

Improving student engagement in forums

General suggestions for engagement

Don't assume students know how a forum works

With the ubiquity of social media, most people would assume that students are familiar with the concept of forums. However, this might not be the case. Instead, introduce students to the forum activity in your unit. Provide a low-risk activity where they can use the forum to post a simple message. This could be a forum where students introduce themselves. This not only allows students to become familiar with the mechanics of the forum but also starts the process of developing a learning community in your unit.

Sufficiently weigh forum participation as part of assessment

Students are strategic on what they decide to spend their time on in your unit. They will take their cues on what they should do based on the assessment weightings for each task. If you want students to engage meaningfully in forums, ensure that you value their effort through a sufficiently high weighting for forum participation.

Clearly, define what students are to do in the forum

To ensure that students complete the task correctly and also engage in the forum, ensure that your instructions are clear and located where they will need them. Also, set out the expectations of students in forums. The frequency, length, content and dates of their posts needs to be articulated. Also, consider providing a rubric around student participation in forums so you set out the standards for students to consider when posting. Consider having detailed instructions in the actual forum itself, however, if you want students to prepare before they go to the forum, consider having those instructions elsewhere too.

Design engagement into forums

Use the two-way nature of a forum to best effect. Design into your forums the ability for conversations to take place. Typically forums are designed so that convenors and tutors provide responses to students' posts. Whilst this can be a good way for the teaching staff to engage with students, it might not be sustainable with large student numbers. Consider designing student responses to other student's posts. This increases both the feedback students receive from their posts and the engagement of the student cohort. The design could include using the structure of the forum (ie a Q and A forum) or the activity itself (for examples see suggested activities below).

Actively facilitate forums

To ensure that students learn the most from forums, ensure that teaching staff facilitate forums. This does not mean that all posts are to be responded to. However, consider providing feedback to students on the quality of their posts. Also, address any misconceptions or difficulties students may have (after allowing a sufficient time for other students to address). Finally, to wrap-up a forum and "encourage" students to start posting to next weeks forum, you might want to summarise the posts, pointing out some great posts, ideas, discussions and linking the discussions with previous and future topics.

Suggested activities for forums

Do you want to try some different ideas in the forums? Are you and your students tired of the same format in your forums? Try out these ideas to explore different approaches to using forums to learn.

Some of these ideas are taken from Bonk, C. J., & Khoo, E. (2014). Adding Some Tec-Variety.

Name of activity	Description	Comments and example
A day in the life of ?	Students to write a post in a forum on an imaginary day in the life of a character (historical figure, thinker, writer, leader).	Students can either be provided with a list of characters or brainstorm people to research. Additionally, students should reflect on what they have learnt about the character and how this related to the unit.
Combining concept maps and forums	Ask students either individually or in groups to develop concept maps on key ideas in the topic and post them to a forum. Students are then required to explain and answer questions around their concept maps. They may be asked to reflect on the comments and whether they should revise their concept maps after peer feedback.	For more detail about concept maps look at this Teche article Mapping your way to improved student learning .
Combining polling and forums	Use a question that encapsulates the issue or controversy that the topic will cover or has covered and include it in a poll. Ask students to comment on the poll results in a forum.	iLearn has a Choice tool that you can use to quickly set up a poll question. The results of the poll will generate interest by the students in seeing how their opinions differ or are similar to their peers.
Developing and defending an argument	Assign readings that take opposing positions on an issue where there is controversy in the discipline. Ask students to post which argument they favour and write an argument as to why they favour it. Students are also asked to respond to at least one other post.	An example was in EDCN861 where students had to support either Clarke or Kozma in the debate around whether there is a relationship between media and learning.
Group based study research and discussion	A group of students are assigned a particular theme or topic which they have to research and discuss with other group members and present and answer questions from their peers in a forum.	Expert students are assigned a forum to communicate with other expert students. Additionally, forums are created for each of the topics, where the expert students upload a group presentation on the topic (PowerPoint, Word Doc, Video etc) and set discussion questions and answer them from their peers.
Hot seat questioning	A student (or group of students) elects to answer questions on a particular topic from students and the convenor during a specific week.	

Online news events	Students include links to online news items in a forum and indicate why they chose it and how it relates to the topic.	
Personal introductions	Create an ice-breaker where the convenor introduces himself and invites students to introduce themselves. Students could be asked to say why they are doing the course and what they hope to get out of it.	Students elect 8 nouns that best describe themselves.
Posts answering questions and reflecting on and summarising the discussion of peers	The teacher sets questions that relate to the readings that week and students are required to respond to them. Then at the end of the week students are to make another post responding to the discussion by peers and reflecting on what they have learnt.	<p>Consider setting a thread for each question and another for the summary of the discussion. Also, consider having a thread for the teacher where they provide feedback on the week and the various themes and issues discussed in the forums.</p> <p>Peter Keegan has successfully used this type of activity in AHIS212 Rome and the Caesars for external students. Students are required to participate in the online forums as part of their participation mark. This activity is worth 20% of the total assessment for the unit.</p> <p>An adaptation of this approach is to specify a word length as well as provide a rubric so that students have greater direction as to what is expected.</p> <p>Peter takes this approach in a 3rd-year unit AHIS339 Capstone unit: Greece, Rome, Late antiquity where all students are required to submit posts to a Seminar forum (weekly discussion forum) responding to questions in individual threads. Students must write between 150-200 words for each post and further develop the issues in the readings. They have a detailed rubric which outlines the 7 criteria ranging from knowledge of the subject matter to response to others. This activity is worth 30% of the total assessment for the unit.</p>
Scenario based discussion	Students are presented with a scenario, with issues and characters. They are asked a series of questions that requires them to apply principles, evaluate information and develop a solution or argument.	

Student discovery of resources	Students locate, link and comment on resources they have found online that are relevant to the topic.	
Student driven Q/A	Students both post and answer questions related to the topic of the course.	<p>PeerWise or the Reading game in iLearn allow students to create multiple-choice questions that other students answer.</p> <p>An alternative is to setup a forum in iLearn for students to contribute to. As an extension have students categorise the questions and generate themes or create a list of frequently asked question</p>
Student reflection on their learning	Develop questions that ask students to reflect on what they have learnt from the particular topic. If relevant ask students to apply what they have learnt to their individual context ie the workplace. Ask students to post their response to the forum before they can see posts from their peers. Students must also comment on one other student's post.	The Q and A forum in iLearn requires students to make a post to the forum before they see other students posts.
Using a stimulus to generate discussion	Include stimulus material (article, image, sound, video etc) in the forum and ask students to respond to it, with some questions to direct their comments.	An example was in EDCN851 in a forum on inspirational leadership where a number of readings were assigned together with four short videos including Shakespeare's Henry V St Crispin Day speech .