

Assessment using online forums

This brochure offers a range of suggestions for implementing formative and summative assessment tasks using your online forum.

Caution: unless well set up assessment on forums can create a high workload due to the large volume of postings.

Formative assessment

- **Collaboration:** Students work together as a group (communicating within their own sub-forum) and then post brief reports on the main forum to the class as a whole. Students could post individual reports on a theme or topic and then as a group summarise the reports in a final group report.
- **Chapter summaries:** Students could be asked to write a brief review of the weekly topic in the study guide or the chapter related to that week's topic.
- **Critique:** Students individually or in a small group could review an article and post the review online. Their fellow students would post responses. Students should restrict their contributions to one or two comments so that the critique is not exhausted before all students have had the chance to comment.
- **Debate:** Conduct a debate with affirmative and negative sides, with the teacher as the facilitator. The rules of the debate, the issue, and organisational information will need to be posted beforehand.

- **Role plays/simulations:** Students take on roles, which they have to research and then recreate online in a discussion type setting. This could be in the form of a summit with various political personalities, a meeting with stakeholders in a health care issue etc. If you could find student participants from other universities around Australia and/or in other countries to participate it could be a very rich learning experience.
- **Case studies/problem-based learning exercises:** Conduct a discussion-type exercise where students are given a description of a real-life situation which they have to analyse, investigate the problems they identify and decide the further information they need.
- **Journals:** Students could be asked to submit journal entries of their responses to the subject material or specific questions and share them with the group. Alternatively, they could post a reflection on the events/study material of a certain period in the session and describe what they have learned.
- Marks would be given for effective use of taught skills, e.g. analysis, evaluation, or contributions to group knowledge.

Summative assessment

Any of the formative assessment activities could be used as, or contribute to, summative assessment.

- **Optional Assessment:** Give thought to optional assessment items on the forum, as this may encourage more involvement.

- **Seminars:** Students submit a paper and the other students comment on the paper with a discussion (with the tutor acting as the catalyst perhaps). After a couple of weeks the original student resubmits the paper including a summary of the discussion. As you may have too many students to allow each to have a turn, you might allow volunteers to post a paper on a particular topic or get groups to develop and present topics. Students could also work in small groups and present in subforums.

Participation leading to assessment

- Many academics find that student participation rates in their subject forum may be quite low unless they provide an *incentive* that encourages students to read and post messages. Some assign marks, e.g. 5% for simple participation (fingers on keys).
- This '*fingers on keys*' marks incentive is justified because it mitigates against 'lurking' (reading but not posting). Some students argue that lurking is harmless because they read all the messages but don't clutter the discussion with extra comments. Most students feel uncomfortable when they think someone reads their contributions and will not post anything of their own. To improve the comfort level, everyone should participate if at all possible.
- Other academics try to make the forum experience into worthwhile learning through *interesting activities*. As participants become familiar with the process and technology, these activities should generate marks for each person who makes the effort and posts thoughtful messages.

- For reasons concerned with access and equity, it may be wiser to use *formative assessment activities rather than summative* ones where marks are to be given.
- In the process of formative assessment, participants can revisit difficult points, *receive feedback from fellow students* and engage in reflective activity that will influence the work they do for summative assessment. One benefit of the online formative process is the medium's capability that permits revisiting, reworking, and reflection, compared to the 'moving swiftly on' flow of events when students only meet for the class lecture but do not engage in 'thinking work' together elsewhere.

Feedback, self and peer assessment

- **Assignment feedback:** Common feedback on assignments can be posted to the forum for the benefit of the class and will save you time in repeating comments.
- **Transcript assignments:** Students could be asked to retrieve all the comments they authored during the course, reflect on their contributions and provide a statement of the perspective embodied in them. Alternatively, they could be asked to pull together all the comments related to a topic, write an essay discussing which comments they agree with and to critique the comments from the perspective of a particular theory.
- **Liaise with academic staff:** Academic staff who have used assessment via forums effectively can provide valuable assistance in implementing assessment on your forum. Ask your Educational Designer to assist in locating academic staff who have used assessment on their forums.

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