Why use online discussion?

This document outlines the potential uses of online discussion boards for staff and students in their learning and teaching activities. It does not provide instructions on using a discussion board (for user instructions, refer to the User Guide to WebBoard), but after a general introduction looks at the ways online discussion can be used to enhance learning and teaching activities.

As a companion to this document, we have kindly been given permission to reproduce "Achieving online discussion" (pdf) by Sonja Cameron of Glasgow University. This paper gives excellent advice on **how to motivate students to attend and participate in online discussion**, along with suggestions for how to integrate online and classroom discussion, and how to deal with inappropriate behaviour.

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1. **What is a Discussion Board**
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1. What is a Discussion Board?

Discussion boards provide a tool that allow groups of people to communicate online. They work in a similar way to email, but anyone in the group can read your messages. The terms discussion board and discussion group are often used interchangeably, although technically the board is the software that allows the group (the users) to communicate.

Discussion boards are a well established as everyday parts of the internet. They can be "stand alone" systems, they can be incorporated into a particular website, or they can be part of a wider system of online communities such as Yahoo! groups. At NTU, discussion boards are available via the VLP using a system known as WebBoard.

Types of discussion board

Broadly speaking there are two types of online discussion:

- Synchronous
- Asynchronous

Synchronous

Synchronous discussion involves all users being online at the same time, posting messages and replies in "real time". This type of discussion is generally referred to as online **chat**. Its merits versus asynchronous chat are discussed below.

Asynchronous

Asynchronous discussion is more common, and if you are unsure which form of discussion is being referred to, it is normally this. Users do **not** have to be using the discussion board at the

same time. Instead they can read messages and reply when they want, rather than having to respond immediately. This means users can take their time in reading and replying to a post - it also means that users can read, post and reply at any time of day.

Synchronous chat does have its place: "Synchronous discussions allow for more spontaneous, less 'considered' responses to each other – both in feedback on work and in social chat. Being actively online at the same time allows participants to feel more immediately engaged with one another." (Hilary Thomas).

However it can be chaotic, especially when there are larger groups of students (Kennedy, page 2) and can favour those who can type more quickly, so if it is used, it is best for small groups of students with similar levels of technical proficiency.

For most activities, asynchronous is more likely to be suitable than synchronous. It has several particular benefits:

- Automatically records who said what, when, and how often
- Re-visited discussion threads serve as a database of analysis and knowledge
- Materials such as web links and file attachments can be included

It is worth noting that because WebBoard is accessed via the VLP, students' logon details are passed from the VLP to WebBoard, meaning that it is easy to identify the postings of individual students.

2. Potential benefits of online discussion?

Online discussion can be used to complement existing classroom based face-to-face teaching. There are a number of potential benefits:

- promote **inclusivity**
- improve **analytical skills**
- promote **independent learning**
- encourage **discussion outside the classroom**
- promote **subject interest**
- promote **flexible** learning
- learn **ICT skills**
- course **feedback**
- **administrative** tool

Promote inclusivity

Discussion boards help to promote inclusivity in a number of ways. They give everyone an equal voice, allowing quieter, shyer students to compete with more confident members of a class. Factors such as race, gender and disability are masked or minimized, allowing students a greater feeling of freedom to express themselves.

Theodore C. Humphrey of California State Polytechnic University (http://www.cwrl.utexas.edu/currents/archives/spr99/humphrey.html paragraph 8) cites this as an important factor in his use of discussion boards: "One notices even today gender-based as well as culture-based differences in classroom behaviours including participation and dominance. On-line, these different modes disappear, and students also are more likely, I think, to challenge the assertions made by fellow students (and the instructor!)"
Discussion boards also provide a record of participation, so it is relatively easy to identify students who are reluctant to participate for whatever reason, and provide encouragement. When assessing participation levels in group work, asynchronous discussion provides a record

both of participation levels, and of who said what, allowing if necessary for assessment of individual contributions both in terms of quality and quantity ("Overview of Activity", Pavey).

Improve analytical skills

Discussion boards enable students to improve their analytical skills by allowing them to develop and reflect on ideas and opinions. According to Humphreys (paragraph 8), this is because they encourage students to revisit existing discussions, and because the whole process involves much more active engagement on the part of the student, than a lecture where knowledge is often passively received.

"Asynchronous discussion: This is the key cognitive activity of the programme. It is social constructivist education in action. The insights generated are unique, relevant and valuable." David Kennedy, University of Paisley.

Promote independent learning

Online discussion promotes independent learning by allowing students to work both together and individually, in their own way and at their own pace, with or without tutor supervision. In this respect, Mary Panko discusses the "Apprentice perspective", where "…the teacher will gradually fade from the online postings to enable learners to practice independently, adapting knowledge from their previous experience and only receiving help when they request it. In other words, the e-moderator may encourage students' moves to independence as they are seen to develop their own expertise within the culture of the subject matter."

At a purely technical level, as modern discussion software uses a web browser interface, they make it easy for students to extend their enquiry further by using links to seamlessly visit websites and other discussion boards.

Encourage discussion outside the classroom

Online discussion can be used to extend class-based discussion. Given the limited amount of class time available to staff and students, online discussion (asynchronous because of its flexibility, rather than synchronous chat – see Humphreys, paragraph 3) can be used to extend contact between tutor and students, and by enabling contact within student peer groups, creates a network of peers who can supply each other with information, opinion, reflection and motivational support.

This has the benefit of allowing reflection and debate to occur at a greater level in terms of both breadth and depth and thus further the quality of ideas and analysis.

In addition, classroom based and online discussion can be combined so that classes refer to, or build upon exercises carried out online. This has the motivational benefit of encouraging class members who are less confident either online or in class to be drawn into class debate by using both media.

Motivate students to take an interest in their subject

Online discussion allows students to engage actively with their subject. They are given an online "voice" that is equal to that of other students, and arguably their tutors, allowing them to display their subject knowledge and analytical powers. It is this power of the "concept of audience" (Humphreys, paragraph 8), and involvement in the process of debate that can motivate students to participate by contributing their own thoughts and ideas.

Promotes flexible learning

As the student population becomes more diverse, there is an increased need to accommodate those with other commitments. Statistics produced by David Kennedy (page 3) of the University of Paisley show that the evening is the most popular time for students to participate in online learning activity, and that the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) used in his study was accessed in each hour over a twenty-four hour period.

Such flexibility cannot be accommodated by traditional means, but with a committed tutor can increase the access that students have to the learning process.

Teach ICT Skills

Online discussion as part of a university course allows students to master important information communication technology (ICT) skills. Not only does it give them an opportunity to get to grips with using the software, but also provides a safe environment in which to learn how to use online discussion as a communication tool which will be valuable in their professional and social lives in the future.

Course feedback

Online discussion can provide tutors with valuable feedback. This can either be formal, with a specific conference set up to handle feedback (or the use of polls to gather statistics from students) or informal, with the tutor gleaning feedback from day to day discussion.

Administrative tool

Discussion boards can have a useful administrative role. Discussion posts can be used to inform students of deadlines, give out questions, confirm meetings and so on in a similar way to email. They have the advantage of being able to inform a whole group without having to add lots of specific email addresses, and specific conferences or threads can be used to keep students and academics alike up to date with various practical elements of running a course or module.

3. The downside…

One potential pitfall that may influence your decision to use online discussion is the amount of time that needs to be given to it, if it is to be used successfully. This is a factor that comes up frequently in the available literature:

"Teaching online is more time demanding than teaching face-to-face. This is principally because its thrust is the fostering of individual and group dialogue, rather than the transmission of information." – Kennedy, P3

"It is important to note at this point, that the intense hard work of students is mirrored by the intense hard work of the tutors. The rewards are great in seeing students move on, but the time it takes to support them is significant. Tutors have recently been asked to keep a log of time taken in order to monitor this aspect." – Bell, P7

This is principally because of the amount of time needed to encourage participation, and to moderate discussion. It is therefore suggested that anyone interested in using online discussion start small and learn effective techniques for addressing these issues before making online discussion a significant part of their teaching activity. A good place to start is by reading Sonja Cameron's "Achieving online discussion" (pdf).

4. References and useful links:

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University of Glasgow
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Hilary Thomas
Department of Continuing Education, Lancaster University
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http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources.asp?process=full_record&section=generic&id=210