

Authentic Assessment

Discussion Board



DEFINITION

As an online communication tool, discussion boards allow teachers and students to participate in conversations and exchanges in a virtual environment anytime, anywhere (with internet access).

A discussion board can be used to keep a record of such online discussions where both parties can post questions, responses, and/or comments. Online discussions allow students to build on each others' ideas and perspectives. It can bring about and promote reflection through the sharing of ideas and/or gaining feedback from peers. The convenience and accessibility of online discussion boards can also encourage active participation. It has thus become a popular online learning tool, as well as a valuable assessment tool for students' learning.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

To design an assessment with discussion boards, teachers should take the following steps:

1. Consider the purpose of the discussion board, including the areas of knowledge and/or skills that students should demonstrate.
2. Set the learning objectives of the discussion board task.
3. Design and build the structure of the discussion board.
4. Set up the discussion board online.
5. Develop the grading criteria and provide them to students.
6. Consider any feedback from students regarding the discussion board task (e.g., set up, chosen platform), and make changes accordingly.



BENEFITS & CHALLENGES

Benefits

- Students can engage in more in-depth discussions, as they have more time to think and reflect when writing board posts at their own availability.
- Online discussion boards allow the keeping of discussion records. A community of enquiry and a more democratic assessment process can be developed from this.
- Teachers can review and evaluate students' performance by looking at their contributions from the discussion board record.

Challenges

- It can be time-consuming for students to contribute regularly to discussion boards.
- Technical issues and/or unreliable internet access can discourage students from participating actively in online discussions.
- Some students may be unfamiliar with the use of discussion boards. Some may have difficulty identifying the appropriate tone to use, be uncomfortable with online discussions in general, or only post low-effort or irrelevant responses.

CASE SAMPLE

Online discussion forum in an undergraduate law course in the Queensland University of Technology

Design of the assessment:

A work placement subject utilized an online discussion forum as an alternative to face-to-face classes. A criterion-referenced assessment, which was used to evaluate students' performance in the online discussion forum against explicit criteria, was designed using the principles of validity (how the assessment items aligned with the learning objectives of the course) and reliability (how students' work can be marked uniformly). In the online discussion forum, students used their time management and written communication skills to demonstrate their knowledge of the relevant legal theories, their understanding of connections between theory and practice, as well as reflect on their collaboration with their work placement colleagues and engagement in collaborative learning.

How are students assessed?

Students were assessed with the criterion-referenced assessment rubric, which consisted of four performance standards ('Poor', 'Satisfactory', 'Good to very good', and 'Excellent').

The rubric had three areas of criteria: (1) students' understanding of legal theory, (2) the connections made between legal theory and practice, and (3) their comments for and collaboration with other students in the forum.

Reference

McNamara, J., & Burton, K. (2009). Assessment of online discussion forums for law students. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, 6(2), 2-14.

TIPS FOR DESIGNING

- Providing students with discussion board post exemplars to illustrate how the assessment criteria will be applied is beneficial. It will help students understand what is expected from them in terms of post structure, language, content, etc. Clear and direct instructions regarding how students should engage in discussions should be provided.
- Assessment criteria of discussion board should always be made explicit to students.
- The design of questions or topics for discussion should aim to promote critical evaluation and discussion, and not at eliciting 'correct' responses from students. This can also enhance the authenticity of students' posts while minimizing their reliance on using Generative AI to write responses.