



Managing Online Discussions in Blackboard

Why use online discussions? Whether you're teaching online or not, the use of online discussions can be a key component for both engaging students and facilitating course communications in your class. In a typical classroom setting, students may feel hesitant to engage in public class discussions. However, in an online discussion setting, students often feel more at ease and less inhibited by fellow students and the classroom setting, and have more time to thoughtfully consider what they want to say before posting their thoughts in the discussion forum.

If you post a simple question that requires a direct response answer, chances are that you won't get the lively, engaging, insightful discussion that you're looking for. When developing discussion questions, try to use provocative, timely questions - topics that require introspective thought, for example, or that tie into current events.

If you're teaching a course that has 20 or more students, you may want to consider dividing students up into two or more discussion groups in order to better control the discussions and not overwhelm students (or you!) with the sheer volume of responses that can often occur in any stimulating discussion.

Another idea for fostering student discussions is the idea of holding Town Hall discussions. Students are assigned as moderators of their own discussion forums and must generate discussion on an assigned topic with their classmates and respond to classmates' responses in their Town Hall forums.

Discussion Forum Options

When creating forums in Blackboard, I recommend enabling or disabling the following key options:

- Keep Allow anonymous posts unchecked unless you are having students participate on a topic which requires confidentiality.
- I typically will check off the option for Allow author to remove own posts along with Only posts with no replies. If someone has posted a message in haste, and wants it removed, I allow students to remove their own posted messages so long as no one has responded to the message yet. If there were responses to the student's original posting, and the student deleted his/her original posting, all responses would disappear as well.
- Keep Allow author to modify own published posts unchecked. If this option was checked off, a student could post a message, others could respond to that message, and then the original poster could modify his/her first posting, possibly changing his/her opinion, and all responses attached to that posting will appear out of context.
- If you are posting the initial message to generate the discussion in your forum, then you may want to uncheck Allow members to create new threads. By doing so, students will have to respond to your initial posting (and to each others' postings), but they cannot start new discussion threads to go off-topic (although they certainly can always go off-topic in their own responses to your initial thread, of course).
- Keep Force moderation of posts unchecked unless you wish to control which of your students postings make the message board. With this option checked, you will receive an e-mail copy each time a student attempts to post in the discussion forum, and you will need to authorize the posting by clicking on a link in the e-mail before the posting will appear in the forum. 99% of most discussion forums will not require this much oversight, so you will probably want this option unchecked.

3 Forum Settings

- Allow anonymous posts
- Allow author to remove own posts
 - All posts
 - Only posts with no replies
- Allow author to modify own published posts
- Allow post tagging
- Allow users to reply with quote
- Allow file attachments
- Allow members to create new threads
- Subscribe
 - Do not allow subscriptions
 - Allow members to subscribe to threads
 - Allow members to subscribe to forum
 - Include body of post in the email
 - Include link to post
- Allow members to rate posts
- Force moderation of posts
- Grade
 - No grading in forum
 - Grade Forum: Points possible:
 - Grade threads



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Online Discussion Rubric Sample

The following was excerpted from Eric LePage's MGMT 360-001 Fall 2008 syllabus. Feel free to use and edit as you wish. In addition, send any suggestions for future iterations to Eric at elepage@bridgew.edu.

Online Discussions: Each week the class will be assigned a discussion question in the Blackboard Discussion Board. Discussion questions will focus on critical reading, thinking, and reflecting on assigned course readings. You are expected to provide at least two responses to the main discussion question and/or to the responses of your classmates in order to get a passing grade for each assigned discussion. Responses must consist of more than just “nice point” or “I agree”, and should be a minimum of 1-2 paragraphs in order to receive credit for your response. The more you contribute to the online discussions, the more engaging the class will be for you and your classmates, and the better your grade for each online discussion assignment. Do not wait until the final due date to post messages, for that will leave little time to get any engaging discussion going and will be factored into your Online Discussion grade.

Performance Level	Point Range	Indicators
Exemplary	9-10	<input type="checkbox"/> Reads & responds at least three times to the online discussion question and/or classmate responses by posted due date <input type="checkbox"/> Includes references to course readings (where applicable) <input type="checkbox"/> Reads and responds throughout the week and does not wait until the due date to post
Better than adequate	7-8	<input type="checkbox"/> Reads & responds twice to the online discussion question and/or classmate responses by posted due date OR <input type="checkbox"/> Reads & responds at least three times to the online discussion question and/or classmates responses but waits until the due date to post <input type="checkbox"/> Includes references to course readings (where applicable)
Adequate	5-6	<input type="checkbox"/> Reads & responds twice to the online discussion question and/or classmate responses but waits until the due date to post OR <input type="checkbox"/> Reads & responds once to the online discussion question or a classmate response <input type="checkbox"/> Includes references to course readings (where applicable)
Needs improvement	3-4	<input type="checkbox"/> Reads & responds once to the online discussion question or a classmate response but waits until the due date to post
Fails to fulfill assignment requirement	0-2	<input type="checkbox"/> Fails to read or respond to the online discussion question