(Discussion) Forums Best Practices

What are Forums?

Wikipedia (Mar. 2009) defines a forum as a message board or an online discussion site, stating that it "is the modern equivalent of a traditional bulletin board, and a technological evolution of the dialup bulletin board system. From a technological standpoint, forums or boards are web applications managing user-generated content. People participating in an Internet forum can build bonds with each other and interest groups will easily form around a topic's discussion, subjects dealt with in or around sections in the forum." It works especially well for asynchronous communications that take place outside of the classroom or act as an alternative to face-to-face interactions. Discussion forums can take the form of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) pages, listserv archives, supportive boards for topics or subjects, or act as a discussion venue on proposed topics, controversy, or ideas.

In Scholar, the discussion board tool is called, Forums. Forums can be arranged in a variety of ways to present opportunities for dialog and discussion between you, your students, and with each other.

How do others use forums?

Organizations, businesses, and some teachers use forums as a place to ask and respond to Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ). Doing this provides participants with a place to first look for existing questions and to learn more about the particular product, service, or assignment. The FAQ forum itself is created by instructor, but the students generate the questions (and answers, if allowed). Some instructors use forums as prompts (using "starter" questions) pertaining to a topic or theme in class. You may have students read and respond to an article or assigned reading through the discussion board and require students to critically evaluate the responses. Forums can also be used to start and to moderate a debate of pros and cons of a topic. Instructors, Teaching Assistants, or select students can be designated as a "Moderator," choosing what is allowed to be shared with the group and what will withheld. "Social" forums can also be created, allowing students a place to discuss non-assignment or other school events or activities. This is sometimes called a "Student Lounge" or "Water Cooler" forum and its main intent is to foster social connections and open dialog otherwise not covered in other online discussions.

How will you use forums?

Advance planning reaps huge benefits. Decide how you would like to setup your forums. Are you planning on having many discussions and using the Forums tool extensively? Will you only be using it once or twice during the semester? Will you have separate areas for FAQs, Student Socializing, and Class Discussions? Once you've decided what type of forums you'll be including

and have a rough estimate of how many discussion topics overall, you can begin building your discussion forums.
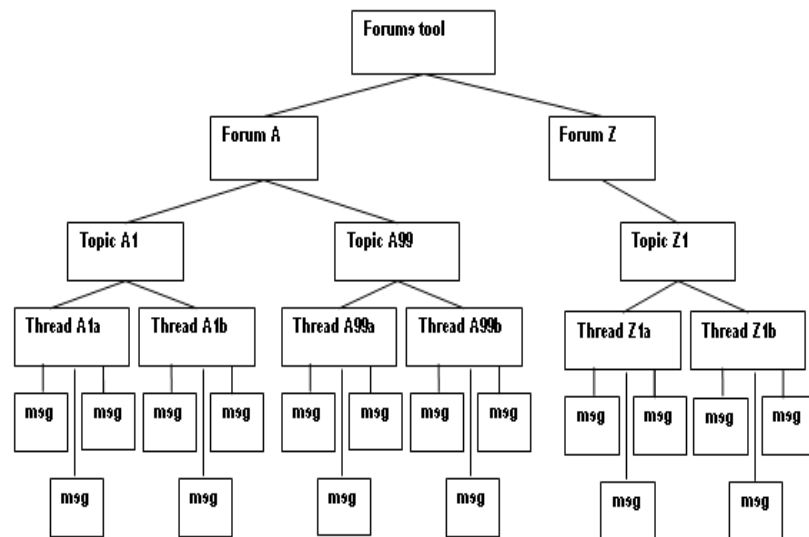
Choose the structure

Scholar organizes the online discussion forums in a hierarchy seen in the image at right.

It may be easier to think of the structure in a different way. Consider Forums A & Z (in the image at right) as being broad categories and the Topics boxes as themes. Within themes, you have Threads that are the "starter" questions and replies to the threads are generated by you or by your students.

If you are planning to have only a few discussion forum activities with 3 or less different themes (topics), you may wish to build your Forum so that students are allowed to create New Responses within the *Topic Settings* and it looks like the following:

- New Forum = Theme (e.g., "Frequently Asked Questions")
  - New Topic = "Starter" question (e.g., "Scholar Questions")

If you are planning to have many discussion forum activities using 4 or more different topics, you may wish to build your Forum so that students are *not* allowed to create New Responses within the *Topic Settings* and it looks like the following:

- New Forum = Name of Course Site (e.g., "FDI Workshop Demo Course")
    - New Topic = Theme (e.g., "FAQ")
        - New Thread = "Starter" question (e.g., "Scholar Questions")

Set the topic(s)

Once you've decided on how many discussion forums and topics and threads you may have, begin by populating your forum with the Topics (or themes) you plan to use. You can 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. If you're not sure which structure you'll likely use, OCS suggests you choose to go with the latter structure of 4 or more different topics, just to keep things concise and easy to see, read, and manage.

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

Clarify expectations for student participation

Netiquette

Include a section in your syllabus that outlines how students should behave in and 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.

Below is an example of one possible way of creating a student area in the Forums tool:

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.

Using Forum Topics and Threads

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. Create a Student Area within the forums so they can start conversations not otherwise covered.

7. 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.