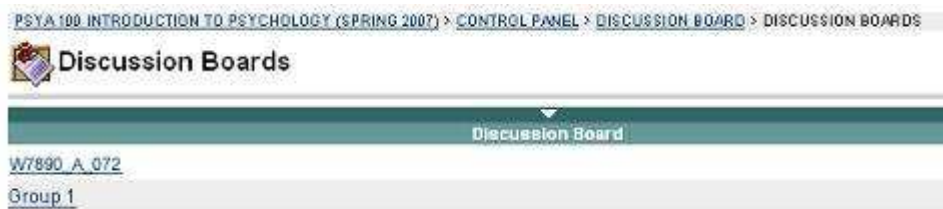


## Setting Up and Using Discussion Boards

Blackboard's Discussion Board is one of the most widely-used features because of its potential for connecting faculty and students asynchronously.

### Accessing Discussion Boards

- *Through the Control Panel*, click **Discussion Board** in the Course Tools menu. You will see a list of *all* Discussion Boards in your course site -- both the “**entire class**” Discussion Board, identified by the course ID (in the example below, W7890\_A\_072), and **group** Discussion Boards).



- *From the main menu*, click **Discussion Board** (or **Communication**, then **Discussion Board**). You will be brought to the entire class Discussion Board.

### Setting Up Discussion Board Forums

1. Click **Forum**.
2. Give the forum a name. Use the Description box to describe the discussion task to your students.
3. You can make the forum available immediately or create it and make it available within a specified window of time. Choose **Yes** or **No** for **Available**, then select date and time restrictions if desired. (You must have **Yes** checked for **Available** if setting date and time restrictions.)
4. Choose the settings in the **Forum Settings** menu. Suggestions for some of the major options are below:
  - **Allow anonymous posts.** Useful for sensitive topics or formative evaluation but many faculty prefer that students “own” their posts.
  - **Allow author to remove own posts.** *Recommended setting:* Only postings with no replies. (If you grade student participation, if a student removes replies to his/her own posting, the record of other students' participation is also removed.)



- **Allow author to modify own published posts.** May allow students to change a posting after you grade it.
  - **Allow users to reply with quote.** Allows users to include the text of the original message in any replies to that message. This is enabled by default.
  - **Allow file attachments.** Useful, but remind students to scan documents for viruses before posting.
  - **Allow members to create new threads.** If not selected, students can only post by replying to other postings.
  - **Subscribe.** An e-mail message is sent to the person who subscribes every time a new message is posted to the thread./forum, depending on your selection.
  - **Allow members to rate posts.** Allows students to review their peers' work and rate it.
  - **Force moderation of posts.** Moderated postings must first be reviewed by the faculty or an appointed moderator, who then decides whether or not to "publish" them. Useful if you first want to review students' work before making it available to the entire class.
  - **Grade.** Grading of forums or threads is linked to the Grade Center.
5. Click **Submit**. The forum appears as a link with a number to the left (indicating the forum's order in the Discussion Board forum list). You can re-order the forums using the "pull-down" numbers to the left of each forum name. If your course uses many forums, the current forum can become lost far down in the list. Move the current forum to the top of the list by selecting the number **1** next to its name.

### ***Changing views of the forum***

You can switch between a **Tree View** and a **List View** of the forum. The **Tree View** shows an expanded view of all threads, showing messages and replies.

### ***Posting messages to a forum***

1. Click the name of the forum.
2. Click **Thread**. (A **Thread** in Blackboard is an original posting and all replies to it.)
3. Enter a **Subject** and your **message**.
4. Click **Submit**. (You can also **Save** the message if you want to come back and finish it later before posting it.)

## ***Reading messages in a forum***

Click on the subject of the message. Click **Next Post** and **Previous Post** to read other messages. You can sort the messages in the default view of the forum by **Author, Date, Subject,** or **Thread** by clicking on the appropriate column heading. Toggling switches the sort order (most recent/oldest, A-Z/ Z-A, etc.)

You can use the **Collect** feature to show all of the messages in a single scrollable transcript. Start by selecting the messages you want to read, or use the **Select All / Go** option found at the bottom of the screen. You can sort the messages in the Collect view of the forum by **thread order, author's first/last name, date, subject,** and **overall rating,** and in **either ascending or descending order** by selecting the appropriate sort type from the **Sort by:** pull-down menu and clicking **Go**. You can filter by **Author, Status** (whether or not the posting has been published), and **Read Status** (Show All, Read, Unread).

## ***Replying to messages***

1. Click **Reply** in the message to which you are replying.
2. The Subject appears in the Subject: line. Enter your message and click **Submit**. The reply appears indented below the original message. To see the message you are replying to, click **Show Parent Post**. (The original message and all replies are a **Thread**.)

## ***Defining a User's Role in a Forum***

You can set different roles for each user involved in managing a forum: **Manager, Moderator,** and **Grader**. Next to the forum name, click **Manage**.

- **Manager** (*privileges given to Instructor and Teaching Assistant by default*). Managers have full control over the forum. Managers can change the forum settings, moderate posts, and assign grades.
- **Moderator** (*privileges given to Course Builder by default*). Moderators can review posts before they are made available to all users in the course, and delete and modify all posts in any forum, even if the forum does not use the Moderation Queue.
- **Grader** (*privileges given to users with a course role of Grader by default*). Graders review Discussion Board posts and enter grades in the Grade Center. Graders do not have access to the Control Panel as part of their forum privileges.

**Non-managerial roles** include **Participant** (can read and post – students, generally), **Reader** (can read only), and **Blocked** (cannot access the forum).

1. Open the Discussion Board.
2. Click **Manage** for a forum. The *Manage Forum Users* page will appear.
3. Select a role from the drop-down list. The default value is Participant. Participants can read and post but have no administrative privileges.
4. Click **OK**.


## ***Grading Student Participation in the Discussion Board***

The Instructor has the option to grade Students at the forum level or at the thread level. (Only users with a forum role of Grader or Manager may enter a grade for a forum.)

### ***Setting up forums and threads for grading***

In the Forum Settings, when creating or modifying a forum, select **Grade Forum** and enter a point value to evaluate students through the entire forum. Select **Grade Threads** to evaluate students on performance in each thread. When the **Grade Threads** option is used, a **Points Possible** option appears each time a thread is started. Students cannot create new threads if **Grade Threads** is selected for the forum.

### ***Grading participation in a Forum***

- A column automatically appears in the Grade Center when you choose to grade forum participation.
- Click the  icon in the Grade column for a forum that you have chosen to grade.
- A Grader may not view his/her own work.
- A list of users will appear. Click **Grade** for a user.
- A collection of the user's posts in the forum will appear. Evaluate the posts and assign a grade.
- Click **Submit** to add the grade to the Grade Center.

### ***Grading participation in a Thread***

- Open a forum and select a thread.
- Click **Grade Thread**. This button will only appear to users with a forum role of Grader or Manager.
- A list of users will appear. Click **Grade** for a user.
- The student's posts in the thread will appear. Enter a grade and click **Submit** to add the grade to the Grade Center.

### ***Disabling grading for a Forum or Thread***

Click **Modify** to the right of the forum name, then select **No grading in forum**. If grades have already been entered for the forum or its threads, a warning message will appear that changing the setting will remove any grades for the forum or thread. Click **OK** to continue or **Cancel** to keep the grades.

### ***Peer review in the Discussion Board***

Each student may start a thread and include their work in the initial post. Other students then review the work, assign a rating to the initial post, and include comments in a response. As users respond, the feedback expands as users reinforce and build on points made by other students. Students can respond to a post using a 5-star rating system.

Select **Allow members to rate posts** when creating the forum. Students open a thread and view the posts. Each post has an **Overall Rating** field with five stars which show the overall rating that the post has received. Students click on the **Rate this Post** drop down list and select a rating from 0 to 5 stars. The rating is now included in the Overall Rating and a student's individual rating appears in the **Rate this Post** field. A student cannot rate the same post more than once.

### ***Tracking student participation in Discussion Board forums***

To view a record of student participation in Discussion Board forums:

1. **Click Performance Dashboard** in the **Control Panel**.
2. The number of forums to which a student has posted appears as a link in the Discussion Board column. Click the link to view details:
  - Total posts
  - Date of last post
  - Average post length (number of characters)
  - Minimum post length (number of characters)
  - Maximum post length (number of characters)
  - Average post position
  - Grade (if the post is not yet graded, click a link to the Grade Center to add a grade)

## ***Suggestions for Managing Online Discussions***

The Discussion Board permits on-line asynchronous discussion. Because participants do not have to be on-line at the same time, it can be an effective and convenient way of connecting very busy people. Because messages posted to a computer conference have a greater degree of “permanence” than words spoken in a spontaneous classroom discussion, students have time to reflect on others’ ideas and the depth of their responses may be enhanced. Students who are less likely to participate in “live” discussions may find that the Discussion Board better suits their communication style.

Being able to frequently refer back to what others have said can lend greater focus to an on-line discussion. Writing out one’s thoughts in order to communicate them can promote greater clarity in students’ writing.

Finally, when combined with e-mail, the Discussion Board supports multiple sub-groups. If a small group of students wishes to pursue a specific aspect of a topic, they can talk among themselves, and then report their conclusions to the larger group. This kind of discussion in a live, real-time environment might prove disruptive.

Despite these advantages, the Discussion Board has some disadvantages:

- Discussions can go off track. It’s sometimes difficult to know where a discussion is headed. Messages posted to a conference may seem “disconnected” and lead the discussion in several directions at the same time.
- It’s easy to become overwhelmed, if you feel like you have to read and respond to all postings. More on this later!
- Discussions must be actively brought to closure by the faculty member. Otherwise, it can be difficult to know when the discussion is “finished” and what conclusions were drawn.
- Students who do not have convenient on-line access can be at a disadvantage if discussion is a critical component of courses which use Blackboard as a supplement only. Plan accordingly – be flexible with deadlines and expectations.

Include a separate forum asking students to post a brief biographical sketch. This helps you and other students “get to know” who is taking the course, and lets you know that students have made it to the conference.

Use the Discussion Board only for those instructional applications which require collaboration and/or the consideration of multiple perspectives. For example: brainstorming, group problem solving, case studies, analysis of an issue, group projects, etc. Asking every student in the class to post an individual answer to the same “one-answer” question invites information overload. Organize your Discussion Board so that discussion takes place in distinct, easily-identifiable areas. You might include separate forums for weekly discussion topics, questions and answers,

and general “chat”. Encourage students to keep each of their postings focused on one particular idea in order to avoid having the discussion go off on tangents.

Begin a discussion with a clear purpose in mind, and communicate this purpose to your students. If the purpose is to propose solutions to a problem, clearly state the problem up front as well as the purpose of the forum. Indicate how the forum itself will be conducted. For example, each member of the group should first post their initial thoughts on how to “solve” the problem, then the moderator will summarize and draw up a list of possible “solutions”, then the group will discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the proposed solutions, and, finally, the group will propose a “best” solution based on this discussion.

Dividing the class into smaller groups (three or four students) for discussion of specific topics can make the discussion more manageable and result in a quicker “resolution”. Assign groups purposefully to ensure that multiple perspectives emerge in the discussion. (For example, in an interdisciplinary health care course, consideration of a case history from multiple perspectives would greatly benefit by assigning nurses, a social workers, and social scientists to work together.)

Moderate the discussion yourself, or appoint one or more students to moderate in order to encourage critical analysis, introduce related perspectives, and tie the discussion together on a regular basis. If using student moderators, rotate responsibility over the course of the semester.

If a discussion branches into numerous “threads” (all of which are interesting but not necessarily related to the original purpose of the discussion), set up separate discussion areas in which students who are interested can pursue these “threads”.

Set a time limit by which all participants should make their contributions to a given discussion point, allowing enough time for as many students as possible to contribute (remember that your students, like you, have busy schedules). This allows the moderator to include all perspectives when posting the synthesis.

Providing general feedback to students on assignments and class discussion can help to make students feel “connected” and is an efficient way of addressing common misconceptions.

Rather than using quantitative measures to evaluate student participation (“each student must post to the conference twice a week”), use qualitative criteria such as the ones below. You might use a rating scale to determine a score on each criterion. Blackboard allows you to integrate this grading with the Grade Center.

- Did the student contribute valuable perspectives on the problems/issues under consideration?
- Did the student relate his/her thoughts to the experiences or views of others?
- Did the student help to “move” the discussion toward a resolution?

Remember that a Discussion Board is a public forum. Be sensitive as you give feedback on students’ postings. Use e-mail when your comments on an individual student’s work are better discussed privately. (Encourage students to check their e-mail regularly.)