

## Discussion Forums in Blackboard

Discussion forums are set up in the Discussion Board areas of Blackboard. The Discussion Board is one of the most powerful communication tools in Blackboard. For example, a discussion forum can help learners become acquainted with one another, work collaboratively on a project, demonstrate achievement of learning outcomes, or confer with an expert guest.

Discussion forums can: encourage reflective, critical thinking, bring out the shy or hesitant learner who, in a face-to-face discussion would be silent, and provide the teacher with archived evidence of learner performance.

This handout focuses on designing and setting up a forum in the Discussion Board.

**Tips are posted in shaded boxes such as this.**

***N.B. You will get the most out of the guide if you have a Blackboard Discussion Forum open as you follow the instructions.***

### Where forums are located and created:

Discussion Boards can be created in two places in Blackboard: in the Communication area where the whole or part of the class can participate and in the Group area where only the members of that group can contribute to the discussion.

The control panel is not needed to create discussion forums. They are created at the actual site (i.e., in the general Discussion Board behind the Communications area or within a group area). However, you can use the control panel to view a list of the forums that exist in that course.

## T i p s

- Use the Discussion Forum to create a learning community that connects in and out-of-class experiences.
- Design the forum as carefully as you would a face-to-face discussion. A free-for-all online discussion looks strikingly similar to one in a classroom. Learners require clear expectations and instructions to see a discussion successfully through to completion.
- There are many excellent resources to help you design, manage and evaluate your forums. e.g., (1) Tisha Bender (2003). *Discussion-Based Online Teaching to Enhance Student Learning – Theory, Practice and Assessment*. Stylus Pub., Sterling, VA (2) Susan Ko and Steve Rossen (2004). *Teaching Online – A Practical Guide - College Teaching Series*. Houghton Mifflin Pub., Boston MA

## 1. Setting Up Discussion Forums

### 1. A. Glossary

**Asynchronous communication:** does not require that all parties involved in the communication be present and available at the same time.

**Forum:** a discussion area focused on a particular topic within a Discussion Board.

**Post:** an entry posted to a thread or used to start a thread

**Thread:** the initial post and the entire series of replies to that post within a forum; a sub-topic of a forum that may be pre-set by the teacher to keep the forum organized and focused; **or** a sub-topic initiated by a participant as the discussion unfolds (depends on forum options set by the instructor)

### 1. B. Adding a Forum

- Only the teacher can add a forum in Blackboard whether for the whole class or within the group area.
- **For the whole class:** Click on the Communication button, Discussion Board, then click on the *Forum* button at the top left. . (instructor access only)
- **For a group forum:** Once a group has been created, click on Communication, Group Pages, select a group, select the Discussion Board then click on the *Forum* button at the top left.

### 1. C. Forum Information

**Add the title and a description** of the forum.

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*Keep the description brief and post detailed instructions with assessment rubrics, etc. separately in areas such as Course Documents or Assignments.*

### 1. D. Forum Availability

- You can make the forum immediately available to members, or hide it for future use, or hide it once the forum has been completed. This option is selected in the forum setup settings. Once the forum is in progress, the availability option is accessed via the *Modify* area. **This available/unavailable option replaces *the archive feature*** offered in former versions of Blackboard.
- **Note** that, as the teacher, you can see a forum that is unavailable to members.

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Add a code such as INV for "invisible" in front of the forums you are keeping invisible from the students as a reminder to you that they are visible only to you. You can remove this code at the time of their release to the students.

## 1. E. Forum Settings

The purpose of the forum will influence which of the forum settings you will enable. Of the options below, by **default**, **Allow file attachments and Allow members to create new threads** are the only settings enabled.

- **Allow anonymous posts:** neither members nor facilitators can identify the author of these posts.
- **Allow author to remove own posts:** you can allow authors to remove either all of their posts or only posts with no replies.
- **Allow author to modify own published posts:** Only the contents of the post are modified with this privilege and not where the original post appeared. Also, the only way to identify a modified post is to check the date it was posted as the most current date will replace the original one.
- **Allow file attachments:** Members can attach files such as text documents, links to external internet sites, music files, etc.
- **Allow members to add new threads:** Members can start a new thread that might, for example, be a new topic or an invitation to respond to a question. If the forum is to be graded by Blackboard this option cannot be selected.
- **Allow members to subscribe to threads:** An email will be sent to members who subscribe to the threads each time a new post is added to that thread. Although this is a general forum setting, individual members can customize their participation in the forum to deselect individual threads to which they do not want to subscribe.
- **Allow members to rate posts:** Users can evaluate a post based on a fixed 5 point scale (presented as yellow stars next to the post). These ratings are not associated with the Blackboard grade book so serve mainly as a visible assessment of postings.
- **Force moderation of posts:** Before being released for public view by all users, the posts must be scrutinized by the moderator. The moderator's first task is to either publish the post or return it to the author with an explanation of why it is not being published at that time. Once published, the moderator can also remove/modify/reply to/lock/unlock posts. Refer to both the tips below and the section on **forum roles** for more information.
- **Grade forum:** There are 3 options here, (1) **no grading in forum**, (2) **grade forum**, and (3) **grade threads**. Refer to the section on **grading forums and threads** in the tips sheet called *Managing and Assessing Discussion Forums* for more information.

The forum setup options are selected based on the expected outcomes for the forum.

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- *Anonymous posts are for the most part inappropriate in an academic forum. If you want confidential feedback, use a tool such as the Survey in Blackboard.*
- *To avoid confusion and manage the postings, allow editing rather than removal of posts if the forum is to be graded.*
- ***Threads** cannot be added by students in forums where the threads are graded. The Threads are set by the teacher.*
- ***Threads** can be added by students in forums where the whole forum is graded (as opposed to the individual threads).*
- *Since **subscribing to threads** sends an email to subscribers for each thread posted, use this option selectively. Even though students have the option of turning off the subscription for each thread and post, they may forget to do so and thus be inundated with emails. This option is probably best used in complete online courses where students need to be aware of new postings or, for example, in situations where students are working collaboratively on a project and emails about new postings will help them stay on track.*
- *Students need **clear criteria** against which to **rate their peers' posts**. These criteria should be directly related to the expectations for the assignment.*
- ***Forcing moderation** of posts prior to public view can be very useful if the teacher wants to scrutinize the posts in order to provide feedback to the message posters before the whole class reads the posts. This is a little like providing a sidebar dialogue with the message posters before everything goes public.*
- *Unless the forum is used for housekeeping tasks such as signing up for group work, **forums should contribute to the course assessment** as a formative or summative activity. For issues related to grading the Forum, refer to the tip sheets on the gradebook, early warning system, and performance dashboard.*

## 2. Adding a New Thread/Post

- Click on *Thread*, add the subject and message. You can add an attachment at this point if that option was enabled when the forum was set up. To complete this task, click on *Submit*
- The first thread in most discussion forums is initiated by the instructor. The post can be as simple as a welcome to the forum or as detailed as presenting a case study with subsequent questions (threads) to guide the learners' discussions.

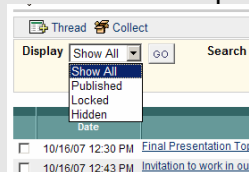
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- *It is good practice as the instructor to add the first thread just as you would open a face-to-face discussion in a classroom.*
- *This is a crucial part of the forum design because it defines the expectations of how students will participate in discussions. E.g. 's Graded forums have pre-set threads within which students post their messages.*

### 3. Saving and Opening a Saved Post

- You can save a post which, for example, is partially completed or requires more work/editing before it is released for viewing by users.
- **Only you, as the author, can see the draft.**
- When you are ready to save the post, click on *Save* instead of *Submit*.
- To open a saved post, just click on the name of the draft.
- To post the draft, click on *Submit* at the bottom right of the message box.

- \* If your draft is a reply to another post, you will automatically see it with "(draft)" at the end of the title of your reply.
- \* If your draft is a new thread that you are adding, then you must select "Show All" from the Display options in order to view/open the draft for review and/or submission. Don't forget to click "Go" to complete the selection.



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### 4. Replying to a Post

- Click on the title of the post to open it up. If by mistake you click on the messenger's name, you will get an email window instead.
- Fill out your reply in the post box then click on *Submit*.
- Note that your reply is justified to the right under the original post. If your reply was in response to another reply, your post will be justified to the right of that one.
- As with an original post, you can save the reply rather than submit.
- Publishing a saved reply is done by opening the draft then clicking on *Submit* at the bottom right of the message box. **Only you can read the draft** until it is submitted for public viewing.

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- *Publish clear expectations of what students' posts must include when responding to a message.*
- *Provide exemplars of stellar and poor responses.*

### 5. Roles in a Blackboard Discussion Forum

The following roles are available in a BB Discussion Forum. You may assign or allow self-selection of these roles depending on the purpose of the forum, where students are in their program, how well they know one another, and how important it is that their role responsibilities are transparent to both teacher and peers. Note that a participant may only have one role in that forum although that student can hold different roles in other forums within that Blackboard course.

Role	Description
<b>Participant</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- By default, students are participants which permits reading and writing posts in that forum.</li> </ul>
<b>Manager</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A forum manager is granted all privileges associated with that forum.</li> <li>- The instructor, by default, is a manager.</li> </ul>
<b>Moderator with <u>No Forced Moderation Option</u></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The Manager is the default moderator for a forum.</li> <li>- This moderator role can be assigned to a student/students even if the forum does not have <i>forced moderation</i> selected as a design option.</li> <li>- The moderator can reply to/remove/modify/lock/unlock the author's post.</li> </ul>
<b>Moderator <u>With Forced Moderation Option</u></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In a forum where there is forced moderation of the posts, the moderator must first scrutinize the post and decide whether to publish it or return it with an explanation.</li> <li>- Once published, the moderator can also remove/modify/reply to/lock/unlock posts.</li> </ul>
<b>Grader</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A grader can only access the Discussion Forum grading area, not the BB gradebook itself.</li> <li>- The grader accesses the grading list through the <i>Grade Forum</i> button and can grade threads by using the <i>Grade Thread</i> button.</li> <li>- Graders cannot grade themselves.</li> </ul>
<b>Rate Post</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Users can rate each other's posts by assigning from 1 to 5 gold stars based on a set of criteria established by the instructor or collaboratively with the group.</li> <li>- A user can self-assign these stars as a form of self-assessment.</li> </ul>

Refer to the ***Managing and Assessing Discussion Forums*** tip sheet for details about:

1. Tools and strategies for managing a forum in progress
  1. A. managing forum users
  1. B. moderating a forum
  1. C. using the search features
  1. D. using the availability and lock controls
  1. E. copying forums
  
2. Tools and strategies for assessing forums
  2. A. collecting and sorting posts
  2. B. grading threads and forums
  2. C. sample tools for assessing threads and forums