

Online discussions

Strategies for effective participation

An increasing number of university courses include student participation in online discussions as an integral part of the subject. This pamphlet provides strategies to help you effectively participate in and learn from online discussions as part of your university studies.

Table 1: Some terminology commonly used in online discussions

Online discussion also called discussion board, asynchronous discussion, online forum, online conference or bulletin board	A text-based conversation between you, your classmates and your teacher that takes place over the internet over a period of time, without participants needing to be logged on at the same time
Synchronous discussion or chat	An online discussion in which participants are logged on at the same time so that they converse together in real time
Post or posting	A text message placed on the Internet
Netiquette	Etiquette used on the Internet
Moderator	The facilitator or tutor of an online course
To flame	To send a derogatory message (not a good idea!)
Emoticon or smiley	A symbol that represents the emotions of the writer: for example. :-) for happy :- (for sad
Threads	'Threads' are the headings on subtopics that develop from the main theme. In a threaded discussion participants can join in at any point
To lurk or be a lurker	To lurk is to read the discussion postings without participating in the discussion. Lurkers can still learn from the discussion



Advantages of participation in online discussions

Become part of a community of learners

Through interacting with others online, you can build relationships that help make the subject more enjoyable and engaging. From these you can build on and learn from the perspectives of others to gain a deeper understanding of new concepts.

Improve your own learning

Participation in an online discussion helps you clarify your ideas because you learn through your interactions with others. The process of writing about what you have learned also develops understanding, reinforces your learning in the course, and makes the course more interesting.

Rehearse before you post

The quality of postings in an online discussion is generally more focused and considered than spontaneous responses in a face-to-face tutorial. Because of this you have time to do research and reflect about the question before you share your views.

Allows all student to participate equally

In an online discussion all students have the same opportunity to participate. If you are shy, or a non-native English speaker then you may find participating in an online discussion less threatening than discussion in front of your peers. You won't be interrupted or have to shout to be heard as may happen in a face-to-face discussion.

Keep a permanent record

Online discussions provide a web based digital record that you can read any time. This can be a valuable resource when you are writing essays or completing assignments.

Participate at a time and place that suits you

Online discussions provide many advantages for those who like to participate in their own time or work from home.

At the beginning of semester

Find out about online discussions in your subject

Online discussions may be used differently in different subjects. In some subjects, they are optional while in others they are integral to the course. Find out your lecturer's expectations of how the discussion group will operate. Is participation in discussions compulsory? How frequently are you expected to participate? Will the lecturer or tutor moderate the discussion?

Review the assessment of the subject

Find out if contributions to the discussion are assessed. If so, what criteria are used for assessment? Do you simply get a mark for participation or is the quality and frequency of your contributions also considered? What kinds of messages are most highly valued by your lecturer? For example, are messages that compare, contrast, synthesize or evaluate information better than descriptions, or is the ability to engage with others as part of a supportive learning community considered a more valued contribution?

Learn how to use your computer

Practice accessing the subject site and become confident to participate in the online learning environment early in semester. Work through any introductory tutorials provided about use of the software, particularly noting features that may save you time. For example, some discussion packages have an online 'Help' button or a feature that arranges postings so that the most recent are displayed first. Know how to reply to messages and how to post new discussion threads. Take all opportunities to introduce yourself and to practice conversing with other students online.

Find out where to get technical advice

Technical problems can be very frustrating and time consuming when you are trying to access and use an online subject site. Bookmark the 'Help' phone number or relevant email address if you need assistance.

Tips on how to participate

Show initiative

To form a productive community of learners, all members need to contribute to the discussion. Actively participate by asking questions that will help to clarify issues or add comments that will help open up the discussion. You can also support the learning of other students by contributing information and comments, or by sharing useful references and URLs. Acknowledge and give feedback about the contributions of other students. Always remember to use their name and show your appreciation with words and/or emoticons ☺. Other students in turn, will support your learning.

Observe netiquette

Politeness and respect for others are just as important in online discussions as they are in face-to-face contact. In the absence of clues about other people's feelings from facial expressions, body language and tone of voice, contributors to online discussions need to be especially careful not to accidentally offend others. Here are some basic netiquette rules:

- ❑ You can be critical of another person's views but do not be critical of the person himself/herself. For example, you can write 'I disagree with your comment about ...' but not 'You were wrong to say ...'.
- ❑ Avoid personal discussion that is not relevant to others or to the learning topic.
- ❑ Use the message heading to indicate the content of your message.
- ❑ Using capitals is the same as YELLING!

(Adapted from Singh 2004)

Watch your writing style

Take cues from your lecturer about the style of writing that is acceptable for online messages. A friendly, conversational tone and a questioning attitude helps to give you a positive 'social presence' online. Most lecturers are more concerned with your ideas and your interactions with others than your grammar and spelling, but check the assessment

criteria. As your messages may remain online for the remainder of the course you may choose to compose them off-line in a program such as Word so that you can spell-check and proofread them before posting. This also gives you a permanent record of your work on your own computer. Finally, be careful about using humour initially until you get to know the group, as your jokes may be misinterpreted online.

Keep messages short and direct

To ensure clarity put one main point in each message. Generally messages should be fewer than eight lines as longer sections of text are hard to read on a computer screen.

Log on frequently

To follow the discussion you may need to log on frequently for a short time, three or four times a week. Post your messages early in the period allocated for the topic under discussion so that you have more chance of receiving a response from others. Posting regularly enables you to participate in the ongoing conversation of the group and to feel connected to the other students. Be patient in waiting for responses.

Engage with your subject

Successful online discussions also depend on you being up to date and engaged with the topic. If you have completed all readings or tasks required for this subject you will be able to make a more worthwhile contribution to the online discussions.

Deal with problems

If tensions arise or you feel anxious about the progress or tone of the discussion, email or phone your lecturer and discuss the situation privately.

Finally

Online discussion groups may not suit all learners, but neither may lectures, tutorials or laboratory work. They can, however, provide a sense of community, a rich environment for collaborative learning, and offer new and interesting ways of learning.

References

Clulow, V. and Brace-Govan, J. (2003). Web-based learning: Experience-based research. *Web-based education: Learning from experience*. Aggarwal, A. K. Hershey, Information Science Publishing.

Garrison, D.R. and Anderson, T. (2003). *E-Learning in the 21st Century: A framework for research and practice*. London: Routledge-Falmer.

Piskurich, G.M. (Ed.). (2004). *Getting the most from online learning*. San Francisco: Pfeiffer.

Singh, H. (2004). Succeeding in an asynchronous environment. In Piskurich, G. M. (Ed). *Getting the most from online learning*. San Francisco, CA, Pfeiffer: pp73-83.