

# THE ONLINE DISCUSSION FORUM: A REFLECTION ON ITS COLLABORATION POTENTIAL IN HIGHER EDUCATION



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The advent of information and communication technologies (ICT) in higher education has disrupted teaching practices, particularly with regard to communication with students. It is becoming more and more common to: contact students via email, transmit their results using an accessible online grade management tool, set aside some space on a platform or personal website for a course, and even to increase exchanges between students through an online discussion forum.

In this article, we would like to share our experience with the online discussion forum. We have been using the discussion forum in higher education for over a decade and have been able to take advantage of this tool in various ways, experimenting with new techniques (more or less successfully depending on the context) after hearing colleagues' stories at symposiums or after consulting research reports. At the end of the article the reader will find a number of references to reading material that was very helpful in our process of appropriating the online discussion forum.

We begin by describing the collaborative potential we see in the discussion forum based on our own experience. Then, we present two types of online discussion forum: the general forum and the learning forum. For each of these we provide examples, and define the teacher's role. Finally we provide a brief synopsis of our experience.

## THE COLLABORATIVE POTENTIAL OF AN ONLINE DISCUSSION FORUM

In the context of higher education, the online discussion forum refers to an asynchronous discussion space in which a teacher and a group of students exchange ideas via written text messages that can be seen by everyone at all times. Generally accessible via an online educational platform, the discussion forum offers the potential of eliciting exchanges that relate to the course in a general manner and more specifically to learning activities.

The discussion forum is a technological tool that can be used to achieve a number of pedagogical objectives. Whatever the targeted purpose of a discussion forum, we have identified in our practice four strengths that motivate us to keep using it with our students.

The first is that it democratizes discussions by allowing individuals to contribute to discussions in progress at the opportune moment within a specific timeframe.

Another strength of the discussion forum is that it serves to support learning activities which are likely to lead to results in team or group work that are difficult to achieve individually. This can happen in different ways as we will see in later examples.

A third strength lies in having to spell out one's point of view in writing, leading the author to reflect on the content of the message and to organize it or even to provide documentation to support it and this can sometimes be more productive than in a classroom activity in terms of the quality of thinking. A final strength consists of a better understanding of the stakes of electronic communications (for example, respect for rules of ethics, adopting an acceptable attitude, responding within a reasonable timeframe, respect for the opinions of other participants, etc.).

In order to maximize the potential of the discussion forum, the teacher must accept to play the role of a guide rather than that of an expert if this tool is to be viewed within the context of a socioconstructivist vision of learning. During our early trials we were very tempted to respond systematically with elaborate answers to all the messages sent by students, thereby limiting by this fact alone the collaborative aspect of the discussion forum. In fact, it is logical to think that the student in such a learning situation would then have nothing left to add since the expert would have said it all.

On the other hand, by adopting the role of guide, we were able to blend into the exchanges and not interrupt the flow of arguments. Playing the role of guide usually meant shorter interventions in the form of a question, a clarification, or suggesting a different viewpoint, thereby leaving more room for the students in the group.

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## GENERAL DISCUSSION FORUMS IN ORDER TO CHANNEL EXCHANGES

This general view of the teacher animating a discussion forum opens the door to a number of possibilities for using this forum as a real space for collaboration. First, our experience showed us that dividing a discussion forum into sub-



groups each for a specific pedagogical purpose was appropriate for facilitating consultation, management and, especially, the quality of exchanges. The creation of general discussion forums for messages not related to a specific learning activity can be especially useful for ensuring that learning forums focus more precisely on the task at hand. For instance, we usually create a forum called *Course-related questions* which is broad enough to encompass questions relating to such things as the process, activities, assignments and readings. In addition, depending on the nature of the course and the technological tools to be used, we implement a technical forum called *SOS, Helen!* (technical problems) to channel this type of question. Finally, just as in class, it is difficult to ignore social exchanges that have no direct link to the learning activities. That is why we created a *Social Forum* where participants discuss anything but the course.

For each of these forums, our role is to send a message that introduces the forum together with its anticipated content from the first day of the session. Thus, students understand the usefulness of the forum and can use it as needed. Obviously, whenever possible, they are invited to answer the questions of their peers, if they have the answer whether or not it is complete.

In addition, to ensure that the group can benefit from a question (and its answer) that might have been asked whether in class, by telephone or by email, the general forums can be enriched by including the students' questions as well as the answers provided. Finally, we try to summarize the exchanges at the end of the course, so they can be used in a subsequent version of the course (for instance, the technical forum can lead to the creation of informative technical tips, or

content from the forum on course-related questions can be integrated into assignments, the course plan or classroom presentations).

### ► LEARNING FORUMS ORIENTED TOWARD A TASK OR AN ACTIVITY

Learning forums differ from general forums in that they are oriented toward carrying out a specific task or a learning activity. They relate to the achievement of a learning objective or occasionally in more general terms to a specific competency. Their use is generally well planned and the time for participation can be shorter than for general forums. The teacher's role is more important in learning forums because they deal with the very purpose of the course, the obvious aim being that of a more meaningful participation in these forums than that associated with general forums. In the next section we present five types of forums that we include in the category of learning forums and that we have used in one or another of our courses.

Among the learning forums implemented are the *debate* forum, the *case study* forum and the *complex problem resolution* forum. These three examples of discussion forums involve the teacher introducing a situation to be debated, studied or resolved in the forum. To be effective, it must contain specific instructions regarding ways of responding to the situation, the duration of the activity, anticipated student participation, the role played by the teacher during the activity and, ideally, it should end with at least one question likely to generate exchanges. Carrying out these activities within the framework of a discussion forum makes it possible to explore many situations, which is sometimes more difficult in class due to time constraints. Students are therefore in a position to choose situations according to their personal interests.

*First and foremost, our experience revealed that dividing a discussion forum into subforums, each having a specific educational purpose, was appropriate for facilitating consultation, management and, especially, the quality of exchanges.*

The teacher's role during such activities is to encourage relevant interventions, to connect up various subject-matter, readings or earlier activities, to play devil's advocate in order to open the discussion to other possibilities, to invite students to clarify some of their viewpoints, to correct false interpretations from a formative evaluation perspective, to intervene in the event of inadequate statements and to make a final summary (in the forum or in class) in order to review the learning activity. We agree this can be easier said than done for some very active forums.

Beyond being useful for debates, case studies and the resolution of complex problems, the discussion forum can also contribute to *carrying out a team project*. Indeed, most discussion forums can be divided into subforums, accessible only to a small group of students only. The subforum then becomes a private space for exchanges, for sharing documents, links, references... in short, for any resource likely to contribute to the realization of the team project.

The role of the teacher during the course of a project is to follow up by visiting each of the team forums to monitor the progression of projects, to suggest paths to explore, to intervene if the project seems to be falling short of expectations, etc. Over time we noticed that a proactive attitude in following up on students proved



to be more effective, especially when it was the only method of follow-up (such as for students in work placement). This also applied to the precise definition of the teacher's role in relation to the team (since there can be confusion if students are not aware that the teacher has access to their team forum...).

Another type of discussion forum we worked with is the *peer feedback* forum. This is a forum in which students, organized in dyads or triads, must comment on an assignment (a model, a project, a document) for the purpose of becoming adept at formulating and receiving critical comments based on certain criteria. In this type of forum, we provide a grid for making critical comments, we form dyads and triads, we give feedback on the comments they formulate and we produce a summary of their strengths and weaknesses and the work produced in the discussion forum.

The final type of discussion forum we used is the *resource bank*. This type of forum receives theme-based links, articles, documents or final projects from students as a way of building a resource bank for the entire group. In this forum our role is limited to specifying operating procedures and the nature of expected resources. However, for this type of activity there are an increasing number of more specialized tools than the discussion forum: a glossary, a repository of resources integrated to a platform as well as *Wikipedia* or blogs.

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## CONCLUSION

Drafting this article led us to assess our current use of discussion forums. The examples presented here, although by no means exhaustive, present a variety of ways of using the discussion forum, while briefly outlining the teacher's role in using this tool. We should add that these examples are not all used in a single course; we used a maximum of two types of learning forums in a given course (offered only online). In spite of the great potential we perceive this tool to have, we generally target a particular use designed to achieve one or more precise pedagogical goals in order to vary the tools and to take full advantage of the particular functionalities of each. Indeed the discussion forum may not suit every pedagogical situation.

Even though it is easy to use, still we agree that it is very demanding. From the teacher's perspective, it is important to carefully target a pedagogical objective and to plan using the discussion forum over time, to integrate it into the logic of the course, to initiate the exchanges with an introductory message, to play the role of guide rather than expert, to visit the forum often with a view to intervening, to summarize the exchanges when possible, to conduct reviews in class when relevant and to create an archive at the end of the course – and these are only the main pedagogical tasks.

All in all, we believe that the democratization of exchanges, the richness of the group's output, the quality of the thinking as well as the development of a better understanding of what's at stake in electronic communications add value to what can be achieved in class, with a view to developing learning activities that are likely to promote collaboration. ●

## Thought-provoking readings that directed our practices in the discussion forums:

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