



Using Discussion Forums – with the Learning Management System ADAM as an example Guidelines

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Summary

These guidelines highlight opportunities to successfully incorporate forums into your teaching and increase educational value. They supplement the section of the ADAM guide about the technical implementation of forums.

Forums are used for asynchronous online communication. To become an integral part of your course and encourage students to use them, they must fulfill a clear purpose; this can range from organizational announcements to debates on specific subjects or discussion of students' work. Depending on the educational scenario, forum posts by students can also be recognized as certificate of achievement.

A clear concept for including forums in your teaching as well as rules on forum use and interpersonal communication will make it easier for you and your students to make use of forums. As a lecturer or e-tutor, you will nevertheless be required to find various ways of stimulating discussions and keeping them on track. The "Challenges" section offers tips for dealing with a range of difficult situations.

Links to the ADAM help page are provided at the end of these guidelines for technical support.

Definition

A forum is a place where users can exchange messages and/or conduct discussions via asynchronous communication. Students can debate topics they have chosen themselves or that have been assigned by the organizer. Web-based discussion forums increase flexibility and allow discussions to be coordinated at any time (<https://www.e-teaching.org/didaktik/kommunikation/forum/index.html>, in German only, accessed 08/04/2020).

Potential uses of forums

For forums to be successful, students must accept their value. If a forum clearly benefits the course in a manner not possible with other, more accessible formats, then students will use it. Forums allow users to write texts, upload files and add comments, serving many different purposes in the process. Examples include:

- Organizational announcements ("noticeboard"),
- subject-based discussions, e.g. pro/con discussions,
- messages from lecturers,
- questions from students,
- group work,
- peer feedback or questions on student work,
- informal exchange of ideas ("cafeteria").

Forum posts as certificates of achievement

If you wish to recognize forum posts (e.g. from a pro/con discussion) as certificate of achievement in your course, the following points are crucial:

- Define criteria for post content before the course begins.
- Set a minimum number of posts if necessary, but always prioritize quality over quantity.
- Set a timeframe for the discussion.
- If students are required to give feedback on their peers' work, stipulate who will give feedback to whom.

Planning forums

- Develop a concept in good time that will allow you to use one or more forums to optimally support the objectives of your course.
- Set up separate forums for different purposes (see possibilities listed above) and make the aim of the forum clear to students by choosing an appropriate name and adding a short description. This will create the necessary transparency through to the end of the semester, even if there are extensive contributions from students.
- If you work in a team, assign forum supervisor roles before the course begins.
- Agree a timeframe for replying to students' posts (e.g. within 24 hours on working days) and pass on this information to the students.
- Remember that asynchronous communication in forums is more time-consuming than classroom discussions and take this into account when designing your tasks.
- Weekly summaries are a good way to add structure to forum activities; ideally, summaries should be uploaded on the same day every week to a forum selected in advance.
- Empty forums are not particularly inviting. Generally speaking, it should not be left to the students to speak up. Launch each forum with an opening post, preferably containing an easy task or a question to get the discussion started.

Rules for discussion forums

- At the start of the course, set communication rules with your students and compose a netiquette policy. You can find netiquette examples online (e.g. <https://wb-web.de/material/medien/die-netiquette-eine-vorlage-fur-regeln-zur-legalen-und-fairen-kommunikation.html>, in German only). Most of these templates are designed for the public sphere, but can be adapted to the forum work in your course and prove very useful. Make sure to incorporate all points important for students.
- When posting, be aware that you are a role model for your students.
- Set out formal criteria for forum posts as well (length of posts, conciseness, linguistic style, correct language, etc.).
- It is particularly important to choose a specific title for every thread (or "Topic" in ADAM) – for example, "Submission deadline for exercise 2", rather than something general like "Organizational question".
- The written word cannot convey gestures or facial expressions. Emoticons can be used to communicate feelings but should not be overused, particularly in professional forums. This may be a good opportunity to practice sharing feelings through language.
- To ensure that students stay up to date with forum discussions, activate notifications for all forum users via "Settings / Notification preselected for all Workspace/group members". The students will then receive automatic email notifications when new messages are posted and will not need to log into the learning environment all the time.
Alternatively, inform your students that ADAM has a forum subscription option and let them decide whether to activate email notifications for new posts.
- Don't get involved in ongoing discussions too soon. Experience shows that if the lecturer intervenes, many students will consider the discussion to have ended.

Tasks for lecturers/e-tutors

Help students to feel comfortable and encourage them to actively participate throughout the course by maintaining an online presence and posting on the forum. Your duties include the following social, subject-related, educational, organizational and technical tasks:

- Create a positive working atmosphere
- Establish social connections between the students (form a learning community)

- Clarify questions on learning material content
- Provide an expert perspective in group discussions
- Inform students about additional learning materials
- Aid communications (e.g. steer the discussion back to the topic)
- Intervene if netiquette is breached and resolve any serious differences of opinion
- Track and, if necessary, document learning activities for subsequent feedback
- Assess results
- Summarize discussions if necessary
- Provide technical assistance to students using the forums, the Learning Management System ADAM and any other tools used

If you would like to explore e-moderation in more depth, texts such as Bett & Gaiser (2010) and Salmon (2000) and (2002) take a comprehensive look at the topic.

Challenges

Unlike face-to-face communication, online communication within a forum lacks social cues and can sometime prove challenging. There may be various reasons why discussions do not take off or come to a halt, and why participants fail to obey the rules (see Häfele & Maier-Häfele, 2005, p. 47):

- *A newly opened forum contains no posts.*
Students may not be sure what exactly is expected of them. Ask them and be more specific if necessary.
- *Only a few students are participating in the forum.*
Most students have not yet grown accustomed to conducting discussions in writing and online. Try to help them overcome their inhibitions. You will find some good suggestions in Christian Spannagel's blog (Professor of Mathematics and Didactics, Heidelberg University of Education): <https://cspannagel.wordpress.com/2011/07/29/wie-belebt-man-ein-veranstaltungsbegleitendes-forum/> (in German only, accessed 20/03/2020).
- *Some students participate in the beginning, and then are never heard from again.*
Students may withdraw for a number of reasons – they might lack motivation, have other competing priorities, worry about making mistakes or struggle to find the time. Whatever the case, send them a personal email to find out what's happening.
- *Discussions gradually tail off.*
If you have not posted for a while, students might assume that the discussion has finished. Ask questions and get the conversation moving again.
- *The tone of the posts is inappropriate.*
This is rare in the higher education environment, but in a lively discussion, students might post too quickly without checking their messages first. Intervene if you notice that the forum atmosphere is at risk of shifting. Make it clear that the forum should remain a positive place that supports the learning experience and highlight the communication rules defined in the netiquette policy.

Further support for forum use in ADAM

- Instructions for the "Forum" function in the ADAM Wegweiser in the ADAM help section: https://adam.unibas.ch/goto_adam_wiki_wpage_90_545096.html (in German only)
- At the end of the "Bausteine" section on the FAQ page in the ADAM help section: https://adam.unibas.ch/goto_adam_wiki_wpage_77_548946.html (in German only)

Literature

Bett, K. & Gaiser, B. (2010). *E-Moderation*.

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