

always add or remove these at any time, but once they are place within the structure, it's impossible to move them up or down a level.

For details on building and creating the forums, refer to the built-in Scholar Help at <https://scholar.vt.edu/xsl-portal/help/main>.

Using Forum Topics and Threads

Clarify expectations for student participation

Netiquette

Include a section in your syllabus that outlines how students should behave in the Forum and how they are expected to complete forum activities. Provide clear instructions for internet etiquette (called "netiquette") and remind them that their answers are archived and are seen by instructors and classmates.

Student Postings

Make it clear to students that they are to post their messages in the appropriate topic area. One best use of a forum is to create a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) forum and encourage students to post questions (and reply to each other with answers) within there. This will reduce repetitive emails of the same question and provides students opportunities to share knowledge. You can also reuse these questions for future iterations of the course.

To keep off-topic "chatter" from distracting others, create a "Student Lounge" forum. Encourage students to post non-class related questions or event announcements to that area. Doing this creates a feeling of community and makes it easier for you to grade forums, for others to follow and reply to discussions, and helps keep the commentary on-time and on-task.

Participation Expectations

Consider defining exactly how forums will affect their overall performance or grade in the class. State how often you expect them to read posts. How often do you expect them to post messages? How many discussions must they initiate? Must they reply to other students' posts? Do posts have to be a minimum (or under a maximum) length? Do they need to link to or include attachments of resources or articles they reference? Provide direction on how to criticize another person's ideas, but not the person. Do you require students to summarize the entire discussion by a certain day or time? How long will the forum topic be available? Is there a follow-up activity (such as a quiz, assignment, or class discussion) they need to complete after participating in the forum? The more specific you can be the fewer organization questions, confusion, and hesitation they will have in posting questions and responses.

Provide your participation estimations

Explain to your students your role and participation within the forums. Informing students of your participation makes them aware of your intent. This helps them feel involved and connected with you despite the physical and time difference that forums may create. State how many times you will read or respond to forum topics per day/week. Are you planning to

be online a lot via email, forums, chat room, or in some other manner? Will you be calling on people to answer, reply to, or clarify posts? What role will you be playing? Will you be the Devil's advocate or act as a facilitator for discussion? Will you be the moderator for a forum debate? Will you be an observer and will summarize the closing discussion forum to be discussed in class?

What's the next task?

After students have participated in forums, reiterate the learning objectives once more and perhaps mention the learning outcomes to follow. *Tell them what are they expected to do next.* Will you have them journal their thoughts about their classmates' discussions in the Blog tool? Do you want them to complete a quiz online or in class? Are they to use the wiki to begin drafting their group papers? Do you have readings or questions for them to complete? Will there be an in-class discussion summarizing the online discussion? Provide students with a clear direction of what and where to go upon finishing a particular topic discussion.

Summary

Provide clear learning objectives for students. What do you want your students to have learned upon completion of the discussion? Check for alignment between the learning objective you've set, the topic you propose they respond to, the activities or discussion they will do, and your desired learning outcomes. Modify the learning objectives or the topic or lesson as needed.

Reiterate specific participation expectations for each forum discussion. While you may have outlined these within your syllabus, providing it again within the topic itself reinforces the expectations and encourages higher-quality responses from all participants.

For each and every forum discussion:

1. Post a welcome message and an overview of the expected session.
2. Provide students with clear participation expectations. (See *Participation Expectations* above.)
3. Explain how you will participate in the sessions. (See *Provide your participation estimations* above.)
4. Outline the learning objectives. (What will students learn or be able to do upon completion of the discussion forum?)
5. Provide the forum question or discussion prompt.
6. Adhere to your outlined participation.
7. Monitor the discussions to keep students on track, to maintain student engagement, and to balance discussions by toning down dominant posters and prompting silent participants to post.
8. If you've chosen to provide commentary or regular feedback (which may or may not be graded), post questions, replies, or summaries to check for student understanding.

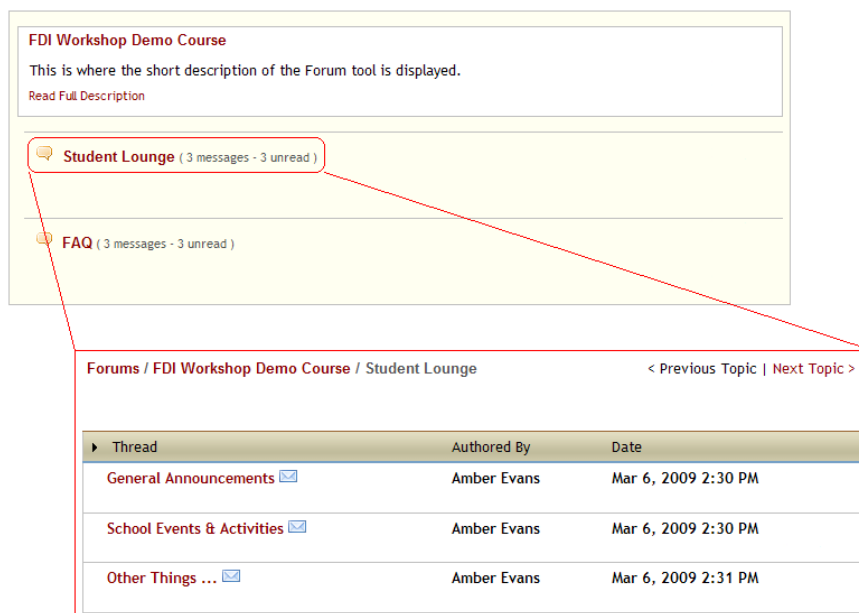
9. Don't leave the discussion forum "hanging." Provide closure by asking students to summarize the entire discussion or by summarizing the discussion for them. Ask them to comment or clarify thoughts, if necessary.

Reviewing Participation Statistics

Scholar Forums offers a *Statistics* link that allows you to quickly and easily see who has authored posts, messages, or replies within discussion forums. You can also see how many postings they have read, how many of the posts are unread, and a percentage of read posts per individual student. This numbers alone cannot quantify the quality, breadth, or depth of an individual's postings, but can act as gauge of interaction between students.

General Tips and Tricks

1. Post interesting, relevant, open-ended questions for the course/chapter/activity.
2. Make the first Forum assignment be a low-risk, high-engagement activity: Have students create and post Autobiographies. Have each student create an autobiography with a photo of their choosing to share with the class.
3. Select the best posting(s) within a topic and explain why it is a good posting.
4. Pose a Pro/Con issue and have half the class post pro responses and the other half post con responses. Ask students to argue and defend their assigned position statements.
5. Have students role-play and respond to questions from a particular perspective, character, or ideology. Ask them to state the perspective as part of their response, or consider having them respond and ask other students to guess that perspective (or character) the original poster had.
6. Have students grade themselves by compiling their three best postings accompanied by their reflection or explanation as to how the postings support their selected grade.
7. Create a Student Area so they can have conversations of their own. (See image.)



Give Me an Example

Post two or three questions on the discussion board, each in a separate forum and ask students to respond to each question. Then ask students to select at least one discussion forum, read ten posts from fellow students, and respond to three of them.

You can then browse all forums and read or skim a number of postings in each forum, making note of key points made, questions raised and misconceptions revealed. Then send a class email with written reactions and comments. Alternatively, you can use the first fifteen minutes of the next class to discuss selected themes and issues from these notes.

Sample discussion questions:

- What do you see as the two key points made in the lecture and how do they relate to your own experience?
- What question lingers in your mind after the lecture?
- If you had to prioritize the three main points of the lecture, how would you rank them in terms of importance and why?
- What information or concept from the lecture helped you the most in terms of what you need to gain from this class? Explain.
- Select one of the lecture points and offer an alternative perspective in two or three sentences.

Managing Online Interaction

Possible Uses for Discussion and Chat

- *Discussions of specific readings/topics*
- *Forum devoted to assignments and procedures*
Having this kind of a discussion board will save you time responding to questions that more than one student might ask in the course of the semester.
- *"Ice-breaker"*
Having a less structured forum can allow students to express themselves more freely and get to know each other better.
- *Group projects*
Setting up a forum for a group of students working on a long-term project allows you to solve a few common difficulties:
 - 1) asynchronous conferencing overcomes the schedule-coordination problems that plague typical face-to-face learning teams;
 - 2) the advantage for promoting online interaction is that learning teams should bond and thus make each student in the group want to do his or her share;
 - 3) you can easily assess the contribution of each student which is normally a difficult challenge.
- *Chats with guest experts*
When inviting a guest speaker is not possible, you can arrange a chat session. This will require additional planning, such as providing guest access to your Telesis community to the expert.

Grading

- *Require participation*
Set aside a portion of the grade allocation for participation in the online discussions. You can tell the students that they must post x-number of items each week or for each topic.
Note: you can also have a separate forum for informal interaction that is not graded.
- *Quality vs. quantity*
Try to grade on quality of the postings. That is highly subjective, but no more so than grading of term papers or essays.
- *Peer grading*
You might want to consider peer grading for some small group discussions. Tell students at the beginning of the conference that at the end of the activity they will be asked to rate each other on the value of each person's contribution. This can be a powerful incentive for students to do quality work in the conference. However, most of the students that I encounter do not like to grade each other. This is especially a problem if they have bonded as a result of operating in a learning team. In that case, they may want to give everybody an A, even when some students made distinctly greater contributions to the conference. Problems also arise by having them rank each other, because they might think that rank 1 gets an A, rank 2 gets a B, and the lower ranked students will get a failing grade. One possible solution is to have students grade the contributions of another group, which also gives them added learning experiences. Another possibility is to structure the ratings so that they don't translate directly into A, B, C, etc. The teacher might say, for example, that everyone will get an A, B, or C for the peer helping portion of the final grade, depending on the peer helping ratings. The ratings might be in the form of "superior, good, fair, poor," or some equivalent. Another possibility is to have each student name the one student in the group who helped them the most. Students who are named more than once might get bonus points on the final grade. A similar approach could be used with a ranking scheme. Students with the best ranks get the most bonus points on the final grade.

Organizing and managing forums and chats

- *Make the activity interesting*

If it is a discussion topic, make it one that students have a reason to get engaged in. Appeal to their life experiences, vested interests and ambitions. It might even be a good idea to let the students create some of the topics, especially if you provide an overall academic framework to guide them where you want them to go. If it is a group-created paper or project, let the students pick the subject within the bounds of the academic objectives.

- *Structure the activity*

Give students guideposts to help them think of things to say that are academically meaningful. Choice of topics has a great deal of influence here.

- Topics should be organized around an academic theme that serves course objectives.
- Topics should not be so open-ended that students digress.
- You can go further by creating activities that are best performed in a structured way. For example, debates can be structured by requiring students to post a position, to which others respond with pro or con supporting arguments, followed by critique of the arguments. Or brainstorming can be structured by having students first generate a list of alternatives; re-think the list by creating new ordering, structure, or relationships, systematically evaluating each item to produce a "short list" of viable alternatives; and then reaching consensus decision on the best choices, followed by prioritization.

- *Allow discussions enough time to develop*

Give at least 3-4 days for each discussion and ask your students to make several posts – at least one a day. This way they can see each other's responses and gradually develop a whole conversation. If you simply ask students to make even multiple posts, they might type them up all in one sitting and never come back to the discussion board – thus missing the whole experience of interactivity.

- *Follow-up assignments*

To make students engage with all of the view points expressed in a discussion, you might want to ask them to create a type-written summary of the discussion or a reflective piece on how the activity proceeded. As Dr. William Klemm points out, "this kind of activity capitalizes on all the advantages of constructivist theory, which holds that students learn best when they have to integrate, synthesize and apply information by creating a deliverable piece of work."

- *Instructor's role in the discussion*

Discussions tend to be more active and productive when the instructor is actively engaged in them. You should at least monitor the activity and intervene to steer students in the right direction. When the teacher participates in a conference, providing extensive critique, feedback, and encouragement, students cannot help but become more involved.

- *Managing chat discussions*

Chatroom discussions tend to be much more layered than your typical face-to-face classroom. Rather than one or two students serially responding to any given point, half the students in the chat will simultaneously respond. This can lead to a richer, more textured response to a particular question or idea, but the danger is a lack of movement across a larger knowledge constructing a narrative. The challenge for the instructor is to think along multiple trains of thought and be able to steer the discussion in more productive directions.

Note: Don't forget to enable the chat log option in Telesis so that you and your students can go over the whole discussion and assess how it went. You can use the log both for follow-up exercises and grading.