

Activities for online forums

Activities for online forums

This brochure offers a range of suggestions for community building and class activities on online forums.

The initial posting

To effectively manage and operate a forum certain guidelines need to be established in the initial posting.

- You should post a message to the forum before or within the *first week* of the teaching session.
- This message should indicate to the students *how* postings will be conducted, when you will review postings, and *why* the forum will be used.
- The type of language used, particularly in early forum postings, has a large influence on how students respond to forum activities, thus you should try to convey a sense of *enthusiasm* on the forum.
- Sometimes a photo of yourself or a link to your personal website may be a valuable tool for setting up a non-threatening *environment* within the group.
- It is important to leave students with a *task* e.g. the initial posting could ask students to indicate their location (in order to form study groups), or could ask students about current work and life experiences that may relate to the subject .
- Post a *closing* message to round off the teaching session.

Community building

- **Group expectations:** Clearly define the purpose of the group, define norms and a clear code of conduct.
- **Ice breakers:** In the first week ask the students to introduce themselves in one to two paragraphs. Or allocate each student a partner and ask them to interview each other and post a brief summary to the forum.
- **Student expectations:** In the second week of the forum you could ask the students what they expect to get out of the subject, as well as the forum itself.

Forum management

- **Student facilitator/moderator:** Organise for your students, on a rotational basis, to take over most of your facilitator roles, leaving you in the role of content expert.
- **Set up a social subforum:** Social interaction is important for a class. It helps motivate students to learn together and from each other rather than only from the teacher. Make a separate forum for your students to talk informally. They should be made aware that there are different standards of (verbal) behaviour in the social forum - it may be okay to make typos and mistakes in this forum whereas they should be more careful in the class activities forum.
- **Set up a resource subforum:** In addition to the social forum and the class forum you might want to set up a forum for exchanging literature references and another where they can provide each other with technical assistance. Remember that students are expected to leave university with a certain amount of skills in using technology – this is an opportunity for them to develop those skills in a wide range of disciplines.

- **Guest lecturer:** Invite a guest lecturer to present an online paper/article or to participate in an online discussion, thereby providing a different point of view for students. This guest lecturer could be an expert in the subject from anywhere in the world, which would add to the richness of the learning experience.
- **Revisit topics:** Occasionally prompt the re-examination of a topic. Students learn at different rates, so revision and recapitulation are both very important in the learning process.
- **Weaving:** Sometimes it becomes difficult to follow the communication taking place on the forum. Weaving is where you post messages that help students understand how a discussion is flowing and its relationship to previous discussion. You can review print outs, refer to earlier discussions, clarify confused expressions, identify themes, make connections. This supplies a unifying overview by drawing all the various strands together in a momentary synthesis and can serve as a starting point for the next round of debate. It allows online groups to achieve a sense of accomplishment and direction.
- **Alert to argument:** Draw attention to opposing perspectives, different directions or conflicting opinions that could be used for debate and peer critique.
- **Reflection:** Encourage students to reflect on online discussion. Suggest that before replying, they download the messages, read them offline, create their responses and then log-on and send the messages.
- **Exam questions:** Review questions asked on last year's exam. Anything to do with assessment or exams is likely to attract student involvement and will encourage students to access the forum.

Class activities

- **Brainstorm:** Ask students to post simple, non-evaluated responses. All ideas should be encouraged, and other people's ideas should not be criticised. The results of this session can be used as the basis for further detailed discussion.
- **Discussion:** Use trigger questions to stimulate discussion. Enter a controversial topic which relates to the weekly topic in the Study Guide and get students to discuss it. They could be required to log in at least twice a week – once early in the week to enter their comment on the topic and then later that week to read and respond to comments others have made to that topic.
- **Students respond to questions from peers:** You could encourage your students to respond to postings by their peers (but monitor the responses to correct any factual errors).
- **Cross modes:** Where subjects have both distance education and internal cohorts of students you could get students from the different cohorts to share ideas, work in small groups, participate in discussions, etc. This could be a valuable opportunity for internal students to communicate with distance education students working in the same field.
- **Share real life experience:** Students could be asked to share real life/work examples of subject material.
- **Send students elsewhere for resources:** Direct students to look at other electronic resources by providing URLs of online journals, websites, library catalogues etc. They could be asked to provide a summary or critique of these.
- **Report back to the group on resources:** Students could be required to join listservs, locate online journals and websites, or use an electronic database and report back to class. Alternatively, they could be asked to evaluate a site using specific criteria.

Celt

CELT has a team of Educational Designers who work with staff in designing and developing learning resources for all modes of delivery supported by relevant communications technology. CELT offers services in:

- Developing learning materials and quality assurance
- Development of e-resources
- Using technology in learning and teaching
- Evaluating learning and teaching
- Staff development for academics
- Research in learning and teaching

Through:

- School-based Educational Designers
- Learning Media Laboratories in Albury, Bathurst, and Wagga Wagga
- The Evaluation Unit
- Consultancies

Website <http://www.csu.edu.au/division/celt/>

Phone (02) 6933 2568

Email celt@csu.edu.au

Centre for Enhancing
Learning and Teaching
celt

CHARLES STURT
UNIVERSITY



**Activities for
online forums**

Centre for Enhancing
Learning and Teaching
celt