

Why Use the Discussion Board to Facilitate Discussions?

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Using the discussion board feature within WebCT as a discussion tool for your class is an effective way to promote communication and continued learning when you and your students are separated by time and space. By allowing students to post thoughtful and thought-provoking messages about a discussion topic in a location where other students can read and gain further insight, you are providing a forum for learning to take place outside of normal contact hours.

Setting up the discussion board for asynchronous course discussions is a very important step in preparing and scaffolding the online portion of your course. Without having a structure present, the number of discussion board postings will be overwhelming and almost impossible to navigate. Below are a few tips for organizing the discussion board and keeping it manageable throughout the semester.

Identify Course Objectives. The first thing you should do is think about the overall objectives for the course and determine which of them will be satisfied or complimented by having online discussions.

Collect Appropriate Supplemental Materials. Collect any materials that you would like your students to consider while they are addressing the topic and participating in the discussion. These materials could be online resources such as websites and electronic articles or other resources such as pages within the course-assigned text book. Make sure these materials are made available to the student at the time the discussion is assigned.

Create Discussion Questions. Write a discussion starter. This a paragraph that introduces the topic to the student and provides framing questions on which the students can build. Include any hyperlinks in this paragraph to materials that are on the Internet and include literal references to any other materials that they may need to appropriately discuss the topic. Make the questions open-ended enough for the students to be introspective and produce quality responses.

Design Discussion Rules. Make the students aware of the posting rules. This is as important as creating structure; if they do not know how to properly partake in the discourse, there will be confusion, frustration, and lack of participation. The rules should be included in the syllabus and in a separate discussion board topic posting, perhaps called "Discussion Board Protocol and Etiquette" (See below). The rules might include such directives as:

- Thought-filled answers only; no "I agree"
- The discussion postings must be placed under the appropriate discussion topic heading to promote organization and reduce clutter
- Only post messages that you want everyone to see; discussion board postings are available for everyone in the class to read

[View an example of the discussion board rules posting.](#)

Once the course begins and the class starts to use the discussion board, there may be a little maintenance at first as the students get used to posting and posting in the appropriate location and format. At the beginning, you may have to move some postings to their correct locations within the discussion board structure. When necessary, send students a gentle reminder about where to post and the required posting format.

As you are reading the postings, respond with a posting of your own when you notice that the class as a whole is going down the wrong path, is missing the objectives you set for the discussion, or is sharing misinformation.

Hopefully, these tips will be of assistance to you as you incorporate the discussion board feature into your course. Please keep in mind that even if you embrace every suggestion provided, without fail, there will be learning curves for you and your students; there will be some need for reorganization and structuring; and without a doubt, some trial and error will take place. Just keep the goals of student learning and your peace of mind through organization in the forefront. You'll be just fine.

Sample Discussion Board Rules

Dear Class,

Welcome to WebCT! We will use this course management tool for many reasons, one of them being the discussion board. As I communicated in class, the WebCT discussion board allows us to have "discussions" that we would not be able to have in class due to time constraints or proximity. The discussion board also gives us a forum to:

- Pose questions to the entire class and view the feedback received from class members
- Access questions and responses posted by others
- Receive instructor-posted announcements to the entire group and
- Provide interesting, course-related and off-topic information to everyone

As you may suspect, with the entire class posting messages to the discussion board, things can get very cluttered, confusing, and even frustrating if there is no order to our discussion board. For these reasons, I ask that each of you read and adhere to the discussion board rules:

I have created several discussion board topic categories so that we can stay organized. Make certain that you are posting your message under the correct topic heading. For example, if you are asking a question about homework assignment #1, problem #2 from chapter 1 of our textbook, post your question under the topic labeled "Chapter 1, Assignment 1." If you don't do this, we will have a hard time trying to find the information that we need and the amount of random messages will become overwhelming.

Remember that EVERYONE has access to anything posted on the discussion board. If you need to discuss something privately with me, send me direct email or contact me by phone or office visit.

No question is a stupid question. Post all non-private questions that you have to this discussion board before contacting me offline. I am almost certain that someone else in our class will benefit from your question and any response you receive.

Make sure your language and content is appropriate for posting. Reword or edit anything that you suspect might offend even one of your classmates.

Spell and grammar check for ease in readability.

Do not type in all caps. THAT INDICATES THAT YOU ARE SHOUTING AT YOUR CLASSMATES.

Make sure your responses to posting are adding value to our message board; do not post messages that simply contain phrases such as, "I agree with Billy" or "me too" or "Dido". You may, however, include those phrases and then an explanation as to WHY you agree or disagree.

Use this discussion board! It is a resource for you to get feedback and to share ideas and it can add value to our course experience together.

Sincerely,

Your Professor