

Supporting Distance Learners via Moodle Discussion Forums

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1. Introduction

In this paper I draw on my experience of online courses, both as a student and a tutor, to share some insights on how Moodle discussion forums can be used to support distance learners and to enhance learning.

2. Why Use Discussion Forums?

The fundamental reason for using discussion forums is that they offer the potential to bridge the distance between student and tutor and between students themselves in distance learning courses. Realising that potential, however, places the tutor in a central role, particularly in the early stages of a course as students learn to negotiate the new learning environment as well as the subject content. A second important argument for the use of discussion forums is that writing – online discussion is a written form of communication - aids thinking and reflection.

3. Students' Experience of Discussion Forums

There are three important characteristics of discussion forums that mediate students' experience of them. Firstly, like e-mail, it is an asynchronous form of communication. That is, there is usually a time lag between someone posting a message and someone else seeing that message and replying. This can be frustrating for the student looking for a quick response. Secondly, it is a written form of communication, which will appeal more to those who are comfortable with writing (whereas classroom discussion favours those who are comfortable with speaking). Thirdly, posts to a forum are both public and stored, which may cause students to be cautious about contributing. Furthermore, the fact that students are learning to use a new tool to communicate – Moodle - may impact communication in the early stages.

4. The Role of the Online Tutor

There are three important dimensions to the role of online tutor:

1. The **learning dimension** relates to providing support both for the subject content and for the process of learning in this new way.
2. The **technical dimension** relates both to the technical skills required by the tutor and the technical support s/he provides to the student.
3. The **social dimension** relates to establishing one's own '*virtual presence*' as a tutor, as well as helping students to socialise with their peers. Socialisation is deemed critical for effective online engagement.

The degree to which the tutor plays out each of these different role dimensions can change over time as students adapt to the new learning environment, become socialised, and acquire content knowledge.

Salmon (2000) offers a five-stage model of teaching and learning online, which can help us to understand how the tutor role may change during an online course.

Five-Stage Model of Teaching and Learning Online

1. Stage one (**access and motivation**) is concerned with developing individual ability to access and use the online environment;
2. Stage two (**online socialization**) involves participants establishing their online identities and finding others to interact with.
3. At stage three (**information exchange**), participants share course-relevant information with one another.
4. At stage four (**knowledge construction**), course-related group discussions occur and the interaction becomes more collaborative.
5. At stage five (**development**), participants look for more benefits from the system to help them achieve personal goals.

The role of the tutor as the student moves through these stages is to provide '*scaffolding*', that is whatever support the student needs to complete those parts of tasks that they can. This scaffolding is gradually dismantled as the student grows in confidence.

5. Netiquette

The coined word netiquette (network etiquette) describes special social conventions aimed at facilitating effective online communication. These reflect the reality that in the absence of non-verbal cues, language and presentation becomes very important, especially in the early stages of an online course. In this section I present some tips, which can help the online tutor build virtual presence, bridge student-tutor distance, and encourage interaction.

- Make sure to update your profile in Moodle with a photograph so that students see your image when they read your posts.
- Personalise your posts and observe the social niceties. If you are addressing a particular student, greet them by name, e.g. *“Hi John”*, or if the message is to the whole group, *“Hello everyone”*. Sign off as you would in an e-mail, e.g. *“Regards, Mary”*.
- Be unfailingly polite and constructive, especially where you are disagreeing with something that has been posted.
- Try to be encouraging of students’ participation, e.g. *“thanks for your question, Paul”* or *“Sean, makes a very important point in his post”*.
- Keep your posts reasonably brief and easy to read. This means paying attention to spelling, grammar and punctuation, as well as formatting. It also means using ‘plain language’, explaining technical terms and avoiding acronyms and abbreviations where they are not universally understood.
- Be responsive to students, while managing their expectations. If a student asks a question, make sure they get a timely reply. This doesn’t mean an instant response but it is a good idea to establish regular log-on times and to let students know these in advance, so they know when they can expect a response.

6. Techniques for Tutors

In this section I present a number of techniques that can be used in discussion forums to promote dialogue and higher order learning.

6.1. Questioning

“Thinking is not driven by answers but by questions.”¹

Learning is as much a social activity as it is an individual one and significant learning arises through conversation, argument, debate and discussion amongst and between learners, colleagues, experts and teachers. Questioning, therefore, can be a powerful teaching technique, stimulating thought, reflection and discussion.

Discussion forums can be used to pose questions that probe students’ understanding, provide the ‘spark’ for discussion and potentially lead to a higher level of learning.

In any subject, the level of question will influence the depth of thinking, reflection and discussion that occurs. If you ask a question such as, “*what is the legal basis for Irish VAT?*”, the response will be a memorised fact and is unlikely to stimulate discussion.

Higher-order questions require that students go beyond recall of facts and apply knowledge and experience in the exercise of judgement. Such questions can, of course, generate more questions in the process. General advice, however, is to begin with a concrete question to which all students can relate from their experience in order to get the discussion going. Through response, students verify their understanding of the question. Subsequent questions can probe these responses – teasing out the issues and fostering higher-order learning.

6.2. Weaving and Attributing

‘*Weaving*’ (Salmon 2000) describes the process of summarising posts to a discussion forum, in much the same way that a meeting facilitator or chairperson would periodically summarise what has been said and try to move a discussion on towards a successful conclusion.

¹ The Role of Questions in Teaching, Thinking and Learning
<http://www.criticalthinking.org/articles/thinking-some-purpose.cfm>

'Attributing' I describe as the process of acknowledging student contributions to a discussion by crediting that contribution in the summary by name and, where appropriate, quoting from the contribution.

Both of these processes contribute to *'recognising'* the student – that is, acknowledging their presence within the learning group (Emmett 2007).

Both of these processes are important, I believe, because they provide a means of showing the student that you are 'listening' and have 'heard' them. They also go some way towards making up for the loss of non-verbal cues, such as eye-contact, that can be important signals of recognition in the classroom.

Active involvement by the tutor in the discussion forum also contributes to establishing his/her virtual presence. This is particularly important at the start of a course, where you are trying to model the type of behaviour you want to see in the forums. As students become more independent you can gradual withdraw the scaffolding – described as *'fading'*.

The following box provides an example of both weaving and attributing in a summary of contributions to a discussion forum during a Trainer Professional Development module to which the participants were asked to present a case study on training needs analysis.

Summary of Week One Case Studies

by Yvonne Emmett - Sunday, 1 April 2007

Just taking the opportunity to summarise the week one case studies - so many opportunities!

Problems/ Opportunities

Excel for Auditors (Participant D); improving the efficiency of the Post Room (Participant A); supporting local training officers to support e-learners (Critical Colleague 1); ITS Train-the-Trainer (Participants J and C); effective e-mail writing (Participant G); decentralisation of debt management to Clare District (Participant L); meeting needs of 'instant' EOs/HEOs in PAYE Customer Service (Participant F); and addressing gaps in training for Case Management staff working on Compliance and audit functions (Participant E).

Methods

A variety of methods were envisaged, usually more than one type to help build up a more accurate picture.

- Focus groups
- Interviews (face-to-face and telephone) (formal and informal)
- Review of documents
- Questionnaire
- Review of existing programme
- Sampling the job / direct observation

Questionnaires can be useful to target large groups initially (Participant E) and to identify people who might be able to provide more in-depth information during an interview/ focus group (Critical Colleague 1, Participant F). Furthermore, choice of method can be influenced by cost (Participant J) and by the target group (Participant A).

Data Sources

Consultation with jobholders and line management was considered important in order to get both perspectives. Other sources included:

- Manuals/ operational instructions
- Training Managers /Training Officers/ Training Liaison Officers
- PMDS/ HRMS
- Legislation (Participant L)
- OPED/ SPD (Participant E)
- Internal customers of target group (Participant A)
- Other sections/ units/ organisations carrying-out a similar function (Participant A)

I hope that the exercise has given you food for thought and will help you in carrying-out your TNA. It's nice to hear what's happening in other parts of the organisation. Each of the case studies presented is quite different, and stands on its own merits - we can learn from each of them. It's also a good forum to get feedback from our peers, and share in each other's experience - consider it another data source!

Talk soon!

Yvonne

6.3. Groups and Collaborative Tasks

The discussion forums can also be used to facilitate group work, which can help to socialise students and foster higher levels of participation. Students may feel less 'afraid' of posting something when they know it will be seen by fewer people. There is also less room for students to 'lurk' when they are part of a small group task. Finally, just as in the classroom, students often like a change of pace and for learning to be more active, and such activity can lead to higher order learning.

The box below illustrates the use of discussion forums to facilitate group tasks. Three discussion forums were created for this activity, one for each of the two discussion groups, and one to which each group posted a summary of their discussion for all to share and comment on:

Unit 3 Activity - Training Delivery

This week we take a different approach to the unit activity. Instead of completing an individual case study, you are invited to participate in an online group discussion about training delivery. This will give you a chance to experience a facilitated session – albeit online - and to explore issues that are relevant to you. For the purposes of this task you are assigned to one of two groups. Each group has its own discussion forum, which will be moderated by one of the e-tutors.

Task/ Process

1. Reflect on an individual level on what training delivery means for you, e.g. formal group sessions, mainly one-to-one, mainly theory, mainly practical etc. etc. What aspects of training delivery do you find problematic? What would you like to change/improve? What do you think you can do? How can you apply what you have learned so far in this module? Reflect on your successes too – what works well for you? Post your reflections to your group discussion forum.
2. Discuss with your group the issues that arise from the individual reflections. Are there common themes/ experiences? What can we learn from one another?
3. At the end of the week, each moderator summarises the discussion of their group, drawing it towards some conclusions, and posts the result to a shared discussion forum.

7. Using the Moodle Forum Tool

In this section I focus specifically on the technical processes of adding a discussion forum to a course, starting a discussion thread, replying to posts, and monitoring student participation in forums.

7.1. Adding a Forum

To add a forum to your course:

1. Click **Turn Editing Mode On**.
2. In the topic block where you want the forum to appear, click on the **Add an activity** drop-down list box and select **Forum** from the menu.
3. In the field **Forum name**, type a descriptive name for the forum.
4. From the **Forum type** drop-down list box, select the type of forum you want to create.

Forum Types

There are several different types of forum to choose from:

1. **A single simple discussion** - is just a single topic, all on one page. Useful for short, focussed discussions.
2. **Standard forum for general use** - is an open forum where any one can start a new topic at any time. This is the best general-purpose forum.
3. **Each person posts one discussion** - Each person can post exactly one new discussion topic (everyone can reply to them though). This is useful when you want each student to start a discussion about, say, their reflections on the week's topic, and everyone else responds to these.
4. **Q and A Forum** - The Q & A forum requires students to post their perspectives before viewing other students' postings. After the initial posting, students can view and respond to others' postings. This feature allows equal initial posting opportunity among all students, thus encouraging original and independent thinking.

5. In the **Forum Introduction** text box, write a descriptive summary.

6. Click on **Save and display**.

7.2. Creating a Discussion Thread

1. Click on **Add a new discussion**.
2. In the **Subject** field type a meaningful name for the discussion topic.
3. In the **Message** text box, type a message to get the discussion started.
4. Click on **Post to forum**.

7.3. Replying to a Post

1. Click on the **Reply** link at the bottom of the post you want to reply to.
2. Type your reply in the reply text box and then click on **Post to forum**. Your reply is indented under the post you have replied to in the discussion thread.

7.4. Monitoring Student Participation in Forums

There are two main ways of monitoring student participation in Moodle forums:

- View a list of all of the contributors to a particular forum
- View a list of all of the contributions from a particular student

To view a list of all of the contributors to a particular forum:

1. From the **Administration** block, select **Reports**.
2. Click on the drop-down list box displaying the current date and select **All days** from the menu.
3. Click on the drop-down list box displaying **All activities** and select the name of the forum you want to check.
4. Click on **Get these logs**.

To view a list of all of the contributions from a particular student:

1. From the **People** block, select **Participants**.
2. From the list of participants, select the student whose forums postings you want to see.
3. In the student's profile, select the **Forum posts** tab. A list of all of the students' posts displays, for all course forums.

4. To see any of the posts within their original discussion thread, click on the **See this post in context** link.

8. References

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9. Further Reading

9.1. Books

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