

Discussion boards

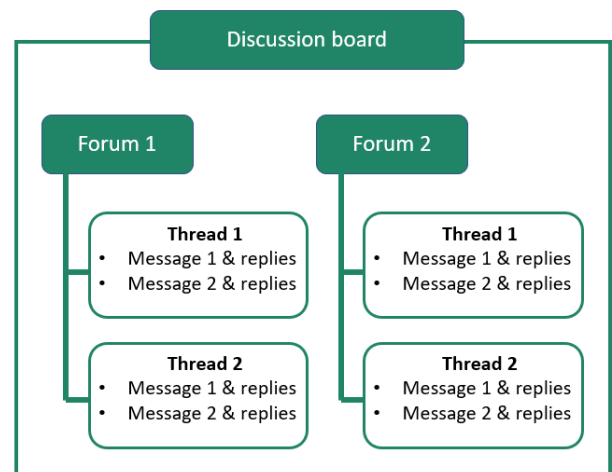
Moving discussion from the classroom to asynchronous online discourse

Classroom discussion is an important part of learning; however live discussion is not always possible online, for example where **connectivity is an issue** (e.g. students are in rural areas) or there are **restrictions on participant availability** (e.g. students have caring responsibilities at home).

Discussion boards provide a **flexible alternative to live online discussions**, they require **low bandwidth**, are easy to use on a **range of devices** (mobile, tablet, laptop/desktop) and are compatible with student assistive technologies already present on student devices. Students can **participate asynchronously at any time**, meaning they can take time to think before they share ideas. You may see more thoughtful conversations in a discussion board compared to a live teaching environment.

Discussion board structure

A discussion board is made up of **forums**, which are folders containing messages on a topic/subject. Students can interact by posting questions, answers, and other comments related to the given topic/subject. Each post may have several replies, these are called 'Threads'.



Types of forum



Designing a discussion board

Decide your approach

To achieve your learning aims, we recommend deciding an approach for each category listed in the table:

Category	Example approach 1	Example approach 2
Interactions	Less formal interactions (students feel safe offering a short answer or not fully thought out/authentic opinion)	Interactions tend to be more formal (crafted responses focusing on a specific prompt).
Assessment	Not formally assessed (what you are saying and contributing is not as important as you being present and engaged)	Every response is formally assessed and points are awarded weekly. Students are required to include citations and contribute a set number of responses.
Community Building	Used for community-building and peer feedback activities.	Primarily designed to promote weekly interaction, but community-building is more incidental or by product.
Type of Discussion	Used often for students sharing of knowledge and practical experience ('theory to practice' bridge).	Discussion prompts facilitate more factual and evidence-based responses rather than experiential.
Size of Groups	Break down into small group work—discuss and solve a problem. It is difficult to connect with and really get to know people in a larger class or discussion forum.	Whole cohort will be accessing the discussion board, FAQs and other discussions that need to take place with entire cohort.

Signpost students

Students can feel **overwhelmed** with keeping up with all the posts. In addition, posting and reading all the posts can be very **time-consuming** (posting/waiting/responding cycle) if not managed effectively.

- Introduce the tool in a 'non-academic' way (e.g. an icebreaker activity) to orientate students in posting/reading/replying in a forum.
- Communicate when the discussions will take place, so students know when to check the forum.
- To encourage a back-and-forth discussion, students should be given two due dates. They should be required to post their original response to the discussion question by the first due date (e.g., using the prior discussion window example, as a first deadline) and be required to substantially respond to one or two classmates by the end of the discussion.
- A "substantial response" would require that the student responds with more than "I disagree" or "Good point," - break down requirements and model your expectations, consider making posts yourself!

Recognise student contributions

- Students should be given clear expectations regarding how their participation in online discussions will be graded or recognised.
- A rubric helps students understand what is expected. For example, are you looking for quality over post frequency, and will marks be awarded?
- It is important to feedback soon after discussions have finished, as the positive or negative feedback students receive motivates them to continue participating asynchronously. Feedback could take the form of a discussion summary – highlighting significant contributions and posing more questions.

Craft discussable questions

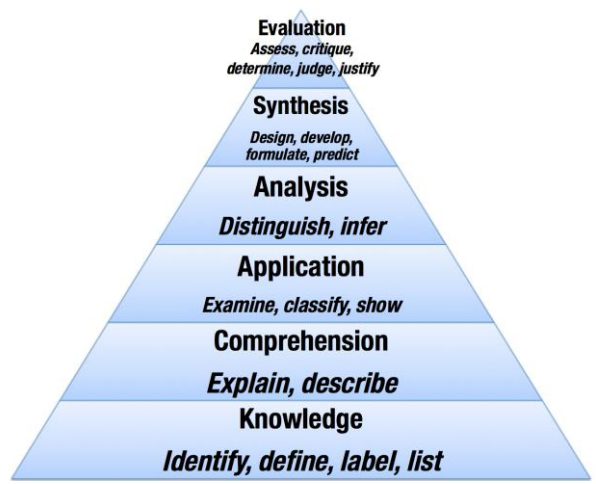
When constructing questions for discussion, refer to

Bloom's taxonomy to ensure the questions are discussable.

- Well-written discussion questions ask students to utilise higher-order thinking skills, which are demonstrated in the uppermost tiers of Bloom's Taxonomy: analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

Questions which force students to analyse a situation and draw (perhaps differing) conclusions, can foster a back-and-forth discussion as students review each other's perspectives.

- In contrast, lower order thinking questions, such as 'Explain mitosis' would elicit very similar responses from students and give little opportunity for discourse.



Example discussion board activities

The following pages contain examples of discussion board activities. The activities demonstrate common teaching objectives that work particularly well for online teaching (table below).

Read and Apply content	Compare and Contrast content	Share an opinion then consider perspectives of other students
Analyse content and Create personal reflections/connections	Analyse and Evaluate a variety of global perspectives	Take a stance on a controversial topic and argue using evidence .