.

A grouping is a collection of groups within a site. If a grouping is selected, students assigned to groups within the grouping will be able to work together.
RESTRICT ACCESS
Access can be restricted based on to and from dates/times, based on specific grades and also option to create a specific set of restrictions.

TAGS
Type key words about this Forum into the Tag field and press Entre. This key words will display on the course site as hyperlinks for the student to select and

Figure 10 – Groups and Visibility options for a new Forum

Figure 11a and 11b – Restricted Access options for a new Forum
COMPETENCIES

What are the site competencies that are linked to this activity.

REFERENCES

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