

## Using discussion boards in IT Carlow - responses in a discussion

I use discussion boards in two of my subjects and it's working really well. I use it with 1st Year Business students for my '*Behavioural Science*' class and also with my 3rd Year International Business class in their '*Business English*' subject.

With the first years, every time that we start a new section, e.g. Perception, Learning, I start a new forum for discussion. An example might be (in the topic on Perception), that I post up a link to an advertisement and ask them to discuss how the ad uses the laws of Perceptual Organisation. Then it is up to the students to post up their views and ideas. In the beginning, I replied after every posting, acknowledging the student's contribution and asking the others what they thought. This was a good idea as I found that it really validated their contribution. In addition, I would refer to the good postings in class; in that way I found that the other students would go look at it after class to see what they were missing. Then, what I noticed happening, was that the students got more involved in replying to each others' postings and so it wasn't a question of me intervening after each contribution, but rather them discussing amongst themselves (which is what I wanted to happen anyway!). I noticed that they were then putting up links to interesting websites for each other to have a look at, which was good.

What I have found really beneficial with the 1st years is that it has allowed all students to contribute. I've noticed that the quiet ones in class don't tend to contribute much in class, as they might find it difficult to get a word in with some of the other, more vocal students, but these same 'quiet' ones are brilliant for contributing to the discussion board. Anyway, with that group, I have found it important to keep the discussion fresh and to have new subjects for them to discuss, bearing in mind that I still want the discussion to go on and for everyone to have a chance to contribute. Therefore, my own experience has shown me that you have to keep an eye on the timing of it; long enough up for people to contribute, but not so long up that the discussion becomes stale! So what I do is this: anytime I start a new discussion forum, I post an announcement up on Blackboard telling them there's a new discussion up and to start chatting!

With regards the 3rd Year International Business students, I am using it in two ways; firstly to get them all discussing topics in Business English (e.g. '*What makes a good manager?*' etc.) but also as a way of correcting their written English. When they post up their contribution, I reply with my comments but also with a correction of their English. This has worked well as it allows other students to see the mistakes made and they can learn from one another. I also found that the 'quiet' students in this group, namely the Chinese, are brilliant for communicating on the discussion board. Obviously, they prefer writing things down rather than speaking, but, in a way, this facility allows them to speak and write, which is great. I've even had a Chinese student put up a posting in which she corrects someone else's English! I also told them that if they were not comfortable having their mistakes corrected in the public domain, so to speak, that I would privately email them a corrected version of their discussion board posting. Some of the students have availed of this facility.

All in all, I find it brilliant to use and it adds another dimension to the subject. I'm not sure though whether or not it would depend on the subject you were teaching, as my two subjects lend themselves perfectly to the facility. Anyway, I'm really pleased with the way it has worked out and would highly recommend it. I suppose the final point is that I've noticed that many of the postings appear after 5pm in the evening and at weekends, which is great as at least it shows that they are studying after class and I suppose, in that sense, it gives them time to reflect on what they have learnt.

Overall, it's a great tool!

*Gina Noonan, Lecturer in Languages and Business Psychology*

In my case, I generally use the discussion forum for small (2-3%) assessments. I find that the students engage with the topic and have a better and deeper understanding of the issues having discussed the topic in this way. They start quoting the class notes, they identify interesting websites on the topic and they think about what they want to say before posting.

The students tell me that it is fun and that they like being assessed this way. They tell me that they get to know each other better and that they learn by reading what other contributors have to say. This is a methodology which gets everyone in the class to participate in discussions and everyone in the class feels listened to. The Chinese and other foreign students are able to discuss topics better than they would in class.

I agree with Gina's view, I really like the discussion forum and find it a valuable tool. Anything that motivates the students is in my view worth considering seriously.

In relation to moderating the discussions, I don't reply to every contribution. I wait for a number of contributions and/or a 'roadblock'. I generally say something like 'Great discussion so far' or 'Well done for some interesting thoughts on the topic from Mary, John, Dave and Joel'. For times when the discussion is not progressing, I redirect, 'What about .....'/ 'Would using ..... address some of the problems' etc...

*Caroline Murphy, Lecturer in Information Technology*

On a Masters programme that I participated on, learners were required to email the instructor an initial response by a particular deadline. This was to be short and carried some marks. The instructor then posted all the initial contributions and we learners were required to make at least two comments on other contributions, kicking off the discussion.

Also, for students working in groups, one student can be required to post a summary of the discussion to be shared with other groups – this summary could be marked, with the position rotating amongst the students in the group.

*Damien Raftery, Lecturer in Mathematics and Information Technology*

### **EXTRA: Using Discussion Boards as a Teaching & Learning strategy**

*Strengths:* All information is shared equally between student and lecturer, Permanent record, Convenient place for students to work as groups and learn from each other, Students have the opportunity to reflect before posting

*Limitations:* Less convenient than email, Lurking, Lecturer may have difficulty in determining 'original' thought

Sile A. Creedon, EdTech 2007 presentation

[http://www.ilta.net/edtech2007/presentations07/session5/Creedon\\_UCC\\_EdTech\\_07.ppt](http://www.ilta.net/edtech2007/presentations07/session5/Creedon_UCC_EdTech_07.ppt)