Building confidence in using online learning forums

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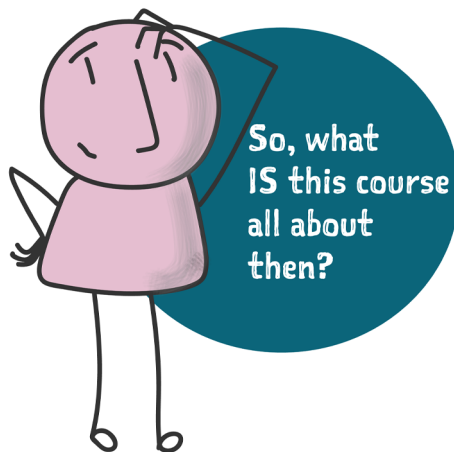
Head of Intellectual Property, The Open University

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Introduction and guidance

Introduction

So, what IS this course all about then?

This free course, *Building confidence in using online learning forums*, lasts 8 hours and is divided into four study 'sessions'. Each session involves approximately 2 hours of study. You can work through the course at a pace that suits you and at times that fit around your daily life and routine. You can do one session per week, or you can do more or less than one session per week – whatever suits your own pace best. So, if you have more time one week, you can happily complete a further study session and, if you have less time one week, you can go more slowly.

The four sessions are linked to ensure a coherent flow through the course as follows.

- **Session 1: Forums as you see them**

    This session introduces some of the main themes that will be developed further in Sessions 2–4. You will reflect on your own experience of using forums and on what some Open University students have said about using forums. This session introduces the benefits of getting involved!

- **Session 2: Forums as a playful space**

    This session will help you to see online learning forums as places where you can bounce ideas off other learners and develop your learning as you work with others, using a form of interactive writing that can be described as *playful*. The session will also help you to see how the playful writing *process* is important for *learning* on forums. Finally, you will begin to develop strategies for getting involved.

- **Session 3: Forums as a space for talking**

    This session will cover how to start the conversation on forums. It will also give you ideas for keeping the conversation going and help you to develop more strategies for getting involved.

- **Session 4: Forums as a shared social space**

  In this session, you will build on the earlier sessions and continue to explore ways of getting involved successfully on online learning forums. You will end this session with a chance to reflect on your learning over this 8-hour course.

After completing this course you should be able to:

- recognise the learning benefits of participating on online learning forums with other learners
- recognise factors that might be a barrier to effective participation on online learning forums
- implement strategies to help overcome any barriers to effective participation on online learning forums
- use strategies to participate more fully in interactions on online learning forums, including ways of listening and responding to different points of view, and taking part in, and encouraging, discussion.

Why is this course important?

A research project to explore students' experiences of using and participating on online learning forums was carried out at The Open University in the UK (Griffin and Roy, 2019). As a distance-learning university, The Open University uses online learning forums in most of its courses and modules. The feedback from Open University students and the main findings from this research project have led to the development of this course.

- What do you think many students reported in this study?
- A surprisingly common theme was that many of them felt 'anxious and a bit nervous' about posting to their online learning forums. This feeling of nervousness, fear and anxiety was reported by students at all of the different levels of university study: by 1st, 2nd and 3rd year undergraduate students, and by postgraduate students doing the Masters in Education.

If you are an online learner in any context, and your course uses online learning forums, this course is for you! You don't have to be a university student for this course to be relevant. You might be learning online for work or out of personal interest. Equally, if you are just interested in taking part in forums and don't know where to start, this course can help.

This course will allow you to develop an understanding of how and why online learning forums can be good for learning, and give you a chance to think about your own experience and views of using them. It will also provide tips and guidance to help you make the most of using online learning forums. Most importantly, it will help you to get involved with more confidence.

Get started with Session 1.

Session 1: Forums as you see them

Introduction

Welcome to Session 1 of this free course which aims to build your confidence in getting involved when using online learning forums.

In this, the first of four study sessions, you will start to consider how you feel about using online learning forums – no matter whether you already have experience of using them. You'll consider whether you feel – or would feel – more excited or more anxious about posting to online learning forums, and you will see examples of what some Open University students have said about them. You will also begin to consider some of the benefits of getting involved on online learning forums for you as a learner.

By the end of this session, you should be able to:

- understand where you are starting from when using online learning forums
- describe the likely purpose(s) of online learning forums
- describe some ways in which getting involved on online learning forums can help your learning.

Session 1 starts with a short reflective quiz. You will reflect on your experience of using online learning forums and then consider both the possible benefits and the problems involved in using them.

1 What is your experience of using online learning forums?
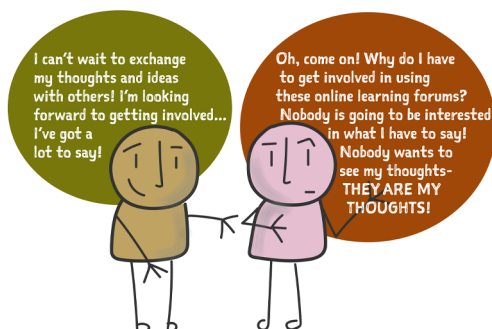
Figure 1 Differing views of forums

Figure 1 shows two opposing views of getting involved on online learning forums. You might associate yourself with either one or the other or you might be somewhere in between. In the activities that follow, you are asked to think about how you feel about using online learning forums. And, if you have used them already, you will be able to reflect on this experience.

Activity 1 gives you a chance to think about any experience you already have of using online forums and to consider how you feel about using them.

Activity 1 Reflecting on your online forum experiences
Allow about 15 minutes

Blank boxes are provided for each question below. You can record your answers to the questions in them. When you click 'Save', your answers are stored and you can return to them at any point to review or amend your response. Your responses will be visible only to you. However, if you prefer to make notes offline on paper, or in any other format, you can.

For each question, you can 'Reveal' a brief comment after you have saved your answer. But remember that your answer is *your* answer which will help you understand where you are starting from and what you think about online learning forums.

1. What experiences have you had of using online learning forum(s)?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Obviously, your answer depends on your own personal experience. Perhaps you have used online forums based around a hobby, or a social interest, or as part of an online community. Of course, you might have already used them as part of an online course for school, college, work or university. For instance, most Open University courses and

modules use online learning forums where learners can share experiences and ideas, raise questions and work on course tasks.

2. How do you feel about using an online learning forum? If you haven't yet experienced using online learning forums, how comfortable do you think you would feel about posting to one?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

You may find it challenging to lay out your own thinking in public on a forum for other people – usually strangers – to see and read. Equally, you might find it exciting and stimulating to share your thoughts and wait for others' comments and feedback. You might enjoy the chance to bounce ideas off other people.

How comfortable you feel about posting to an online learning forum will be linked to your enthusiasm and confidence in using one.

3. What do you see as the **purpose** of online learning forums?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Each course that uses online learning forums will use them in different ways. Indeed, forums may sometimes have different names – a 'discussion forum,' for instance.

Their purpose includes providing:

- an online space where you can learn from and with other people
- a place where you, as a learner, can share your thinking – making your thinking visible
- a place where there is no 'right' or 'wrong' answer, so you can develop discussions in the way you want to
- a place where you can be active – going beyond 'just' reading, listening or watching course content
- an online space where, together with other learners, you can build a sense of community, of being together on the same learning journey
- an online space where, as a learner, you can ask questions and benefit from answers perhaps from both your tutor and your fellow learners.

So, forums can serve multiple functions in online learning. But what might the benefits be of lots of different learners, from lots of different backgrounds and with lots of different experiences, sharing their thoughts and commenting on each other's shared thoughts? Could that sharing stimulate your own thinking? Could that sharing help you develop your thinking? And what about questions from your fellow learners – other people's questions about the thoughts you shared? Would you get such questions simply from reading, watching or listening to the course content?

In the next section you will consider the benefits of sharing and interacting on online learning forums in more depth.

2 Pros and cons of online forums

The next activity encourages you to consider what some of the problems and benefits of using online learning forums might be.

Activity 2 Considering the problems and benefits
Allow about 15 minutes

1. What potential problems can you see in using online learning forums?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Sharing your ideas on an online learning forum can potentially cause the following problems.

- The asynchronous (not happening at the same time) nature of online learning forums can be frustrating. For example, you post to your forum … and you wait, and you wait, and you wait … for an answer or a comment!

- Online learning forums are remote and, obviously, involve no face-to-face contact with participants. This means that there are no visual cues, which are often used when communicating face-to-face either in a room or in a video conference.

- You may feel anxious, nervous or reticent about sharing your thoughts with people you don't know on a personal face-to-face level (see Griffin and Roy, 2019).

- When sharing your thoughts on a forum, you may hesitate, perhaps trying to 'craft' a 'perfect' message so that other participants cannot find 'faults' in your post. As Session 2 will show, writing, particularly in education, is often done for assessment purposes. As a result, you might have feelings of being judged or assessed by what and how you write when sharing your thoughts on an online learning forum.

2. Having addressed some of the potential problems with using online learning forums, now consider the benefits, some of which were discussed in Section 1. How many benefits of getting involved on online learning forums can you think of?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Again, *your own* answers are the most important here. The list below simply suggests a few benefits. They might match your own thinking or expand it. Remember: there is no correct or definitive list here.

- They provide a space for interactive communication among online distance learners who might not get many chances to discuss things in other parts of the course.

- They provide opportunities to exchange ideas with fellow learners whose ideas may differ from yours. This can help you develop different perspectives which you might not have considered on your own.
- Feedback from your peers may help you to see areas of strength or weakness in some of your ideas.
- They provide opportunities to learn from other people.
- They provide opportunities for group support from your peer group. This can help to reduce feelings of isolation when you are studying online at a distance.
- They provide opportunities for *collaboration* with other people. Working collaboratively is often seen as a key skill by employers.
- They provide opportunities to ask for help, guidance and support from both fellow learners and your tutor(s).
- They provide opportunities for a *large* and *diverse* range of people (across time zones, contexts and places) to get involved. This offers richer, more diverse learning than a physical classroom, for instance. It also enables a wide range of people to share ideas (Desanctis *et al*., 2003).
- Sharing your thoughts in writing on an online forum may lead to feelings of success, especially when you get positive feedback or stimulate a discussion.

So far, you have reflected on your own experiences of using online learning forums and how you feel – or would feel – about using them. You have also begun to consider some of the *learning* benefits of getting involved in forum discussions. In the next section, you will read and reflect on students' experiences of using online learning forums.

3 Reflecting on student experiences of online learning forums

Time to see what students have had to say about online learning forums!
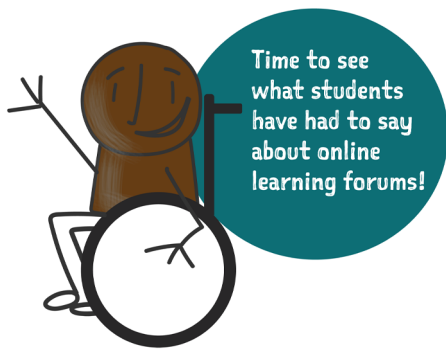
Now, you are going to see what some students from The Open University have said about online learning forums. In the next activity you will reflect on what seven different students have said about getting involved on online learning forums.

Activity 3 Responding to student voices
Allow about 30 minutes

1. Table 1 lists a range of views from seven students who took part in The Open University study exploring student perspectives on online learning forums which was reported in Griffin and Roy, 2019.

For each statement, note down whether the student is fearless or fearful of using forums, what their views tell you about using forums, and any other comments you have about their responses.

Table 1 Student perspectives on online learning forums

What student said about using online learning forums	What you discovered about online learning forums from the student's statement
1. 'It aided me in my learning, it is informative and improved my communication skills. The forum is important as it allows people to give alternative	*Provide your answer...*

viewpoints with great discussions.'

2. 'What I liked was that I could see Q&As from others but I was not so keen on posting on there myself because it's so open for everyone else to see.'

Provide your answer...

3. 'I found that the …. forum was a good way to communicate and ask other students how they were getting on, especially if I was struggling. The other students were really supportive in offering advice and helped me to keep faith in my studies.'

Provide your answer...

4. 'It was like tumbleweed rolling through it most weeks! Not many participants and felt a bit flat.'

Provide your answer...

5. '… it allowed me to find how my ideas differed from other students. It also helped me gain some confidence when my ideas were very similar, I would feel as though I could add to the group and this boosted my self-esteem and pride in my learning. It showed evidence of my

Provide your answer...

learning to myself in a distance-learning setting. Connecting with fellow students who had similar struggles helped as well.'

6. 'I posted relevant activities on there and always had replies from my tutor. I was disappointed to find not many students using it and they didn't post their activities on there for me to compare mine. It would have been much more useful if others had used it too.'

Provide your answer...

7. 'I liked the fact that we could bounce ideas off of each other as well as just keep in touch to help you feel less alone in your journey through the course. It also gave you an opportunity to share articles that had been published either in the news or on social media to potentially spark debate.'

Provide your answer...

(Griffin and Roy, 2019)

Discussion

Example 1 shows how valuable and useful the forum was for the student's learning and, indeed, how it helped to develop communication skills. Interestingly, this student went on to say:

> The drawback is that I don't enjoy typing everything onto the forum.
> I sometimes have problems in articulating my words, which makes me
> nervous when talking with others as some people have greater skills in
> writing.

This is an interesting example of a student who found clear, tangible benefits from getting involved in their online learning forum. But they were also a little nervous about actually expressing themselves in writing on the forum.

In Session 2, you will be introduced to the idea of *playful* forum writing. This technique can help you to relax when writing on a forum. Remember – this course will build your confidence and help you to reduce any feelings of nervousness you might have about getting involved on forums.

The student in example 2 seems to be saying that the online learning forum is a great place to get information and pick up answers to queries. This was a common theme from the students in the study. The student also reports being a little nervous about making their thoughts visible to others by posting on the online learning forum. You might be interested to know that this student concludes by saying 'I do think it's [an online learning forum] a good idea though'. So, again, as in example 1, this student found clear benefits to online learning forums but, at the same time, felt a little uneasy about posting to one.

Student 3 had a great group of supportive peers. Although this student sometimes struggled with the course itself, fortunately they found support from their peers. Indeed, this student went on to say:

> the forum is a valued source of emotional support not just purely for
> academic use.

Another student in the study said:

> It was nice to feel at times that others were in the same boat as you and to
> have people to talk if you had queries, etc. It meant you didn't feel as
> isolated by distance learning.

This quote highlights another potential benefit of online learning forums. By providing peer support, they can reduce feelings of isolation, or being alone, which can affect you as an online distance learner.

In example 4, like other students in the study, the student actually liked the online learning forum and would have probably enjoyed using it. However, they found it a bit 'flat' or lifeless because fellow students didn't get involved. This highlights how important more group involvement is for online learning forums to be that 'valued source' of support, as noted in example 3.

Student 5 clearly found the online learning forum valuable and learned a lot from getting involved. There is some evidence to suggest that this student was a little nervous and lacking in confidence. But by getting involved, they gained confidence and their self-esteem was 'boosted'.

Example 6 is a clear case of a student who would have liked to engage in much more discussion with their peers, but who was disappointed that fellow students didn't get involved. Similar to student 4, this highlights the importance of *everyone* getting involved on online learning forums – not just for your benefit but to help your peers' learning too.

This student's words very clearly highlight the benefits of getting involved on an online learning forum.

2. Can you think why engaging in a forum would be useful to you? Would you be willing to try it?

Note down your thoughts in the box below.

Provide your answer...

4 Summary of Session 1

In this first session, you reflected on your experience of using online learning forums or considered how you might experience using them. You also thought about how you feel, or might feel, when posting on an online learning forum. You saw some of the likely purposes of online learning forums and how posting on a forum may, understandably, make you feel nervous.

Session 2 will develop the idea of seeing the writing you do for online learning forums as playful writing. This will change the way you view forum writing. It is important to tackle any nervousness you may feel about posting on online learning forums. This is because, as you discovered in Session 1, forums can provide clear benefits for your learning. These benefits are perhaps best summarised in the words of one of the students who responded to the survey for the study on using online learning forums, reported in Griffin and Roy (2019). The student said the forums were:

> an opportunity to interact with fellow students and create a discussion leading to increased interest, understanding and interaction with topics. These are all positive elements that enhance learning and furthermore can help students feel less lonely and isolated in their journey of independent learning.
>
> (Griffin and Roy, 2019)

You can now go to Session 2 when you are ready.

Session 2: Forums as a playful space

Introduction

This session will continue to explore your experience of using online learning forums. It will also help you to recognise the ways in which they can support your learning.

In particular, it will begin to help you think about online learning forums as *playful spaces* where you can bounce ideas off other learners and develop your learning through getting involved.

By the end of this session, you should be able to:

- understand how your past experience of writing in learning contexts (such as school or college) influences how you think about the writing process
- recognise how 'play' can be a useful story of forum writing
- understand what it means to be playful with words, sections of text, images and experiences on forums.

1 Changing the story of writing

Stories are used to help shape how you think about different aspects of life. These stories inform not only how you think about things, but also what you consider to be important and how you respond. Sometimes these stories are based on scientific facts (e.g. vegetables and fruit are needed in a healthy lifestyle). Sometimes they develop because they are experienced repeatedly in a particular way (e.g. moving to the left of a staircase to let someone else pass). These stories become ingrained in you, in how you talk about

something, the images you associate with it, or how your body responds. One story everyone has is a story of writing: what it is for, how to do it and how to think about it.

In educational settings (schools, colleges, universities), stories about writing are reinforced by teachers, parents, guardians or peers. Often this experience of writing is for assessments where you are trying to show understanding. In these stories, writing is judged, considered as right or wrong, and can often lead to feelings of success or failure . However, this is not the *only* story of writing.
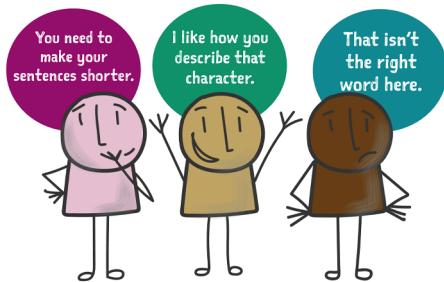

Figure 1 Moving towards a different story of writing

Forum writing, while sometimes done to show understanding or for assessment, mostly needs a different story of writing, where writing is done for a different purpose. The question is, what is this different story of writing? To begin to explore this, you need to start by considering your experiences of writing so far.

2 Thinking about your story of writing

You write differently for different purposes and depending on who will read your writing.

Try to recall a time when you wrote something creative or free-flowing that wasn't for assessment or learning. You might currently write a diary or a blog which isn't assessed, or you might have to think back to examples (possibly a long time ago) of writing poems or stories as a child. How does this type of writing differ from writing for assessment or learning activities?

In Activity 1 you will compare these different styles of writing.

Activity 1 Considering your experiences of writing
Allow about 15 minutes

Identify the differences between creative writing and assessment by completing Table 1.

Table 1 Comparison of creative and assessment writing

Question	Creative or free writing	Assessment writing
How do you feel when doing this type of writing?	*Provide your answer...*	*Provide your answer...*
What sources of inspiration do you use?	*Provide your answer...*	*Provide your answer...*

What types of language do you use?	*Provide your answer...*	*Provide your answer...*
What helps structure your writing?	*Provide your answer...*	*Provide your answer...*
Who are you writing for?	*Provide your answer...*	*Provide your answer...*

Discussion

You might associate creative writing with feelings of freedom, exploring and trying out. You may feel less pressure to get things 'right', where words just flow and it doesn't matter. Conversely, you might associate such writing with being a struggle. You might feel anxious doing it, because you either get stuck for ideas or can't think of something to start with.

You might have noted the content of your writing is more structured for learning or assessment activities, whereas creative writing can wander. However, some creative writing forms also structure your response.

You may have noted that in creative writing you can bring in ideas from anywhere that grabs your attention (e.g. seeing a picture, reading a blog or watching a TV show) whereas in learning and assessment writing you might focus heavily on course materials and suggested literature sources.

Reflecting on your experiences of writing is an important starting point to help you write on forums. But neither creative writing nor assessed writing is completely fitting for writing on forums. Forum writing requires a different story – one which is appropriate for its context and the purpose of *learning*.

In the next section, you will consider the idea of playful writing as a good story that can be used to shape how you think about writing on forums.

3 What is playful writing?

To consider what 'playful writing' means, it is important to think first about the term 'play' and what ideas this conjures up.

Activity 2 Exploring the term 'play'
Allow about 10 minutes

Look carefully at Figure 2, which shows three children playing. In your opinion, what makes this a picture of 'play'? (Hint: you might consider the types of interaction, the materials, the task or the activity.) Note down your thoughts either in the box provided or elsewhere.

Figure 2 Three young children at play

> *Provide your answer...*

Discussion

While anyone looking at this picture will note down slightly different aspects, depending on how they see what is going on, your comments probably fall into some of the following categories:

- The **structure of the activity** doesn't seem to be following a set pattern. The children can choose how they respond, with no right or wrong way of doing it.
- There are many **choices of materials** (plasticine, bricks, balls, pencils, paper, pots, paint).
- The **materials are being combined** in different ways to make new images.
- The children are **exploring the possibilities** through touch, sight and possibly through sound, smell and discussion (but you can't tell that from a photograph).
- It is **active** – the children are engaging mentally and physically with the objects and their ideas.

You should now see why including the characteristics of play in your forum writing can be a good way of getting involved on forums.

3.1 Why is playful writing a good story for forum writing?

In Activity 2, you identified some characteristics of play, including:

- a freer structure with no single end-point
- a choice of material
- the ability to combine materials in different ways
- the ability to explore possibilities
- *actively* engaging with materials and ideas.

These characteristics of play tell a very different story from the types of formal assessed writing you may be used to. But how does this help with forums?
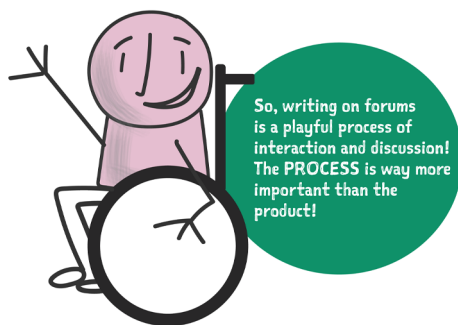

So, writing on forums is a playful process of interaction and discussion! The PROCESS is way more important than the product!

Figure 3 The interactive and discursive purpose of forum writing

The reason to rethink the story of writing for forums, and to consider it in 'playful' terms, is because the *purpose* of writing on forums is different from other forms of writing. Forum writing is not solely for showing understanding, or for writing that is complete and polished. It is not purely to create an end-product such as an assessment, or to present yourself and your ideas as 'perfect'. Instead, the purpose of writing on forums is more varied than this. The focus is on *learning*, not only through demonstrating or presenting (although they may play a part too) but also through *interaction* and *discussion*.

Therefore, writing in this space, with its multiple purposes, is about the *process*, not the product. This learning is not linear, straight and predictable. If it was, forums wouldn't add to or develop learning. They would merely act as another place to express one particular view. Instead, forums are a space in which you can play with the messiness of learning, trying out things and making different connections.

The journey of forum writing allows you to be reassured by other people that you are thinking in a similar way. Equally, it allows your ideas to be challenged as a way of broadening your thinking and understanding. Don't be afraid, or deterred from getting involved, if your thinking is challenged by one of your peers. Challenges can develop your thinking by broadening and expanding your understanding. This course helps you develop your confidence so that you can see challenges as part of your own learning by contributing to the development of your own ideas. Indeed, much like play, the process of forum writing and the responses you get might also add different sources or materials to extend your learning.

Session 2: Forums as a playful space
3 What is playful writing?

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The difference between linear and non-linear learning can be thought of as the difference between the images in Figure 4, where the pipe cleaners represent learning.
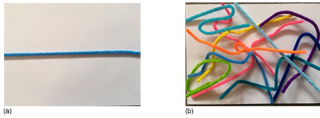

Figure 4 (a) A single pipe cleaner represents a linear, predictable path (b) Pipe cleaners in a messy, interacting, connected jumble

While the pipe cleaner in Figure 4a travels towards one end-point by working along the line, there is little evidence of new ideas, new materials or exploring going on. In contrast, in Figure 4b there are many connections, links and interactions along the way. When each pipe cleaner comes into contact with another, there is the chance that new under-standings will be created. This is all about the **process**, as there isn't one neat end-point.

You will now go on to think more practically about what playful, messy learning looks like on forums.

3.2 Putting messy play into forums

In the next activity, you will consider where the characteristics of play can be seen in examples of forum postings.

Activity 3 Messy, playful learning processes
Allow about 15 minutes

Take a moment to read these two scenarios of forum discussions. Note any examples of play.

Scenario 1

Susan:	Hey everyone! I found this really great resource for assignment 2 – 'A guide to philosophy: do prisons work'. I think it's got all the key information we need.
Krish:	Thanks!
Ali:	Yes, thanks Susan!

Scenario 2

Susan:	Hey everyone! I've been looking at this resource for assignment 2 - 'A guide to philosophy: do prisons work'. I think some of it might be useful, particularly paragraph 3 as it links to what we were looking at in the Bruner chapter in week 4. What do you think? What other articles are you using to support the argument that prisons need to support educational and social skill development as well as being a place to punish?

Krish:	Thanks Susan – I like paragraph 3, yes. It is clear and gives a slightly different view from the Bruner so I may also reference this. I have also been using Smith (2018) and Alexander (2010). If you look at these four together it gives quite a range of different views on the educational / social skills debate.
Ali:	Thanks Susan and Krish – this is interesting as I too was looking for more ideas for this section of our essay. I am finding Smith's ideas about higher education in prisons doesn't sit well with Bruner's idea of key basic skills – or am I missing something?
Susan:	I'd never thought of that Ali but yes that doesn't completely tie up. Thanks for the recommendations – maybe we need to think about the types of education and social skills being discussed – any more thoughts?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

You probably found some examples of characteristics of play in the two scenarios. For example, Krish's response in Scenario 1 mixes words and images using an emoji. In Scenario 2, Susan, Ali and Krish are all actively exploring different possibilities and engaging each other, through questions.

You will now look further at how you can make forums into a playful space.

4 Making forums into a playful space

Forums as a space may not necessarily make you feel playful – a point you will pick up again in Session 4. Generally, they are fairly plainly designed, with blank spaces that create a container which you may find difficult to write in. The tools you have to express yourself with – such as the basic text formats and use of punctuation – may also feel limiting. But think a little more creatively and there are many ways in which you can make the forum space more playful and, in turn, make forum learning much richer.

In this section, you will consider the materials you have to play with on a forum and the ways in which you can playfully combine them to explore different possibilities. These materials include individual words, sections of text, images and your own experiences.

4.1 Playing with materials

When you sit down in front of a computer screen, ready to write on a forum, the materials you have to play with may not be obvious. But if you take a moment to think what they are, you will see how rich they can be.

For example, words are often thought of as fixed: they have a meaning and there are rules about how to use them in a sentence. However, even common words hold slightly different meanings and associations for different people. Words in different combinations, or emphasised in different ways, can also lead to new meaning. In other words, playing with words can lead to learning.

In the next activity, you will explore in more detail how words can take on multiple meanings and associations.

Activity 4 Playing with individual words
Allow about 10 minutes

Imagine you are participating in a forum about how communities respond to new housing estates being built. Read the comment posted by Kerry, then complete the tasks below.

Kerry:	New houses, new people coming from somewhere outside the community, of course it will have a big impact on people's behaviour but also on how they see their community!

1. Choose a key word from this statement to play with (e.g. new, people, houses, outside, community, impact, behaviour).
2. Find a blank piece of paper and some coloured pens or pencils and write the word in different ways (big, small, different types of lettering).
3. In the spaces between your words, write down all the different ways you think of the word. (What links, associations and meanings does the word spark?)
4. Now re-read Kerry's comment with all these additional meanings around the word you chose.
   - What new ideas does it create?
   - What different meanings are added to what is being said?
   - What questions does it raise?

Discussion
The word 'community' can have many different associations. For instance, it contrasts with 'outside' and involves a sense of belonging, a sense of togetherness and a sense of tradition. These associations also contrast with 'new'.

By commenting on the different meanings of the word on the forum discussion, you can expand your own and other participants' thinking.

In the next activity, you will explore in more detail how words can take on multiple meanings and associations.

Playing with individual words in this way opens up the possibilities of understanding one comment, or even one word, in multiple ways, which creates new questions and new opportunities to explore. This is an active process, where you are thinking out from your original response, pushing yourself to be playful, rather than taking something at face value on the first reading. While you may do this individually, sharing your discoveries on the forum opens up possibilities for other people to follow. For example, by photographing and posting your playful word sheet or by adding a comment to explain the different ways in which you have thought about a word.

4.2 Playing with sections of text

As well as playing with individual words, you can also play with larger sections of writing, from sentences to paragraphs or even whole articles. This is about being playful with how you react to the text on initial reading. Then, deciding whether there are possibilities for

seeing the words and meanings differently as you explore more deeply. You can try this out in the next activity.

Activity 5 'Flipping' initial responses
Allow about 15 minutes

1. Re-read Kerry's statement. On first reading, did you assume that Kerry was suggesting the new housing estate would be positive or negative for the community? What made you assume one way or the other?

Kerry:	New houses, new people coming from somewhere outside the community, of course it will have a big impact on people's behaviour but also on how they see their community!

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Kerry's statement is probably interacting with your own assumptions and experiences, either positive or negative. One playful technique you can try is to read the same passage deliberately from a different perspective.

2. If you 'flip' your initial response and read Kerry's statement from the other perspective, how does that change the meaning of her comment?

Provide your answer...

3. Write a response to Kerry's post which recognises how her comment has made you consider it from two different perspectives. Try and write your response to keep possibilities for replies as open as possible on either side of the debate.

Provide your answer...

Activities 4 and 5 introduced some ideas for how to be playful with words, either individual words or sections of text. You will now move on to think about what other materials you can play with on forums.

4.3 Playing with images

Words are only one material you can play with on forum conversations. An interesting discussion, which makes different links and makes meanings richer, can often stem from the most unlikely places!

In many learning situations, you are introduced to a new idea or concept. Sometimes the words that go with that concept or idea are completely new and hold no other real-world meaning. But sometimes there are different connections to be made (see Box 1).

Box 1 Taking on different meanings

Consider, for example, the term 'behaviour'. For new teachers, 'behaviour' is often thought about in terms of 'bad behaviour' in classrooms and how to manage it. However, 'behaviour' has many other real-world meanings which can be used to deepen how you consider the word.

Figure 5 Lions in their natural habitat

Does Figure 5 conjure up any different meanings and associations of the word 'behaviour'? Here, behaviour has associations with survival, hunting, family groups as security, and interactions with the plants and animals in the environment. Here, behaviour isn't associated with misbehaviour but with how the animals successfully live.

Using the image of the lions has helped to provoke a different way of thinking about the concept of 'behaviour' for new teachers.

You can now try this yourself.

Activity 6 Using images to 'see' concepts or ideas in different ways
Allow about 15 minutes

1.   If you can, choose a key concept or idea from a course you are studying or related to your work, a hobby or an interest you have. If you are struggling for ideas, use the term 'improvisation'.

---

a. Enter your key term into your preferred search engine and click to see 'Images'.

b. Spend 5 minutes choosing three different images that are closely linked to your term but portray it in a different way.

c. For each image, identify three or four words that come to mind.

d. Look through your words and gauge which terms have pushed you to consider the term in different ways from your initial understanding.

2. Draft a forum post in the box below which you could post alongside two of the images you have found and which you think would spark a discussion about the meaning of the term. Then, if you are already participating in an online learning forum, why not post what you have written with the images you have chosen and see what kind of response you get?

*Provide your answer...***Your response:**

You will now look at playing with your own experiences on forums.

4.4 Playing with experiences

As well as being playful with words and images, you can also bring your experiences to a forum. While it is a personal decision whether to write about your own experiences on forums, personal anecdotes or reflections on real-world experiences help learning 'come to life'. This is partly because these materials are full of emotion, feelings, memories and physical responses. They were and are 'felt' by the writer and, therefore, are rich and full of meaning.

Just as being playful with words or images can help you 'read' or 'see' differently, sharing personal experiences can also transform your thinking and understanding of an issue, an idea or a concept. You will look at an example of this in the next activity.

Activity 7 Being playful with experiences
Allow about 10 minutes

Read the following forum discussion and then answer the questions below.

Andi:	Hi everyone, I was reading the article we have been set about loneliness in the over 70s in rural communities and I am sat here confused. On the one hand I have an article which suggests this is a major problem and on the other hand my mum (in her 60's) abd my grandma (in her 80's) who live in a village in Cumbria have a much better social life than me! Are my mum and grandma just very lucky. Are others experiences more like the article suggests?

| **Amma:** | Hi Andi - I know what you mean! My parents are always out but their village is very close knit. I suppose it depends a little on the history and location of the village. My parents' village isn't in the commuter belt (too far out) and has a lot of retirees who actively organise them to do stuff together. Whereas my husband's parents live in a commuter village for London which has expanded massively and has become quite 'anonymous'. They know a few folk, but not for socialising with regularly. |
| **Andi:** | Amma – that's so interesting! I hadn't thought about size/ population type, and neither did the article which focused on service and spaces for community activity. |

1. How did Andi keep the tone of her posts playful?

2. How did Andi make sure she had left her initial post open enough for anyone to come into the conversation, no matter what their experiences?

3. What was the impact of bringing these experiences together on the forum on Andi and Amma's understanding of the issues?

> *Provide your answer...*

Discussion

Andi keeps her initial posting playful by bringing in some humour, contrasting her mum's and grandma's social life with her own and suggesting that they may be luckier than her. Andi ends by throwing in a fairly open question encouraging others to respond, no matter what their own experiences are. Both Andi and Amma broaden their understanding of the issues raised in the article. By sharing experiences, they arrive at a position where they can be more critical of the article through realising that it missed out some important factors such as size and population characteristics.

5 Summary of Session 2

This session focused on the ways in which you can play with the materials available on forums: words, images and experiences. The examples in this session are just a few of the possibilities. You might have thought of others as you worked through the activities. However, whatever the method of being playful, all of the examples and activities you explored involved the five aspects of play which were identified in Activity 2:

- the structure doesn't have a set pattern
- there is a choice of materials
- the materials can be combined in different ways
- you can explore the possibilities created by the combinations
- it involves you and other people as active participants.

This session focused on how you can engage playfully on forums. In Session 3, you will look at how to respond in playful ways to other learners' posts and comments.

You can now go to Session 3 when you are ready.

Session 3: Forums as a space for talking

Introduction

In Session 2, you considered the ways in which online learning forums can be playful spaces. You tried some activities which helped you do that. You also played around with ideas as a way of creating responses which you could post on a forum thread. This session continues the theme of playfulness but extends it to think a little more about the kinds of interaction that can support both your learning and other people's learning.

By the end of this session, you should be able to:

- start a conversation on a forum
- keep the conversation going
- reply to other participants on a learning forum.

This session starts with a brief note about what participating in online learning forums means. You will then look at how to introduce yourself on a forum and get to know other participants. Next, you will consider ways of getting conversations going. How do you start a conversation about an issue or a topic in a way that will encourage other people to join in? Finally, you will look at how to continue conversations by responding to forum threads in ways that play around with and extend ideas in interesting and engaging ways.

1 Participating in online forums means reading too

First, think about what 'participating' and 'interacting' on online learning forums means. Although much of this session focuses on strategies for writing your forum posts, there is another important activity involved. That, of course, is *reading* forum posts. When you read posts on an online learning forum, you are very much *participating*, as there may be several ways in which your reading influences your learning and enjoyment of a course or module.

For example, reading online learning forum posts:

- introduces you to the tutor and other participants in your group
- clarifies your understanding of something
- helps you feel less isolated
- encourages you to find out more about a topic or concept
- can give you a different view of an issue.

Therefore, you will probably read what is on forums – and so participate – before you even consider writing your own post. However, it might feel like a big step going from reading posts to writing them.

2 Starting out: introducing yourself on an online learning forum
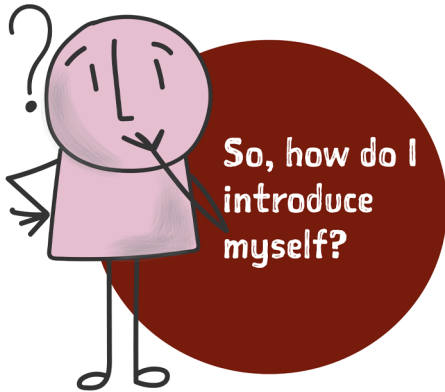
Your first contribution to an online learning forum will probably be a post in which you introduce yourself to the other people. Participants often say that they find even this seemingly straightforward task quite daunting. One of the main reasons for this is worrying about trying to 'sound right'. So, what should you say and how should you say it?

Note that what you do with other people on an online learning forum is referred to here as a 'conversation'. There are some similarities between writing an introductory post and starting a conversation, even though you are typing on a keyboard or keypad, rather than talking face-to-face in real time. In the next activity you will consider what some of these similarities are.

Activity 1 Similarities between starting a post and a face-to-face conversation
Allow about 10 minutes

Can you think of any similarities between starting a forum thread and starting a face-to-face conversation with someone you don't know?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Similarities you thought of might include:

- you often start with a greeting
- someone starts off by saying something or writing a post
- someone replies
- you then continue by taking turns to reply to each other.

In Activity 1, you considered some of the similarities between starting a thread in a forum and starting a face-to-face conversation with someone you don't know. In the next activity, you will consider what differences there are between them.

Activity 2 Differences between a forum post and a face-to-face conversation
Allow about 10 minutes

What are some of the main differences between writing a forum post and having a face-to-face conversation?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Differences you thought of might include:

- you can't 'see' who you are talking to
- you don't share the same physical space as them
- you can't read body language, such as facial gestures, which add meaning to language
- you have to wait for a response, unlike a spoken conversation where you usually get an immediate response
- you have no 'clues' about how long you might need to wait for a response
- the audience is much wider on a forum – you are always potentially talking to more than one person.

So, 'getting it right' can be more of a challenge when you are addressing people you don't know and who are not sharing the same physical space as you. This is because of the absence of visual cues or body language clues to show you what people are thinking. Unlike face-to-face conversations, you don't know when you might get a response, or even what that response is likely to be.

Not surprisingly, this aspect has been mentioned in research (Griffin and Roy, 2019). Figure 1 shows what two student respondents for that study said about using an online learning forum.

Figure 1 Student responses to using an online learning forum

(Source: student responses to survey used in Griffin and Roy, 2019)

Student 1 identifies an important concern that many people have when writing on forums – a fear of saying 'the wrong thing'. The good news is that these feelings *will* subside as your confidence grows over time, much in the same way that you become more relaxed with people the more times you meet them.

Student 2 identifies a further challenge: the audience is wider than just you and whoever you are replying to. Your tutor and other students or learners are also part of the conversation and may read your posts. This can make posting on a forum feel very 'public' – 'open for everyone else to see', as one student put it.

In the next section you will look at how you can make the most of having thinking time before you post on an online learning forum.

3 Using your time wisely

Figure 2 Online learning forums allow you to take your time to reply

Despite being potentially daunting, there are many advantages to using online learning forums which help to balance this out.

For example, you can:

- take your time to reply – unlike being 'on the spot' in real-time conversations
- think about how you want to compose your reply
- edit your response before you send it, or after it has been posted – which, of course, is hard to do in spoken interactions.
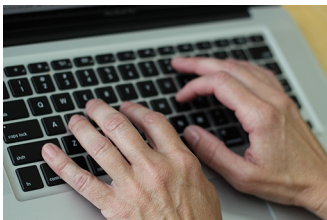
The next section describes some practical strategies to help you take your first steps towards successful and enjoyable online interaction. You will be guided through a way of writing an introductory post about yourself that is short, informative and inviting. And remember, if you are feeling apprehensive about posting on a forum, other people feel the same, too.

4 Introducing yourself on an online learning forum

When you first meet people face-to-face, you often begin by talking a little about yourself. Similarly, your introductory post on an online learning forum can also be something about you. The next activity shows you how to introduce yourself succinctly and in a way that invites other forum participants to join in.

Activity 3 Writing an introductory forum post
Allow about 20 minutes

The different parts of this activity will help you to write a brief statement about yourself which you can use and adapt as an introductory post on an online learning forum. The aim of your forum post is to include enough information to get the attention of other members of your learning group without writing so much that everyone else is too scared to respond or add their own contribution!

Even for a short post like this, playing around with ideas can help to overcome the dreaded blank page!

Part 1
Personal

Choose five words to capture the things that are most important to you, such as your hobbies. Don't think too hard about this.

- What are the first five words that come to mind?

- How many of these words can you use to write a maximum of two sentences about yourself?

Try several different options and choose the one you like best.

Provide your answer...

Professional

Explain what you do.

Remember: when you meet someone socially and they ask 'So, what do you do?', they probably aren't expecting a long, detailed answer! So, how would you answer this question in no more than two sentences?

Provide your answer...

Study

- What are your study plans?
- What are you looking forward to in your studies?
- What are you concerned about?

Again, limit yourself to two sentences.

Provide your answer...

Part 2

Now that you have your responses to the tasks in Part 1, copy and paste them into the box below. With some further work, such as adding an opening sentence, you have produced a potential draft of an introductory post for a forum. You can now save this and adapt it the next time you need it!

Provide your answer...

In the next section, you will look at other strategies to help build your confidence in using online learning forums even further. You will do this by starting a new thread in a discussion forum yourself.

5 Getting the conversation going: starting your own thread

Online learning forums are much livelier places when the participants, rather than simply the tutor, are actively involved. One of the best ways of doing this is to start a discussion yourself. But how can you write a post that encourages other people to respond?

One way to encourage responses is to ask a question. It might be a fairly straightforward question about assessments or tutorials. Or it could be a question about a specific topic, idea or concept that you have been reading about and want to discuss further with the rest of the group.

To start a thread, some question types work better than others. Read Box 1, which outlines two types of question. Then work through Activity 4.

Box 1 Open and closed questions

- A **closed** question is one to which it's only really possible to answer with one or two words: 'yes', 'no', 'don't know'. For example, 'Do you like sport?' or 'Do you play sport?' are both examples of closed questions as anyone can simply answer 'yes' or 'no'.

- An **open** question encourages a longer response. For example, 'How do you feel about playing sport?' or 'What's your view about playing sport?' are both open questions and will generally encourage a longer response than simply a 'yes' or a 'no'.

Activity 4 Asking questions
Allow about 10 minutes

Decide whether each question below is an open or a closed question. If the question is closed, try rewriting it as an open question in the box provided.

- Was Elizabeth I the last surviving child of Henry VIII?

○ Open

○ Closed

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Open example: What were the main issues around the succession after Henry VIII died?

• Does Mozart's reputation as a great composer continue today?

○ Open

○ Closed

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Open example: Why do you think Mozart's reputation as a great composer continues today?

• What do you think is a traditional belief?

○ Open

○ Closed

Provide your answer...

Discussion

This is an example of an open question.

• I'm really struggling to get going on this assignment, how do you plan your essays?

○ Open

○ Closed

Provide your answer...

Discussion

This is an example of an open question.

As you can see, open questions generate more detailed responses and encourage livelier discussion than closed ones. Now that you have considered how to start a conversation on an online learning forum, you will move on to thinking about a different kind of post.

This is one where you reply to a post added by someone else, in a thread that either they or the tutor has set up.

6 Keeping the conversation going – replying to other people

So far, in Session 3, you have considered:

- planning your own initial post
- starting a new discussion yourself.

Next, you will look at strategies to help you reply to other people effectively. This is an important part of keeping the conversation going. As with the other two aspects, it usually needs some pre-planning and thought. The next activity looks at how this is done in a face-to-face context.

Activity 5 Identifying 'signals' in face-to-face conversation
Allow about 5 minutes

A key part of any face-to-face conversation is *listening*. People often use verbal and non-verbal 'signals' to show that they are listening to the other speaker in a conversation. Read the short conversation below and **highlight** any examples of verbal or non-verbal 'signals'.

- Identify verbal signals in yellow
- Identify non-verbal signals in green

Interactive content is not available in this format.

Discussion

You might have noticed the following signals:

- monosyllabic responses ('Hmm')
- short phrases ('I guess so')
- non-verbal signals (nodding)
- facial gestures (raises eyebrows).

These types of behaviour can tell you something about the feelings and views of both the speaker and the listener. But, of course, this is more problematic if the conversation isn't face-to-face. In this case, you have to think carefully about how you use written language in response to other people.

In the next section, you will look at strategies which can help to keep online conversations going. First, you will look at an example of how using 'yes, and …' works on an online learning forum.

7 Keeping the conversation moving forward
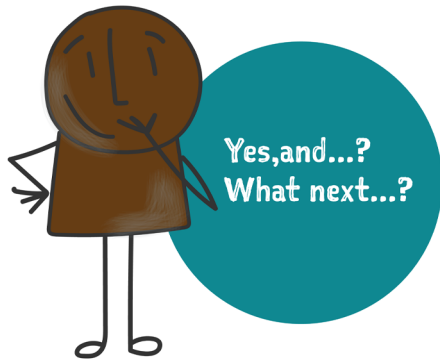
'Yes, and …' is a common feature of improvisation in the theatre. Performers use it to make sure the scene keeps moving forward. By saying 'yes' you are acknowledging what the other person has said and the 'and' moves it forward. This means that the possibilities of the conversation are kept open to be played with and built on.

You can explore this now in the next activity.

Activity 6 The possibilities of saying 'Yes, and …'
Allow about 10 minutes

Read the conversation below between Alex, Sheena and Ali. Then answer the questions that follow.

Alex:	I thought the article we were told to read this week is arguing that adding new houses to a small community always changes how people move around, changing the routes people take on foot and in cars.
Sheena:	Yes, that's the key message I picked out too, Alex, and it made me think of my small town where the new estate has got a small play area in the middle which the kids from my area can now walk to safely as there is a new path.
Alex:	Yes, I know somewhere where that's happened. It's meant that the new residents have met the parents of children living in the area next-door too!
Ali:	No, but that wasn't the main argument of the article. It was saying that even though it changes how people move around, new estates lead to new pollution issues. I don't think a few people having extra walking routes makes up for the environmental damage.

- Ali's response to Alex and Sheena's exchange didn't use the 'yes, and …' technique. Instead she uses 'no, but'. What effect does 'no, but' have on the conversation flow?

- How could Ali have rephrased her response to keep the conversation open to further possibilities? Rewrite her response below to keep the conversation playful.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Using the word 'no' or 'but' (or variations of them) blocks the conversation. It does this by setting up a feeling of right or wrong and stops a conversation from carrying on. Ali probably didn't mean to do this. She was trying to join in. However, the words she used stopped the conversation feeling playful, exploring possibilities and keeping everyone in the conversation actively engaged. This doesn't mean she can't express her opinion that the main argument of the article is the pollution, but this can be brought into the conversation as an 'and' rather than a 'but'.

For example, Ali's response could be rewritten as follows.

| **Ali:** | The movement of people is a really interesting point. I hadn't seen this as the main point but your examples have made me think more about that aspect of the article. I've been thinking more about the pollution angle and how new estates create new pollution issues. It's interesting that there is a positive environmental aspect (more walking, paths, outdoor play opportunities) and a negative environmental aspect (more rubbish, more traffic). Were these issues in your experiences? |

This type of response, although not using the words 'yes, and …', acknowledges the previous responses ('yes') and then builds from these, linking into her own perspective and maintaining the openness of the possibilities for the conversation to move forward.

Very importantly, by finishing with a **question**, Ali now deliberately opens the door for a continuation and development of the conversation.

In the next section, you will look at the importance of being aware of your audience when writing on online learning forums.

8 Thinking about the audience

Don't forget the audience!

As you saw in Activity 5, in face-to-face conversations, people use various strategies to show that they are paying attention to the other speaker. However, writing on a forum has characteristics of both talking and writing. In fact, when you compose a forum post, you are doing several things at once:

- you are typing on a keyboard or keypad and thinking not only about *what* you want to write, but *how* to write it
- you are reading and checking as you compose.
- you also have to keep in mind who will read your response – your *audience*.

This is similar to the process of writing in other academic contexts. For example, when writing an essay, you need to make it 'flow', so that you give your reader a clear idea of how one point links to the next. This is a strategy that can help make a post more effective on online learning forums, too. In fact, writing on forums is a very good way of developing your academic writing skills and finding your own style.

There are some strategies you can use which act as 'verbal signposts'. In academic essays, you might use these to link paragraphs, although using a more formal style (and possibly using words and phrases such as 'however', 'on the other hand', 'for example').

You can explore this in the next activity.

Activity 7 Revisiting Alex, Sheena and Ali's conversation
Allow about 10 minutes

Look again at Activity 6 and the discussion between Alex, Sheena and Ali (open in a new tab or window by holding down Ctrl (or Cmd on a Mac) when you click on the link).

Can you spot where they do any of the following?

- Illustrate an idea or a point.
- Offer an alternative view.
- Extend a point.

Note down your ideas in the box below.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

- Sheena introduces an example – the play area in the new estate.

- Alex extends this with his own example.

- Ali introduces a different perspective – although, as discussed in Section 7, using the words 'no' and 'but' stopped the conversation from progressing further.

Activities 6 and 7 encouraged you to think about who you are in conversation with and also the ways in which you can use language to help 'keep the conversation going'. This all helps to build your confidence in participating in online learning forums.

9 Summary of Session 3

In this session, you explored ways of introducing yourself, starting discussions on a forum and keeping conversations going. You tried to keep a playful tone, so that the forum is a friendly, welcoming and fun space, where learning is much more likely to happen.

In Session 4, you will look at online learning forums as a shared social space. You will start thinking about the importance of good online behaviour on forums and what barriers you may face when contributing to them. You will also look at how you can overcome such barriers. Finally, you will have a chance to reflect on your learning in this course and start to make plans to put this learning into action – by getting increasingly involved on forums as you move forward!

You can now go to Session 4 when you are ready.

Session 4: Forums as a shared social space

Introduction

In this session you will reflect on the importance of good online behaviour on online learning forums and then consider the barriers that you may face when contributing to them. You will then reflect on some of the barriers you experience and think of ways to overcome them. Finally, you will reflect on your learning throughout this course and start to plan to engage on online learning forums in the future.

By the end of this session, you should be able to:

*   understand the key features of good netiquette and how this applies to online learning forums

*   appreciate your own and other people's barriers when contributing to online learning forums

*   recognise the approaches that could be used when addressing barriers on online learning forums

- reflect on what you have learned in this course
- identify the ways in which you could use these ideas to develop your use of online learning forums in the future.

1 Netiquette

Many online learning spaces operate with codes of conduct and particular guidelines. Becoming familiar with these is vital if you are to get the most out of being a member of any online group which uses an online learning forum. In addition, there are commonly held principles which are seen to constitute good online behaviour. These are collectively referred to as **netiquette** (net etiquette).
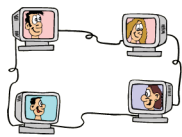
Although the basic principles of good 'netiquette' are similar to the features of good communication in face-to-face settings, there can be differences. This is because you can't respond in the same way through using visual or auditory cues, as you saw in Session 3.

In the first activity, you will look in more detail at netiquette and consider why it is important.
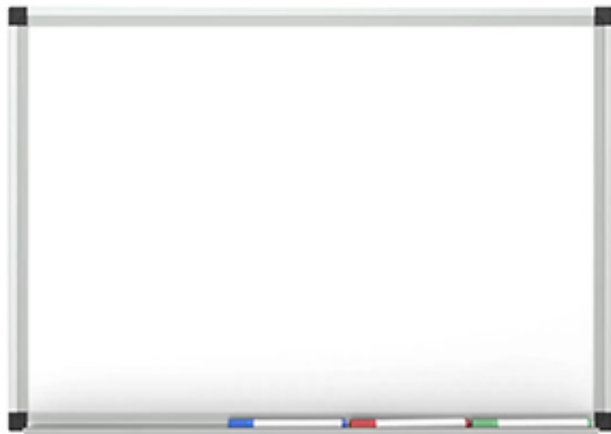
Activity 1 What is netiquette and why is it important?
Allow about 15 minutes

First, watch the video below and then answer the following questions.

Video content is not available in this format.
Video 1
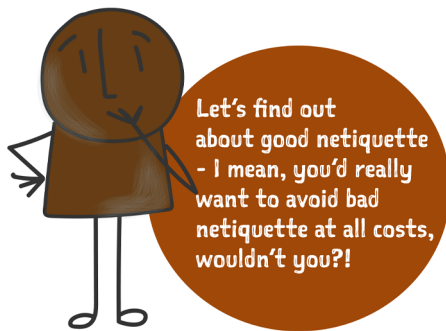
- What is netiquette?

Provide your answer...

- Why is it important in online communication?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

There are several different features of good netiquette and this video identifies just a few of them. You may well be aware of other features that constitute good online netiquette. It will be useful for you to reflect continuously on the different aspects of netiquette as you work through this session.

1.1 Features of good netiquette

Let's find out about good netiquette - I mean, you'd really want to avoid bad netiquette at all costs, wouldn't you?!

Poor netiquette can stop other participants from responding to you and stifle interaction. This section helps you to avoid poor netiquette by introducing the features of good netiquette.

Activity 2 Identifying good netiquette
Allow about 20 minutes

Table 1 lists some aspects that make up good netiquette (Elearning info-graphics, 2019).

- Can you identify why these features are important on an online learning forum?
- Can you think of any more features and why these may also be important?

You can record your thoughts in the blank column.

Table 1 Good netiquette on online forums

Feature of good netiquette	Why do you think this feature is important on an online forum?
Reading forum posts thoroughly before you respond	*Provide your answer...*
Avoid responding in capital letters	*Provide your answer...*
Avoid using sarcasm	*Provide your answer...*
Respect other people's opinions even if you don't agree with them	*Provide your answer...*

Be kind and respectful	*Provide your answer...*
Be as concise as you can	*Provide your answer...*
Keep an open mind and adopt a forgiving and empathic approach	*Provide your answer...*
Use the terms 'please' and 'thank you' if you are asking for assistance	*Provide your answer...*
Try to avoid correcting spelling and punctuation errors made by other people on the forum	*Provide your answer...*
Read your posts before posting to check for errors and the accuracy of your post and consider whether anything could be misinterpreted	*Provide your answer...*
Keep to the focus of the thread	*Provide your answer...*

Provide your answer...	*Provide your answer...*
Provide your answer...	*Provide your answer...*
Provide your answer...	*Provide your answer...*

Discussion

It is important to consider all of the features identified in Table 1 when reading and contributing to an online forum. By responding to a post, even briefly, you are clearly identifying that it has been read and acknowledging the contribution that someone has made to posting their ideas. It may have taken a lot of time and effort to post and so, as you began to think about in Session 3, it is important to focus on considering the feelings of other contributors when crafting your reply – just as you would in a face-to-face setting. This can then support other participants to contribute further. As you also saw in Session 3, this helps the conversation to flow.

By keeping your posts concise, relevant and to the point, there is more chance that other people will read it all and respond to the points you have made (Vonderwell, 2003, cited in University of Waterloo, no date). It is also useful to read all of the posts in a thread *before* responding because a question may already have been asked or answered (Elearning infographics, 2019).

Other participants may have posted something that you do not agree with. But by contributing a different view or perspective, respectfully and using constructive language, you can help to further develop the discussion. Constructive discussion like this keeps you open to new ideas (Saint Paul University, no date) which you can acknowledge. Such new ideas may support or challenge the way you think, which is an integral and dynamic part of the learning process.

It is important to remember that, without visual and auditory cues, the content of posts can be misinterpreted. Avoiding the use of capital letters, ambiguous terms, jokes or sarcasm can help to reduce the possibility of this. Think carefully about the language you use. Remember to treat other people on an online learning forum as you would want to be treated yourself.

If you feel particularly strongly about a post, take time to reply (University of Waterloo, no date). It is easy to respond quickly and then regret it. A post might have been written without sufficient thought, or in haste, with the person being unaware of the potential for offence. Everyone can make mistakes! If you have any serious concerns, you could report this to the forum moderator.

In the next section, you will look at some of the barriers that may prevent you, or others, from contributing on an online learning forum.

2 Managing barriers that may reduce contributions to online forums

In a recent study, students identified some of the concerns they have in contributing to online forums (Griffin and Roy, 2019). Some of these concerns involved the behaviour of other students on online learning forums. A selection of these comments is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 What six students reported about online learning forums
(Source: Survey responses for the study reported in Griffin and Roy, 2019)

Activity 3 What about you?
Allow about 10 minutes

- Do any of the statements resonate with you in any way?

> *Provide your answer...*

- Why have you identified these particular statements?

> *Provide your answer...*

Discussion

Some of the statements may mirror your own perceptions of contributing to forums. Others may be opinions that are either less relevant to you or you had not considered previously. You may enjoy participating in forums and believe that it helps you to articulate your own understanding further. Or you may, as Student E notes, avoid them 'like the plague'.

These statements demonstrate that everyone has very different feelings and opinions about participating in and contributing to forums. This understanding is important because it can be a first step in reflecting on the use of forums. It can also help you to

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overcome any barriers which may prevent you from getting the most out of the online forum experience.

2.1 Overcoming the barriers to contributing to forums

To overcome the barriers to contributing to online learning forums, it is useful to identify what those individual barriers are. In the next activity, you will consider a range of potential barriers and rank them in the order of importance to you.

Activity 4 What might stop you getting involved?
Allow about 10 minutes

Read the statements below about people's barriers to contributing to forums and add a number from 1 to 8 in the column alongside it to show how important each one is for you, with 1 being least important and 8 being most important.

Table 2 What's important to you?

Reason for not getting involved	How important is this to you?
I don't want to look silly	*Provide your answer...*
My posts are less detailed	*Provide your answer...*
I am afraid of negative comments	*Provide your answer...*
I worry about writing the wrong thing	*Provide your answer...*
I am always behind everyone else	*Provide your answer...*
I don't have the time	*Provide your answer...*
I feel inferior to other students	*Provide your answer...*

I feel pressure to contribute when I have nothing useful to add	*Provide your answer...*

Discussion

You might have found this activity difficult because you may have several barriers which you perceive as being equally important. However, by reflecting on these barriers, you can start to prioritise which of them is influencing you the most. You can then take small steps to address them.

In the next section, you will consider your options for addressing your barriers and enhancing your participation.

3 Addressing your barriers

So far, in this session, you have considered the different barriers which may limit people getting involved on online learning forums. You have also noted the barriers that are most important for you. In this section, you will address your barriers so that you can get involved and benefit from participation. Start by working through the next activity.

Activity 5 How should I react online?

Allow about 10 minutes

You will now consider three different scenarios and choose which responses you think are most appropriate in each case. Use your knowledge of netiquette and the ideas that you have considered in this course to guide your responses.

Scenario 1

Juan:	Hello everyone. To get this forum started I am going to share my thoughts on my favourite TV programmes. My absolute favourite is Strictly come dancing, but I also like crime drammas such as Lin of Duty. What about everyone else?
Rachel:	I agree John, I also like Strictly but I also really like soaps such as EastEnders.
Li Wei:	not a fan of soaps but I do like factual programmes about wildlife. Strictly is my worst nightmare
Aisha:	have you all got nothing better to do! I would NOT dream of watching anything that you have watched. I do not see the point of this thread!!!!!

Which response(s) below do you think is the most appropriate here and why?

a.   No response needed because the final post has shut down all further discussion.

b.   'I like TV programmes so what is your problem !Warning! Segoe UI Emoji not supported☹☹'.

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c.   'I appreciate that not everyone likes TV, but I find that it is a welcome distraction from studying and managing my family.'

d.   'Thanks for getting this forum thread started Juan. It is nice to see what others get up to in their spare time. I am a fan of music mainly, so I don't watch too much TV, but I might catch up on some wildlife programmes that Li Wei has mentioned. Which ones do you suggest Li Wei?'

Discussion

This is an example of an informal introductory discussion, as discussed in Session 3. It starts to develop a sense of community within a social network. Not everyone will want to contribute but responses (c) and (d) aim to neutralise any negative comments, continue the discussion and acknowledge the previous posts. People who often use social networks for communication talk about the power of positivity in dealing with participants who have different or negative views, as in this scenario. To keep the conversation going, and use good netiquette, responses (c) or (d) are good choices. Note that response (d) ends with an open question, inviting a further response.

By developing a sense of community, participants are more likely to become motivated and invested in the forum. You might also have noted there are some spelling errors in the first post. These are ignored by the other participants, so Juan won't feel embarrassed and reluctant to contribute again.

Scenario 2

You are asked to respond to a long discussion where there have been numerous posts. Some of them are very lengthy, highly detailed and discuss aspects which you have not yet studied.

Do you:

a.   Stop reading and log out. You lack the confidence to contribute and don't want to look or feel inferior.

b.   Read the posts and introduce yourself to the topic that you will be studying. You are not in a position to contribute at the moment but could at another time.

c.   Choose one or two posts and respond to them quickly by stating 'I agree'. This shows that you have at least contributed to the forum.

d.   Read the posts and take a strategic approach. You haven't the time or confidence to respond to everything. So you decide to focus on one post where you can ask an open question which will extend the discussion and enhance your learning in some way.

Discussion

By being strategic (Saint Paul University, no date), you can respond in a way that is appropriate for you at a particular time. When you have studied further, you could be in a position to ask a question or make a comment that will further the discussion. Remember: you have your own unique perspectives on a topic, so might have interpreted the source material in a way that provides a fresh perspective to other participants.

When writing a post, try to be concise (Vonderwell, 2003, cited in University of Waterloo, no date). Long posts are more difficult to read and, hence, less likely to be responded to by other people. Response (d) is the strategic option: by asking an open question, you keep the conversation going. Responses (b) or (c) are both ways of

keeping involved. Response (b) means that you are participating by reading, although you don't actively contribute through your own post yet.

Scenario 3

You ask a question on the forum. One person responds in what you consider to be a sarcastic and patronising manner.

Do you:

a. Ignore it. They are welcome to their opinion.

b. Feel a little upset but, on rereading their reply, they might have been trying to be humorous.

c. Reply immediately and tell them in no uncertain terms that they are rude and should keep their ideas to themselves.

d. Realise that the reply has knocked your confidence but decide to respond by stating 'I'm not quite sure about your response but I am sure that other people will also want to know the answer to this question as it was not clear to me'.

e. Feel very upset and, although you know the benefits to your learning of getting involved, decide that you will never ask a question or contribute again.

Discussion

Sometimes people respond on a forum thread without thinking about how their comments could be interpreted. By trying to defuse the situation in response (d), you are reiterating the importance of being able to ask the question on a forum. Very often, forums are monitored for inappropriate posts and they could be removed. If you are in doubt, or if any further instances occur, you should report this type of behaviour to the forum moderator.

In the next section, you will consider some of the benefits of taking your time to respond on an online learning forum.

4 Taking time to respond appropriately

In Activity 5, you considered how you might react to three different scenarios on an online learning forum. Next, you will consider three further scenarios and what may happen if you act too emotively, too quickly, or without thinking first. For example, if you don't take a little time to think before you respond, you may lose a potential opportunity for learning or you may upset the person who posted, even if you didn't intend to.

Activity 6 Thinking before responding
Allow about 10 minutes

In each of the following three scenarios, choose which responses you think are most appropriate in each case. Which responses would cause least upset and possibly keep the conversation going? Use your knowledge of netiquette and the ideas that you have considered so far in this course to guide your responses.

Scenario 1

After reading a post, you are not sure what it means as it could be open to misinterpretation.

Do you:

a. Respond to the post and ask 'What does this mean? It doesn't make sense to me!!!'

b. Reply by posting a series of 'confused' and 'laughing' emojis.

c. Read the post a few more times and then reply by asking a question, such as, 'That is an interesting point. Can you please clarify for me what this means in terms of …?'

d. Ignore it – you don't have the time to bother with something you are unsure about.

> *Provide your answer...*

Discussion

When posting online, always consider whether the meaning of what you are trying to convey is clear. By reading through your posts, you can identify whether there is any ambiguity. When reading a post that is unclear, consider that it might have been written in a hurry or that the person may not have realised that their post was open to misinterpretation.

By asking constructively for them to clarify in response (c), you are gaining additional insight to enhance your own understanding, extending the discussion and, importantly, not belittling their contribution. Response (c) is the considered response that requires a little thinking time. You are also providing an opportunity for other participants to respond, taking the conversation forward.

Scenario 2

You have discussed your ideas on a forum thread and a fellow participant has challenged your position, but in a friendly and constructive manner.

Do you:

a.   Get offended as you spent a lot of time thinking about this. Now you are worried that you have got it wrong and been made to look silly.

b.   Ignore the post. They are entitled to their opinion.

c.   Reply immediately and thank them in a sarcastic tone for their contribution.

d.   Read their post carefully and, in your reply, acknowledge their point of view. Respond to their comment by stating 'I had considered this from a different angle because …. However, I can see that …', or 'That is a useful point but from reading … it seems that …'.

> *Provide your answer...*

Discussion

It is easy to feel that any comment that challenges your ideas, however positive in tone, is personal and hence you can get offended or disengage from further discussion. By keeping an open mind, you can reflect on 'different perspectives' (University of Waterloo; Saint Paul University, no dates). You can also consider how this expands your understanding and facilitates your learning (response (d)) as well as the learning of other people in the group. Response (d) requires you to take a little time and decide not to take the challenge personally. In doing this, you provide an opportunity for a discussion to develop.

Scenario 3

You are part of a group of students who are responding to a task on a forum thread. One person is dominating the discussion. You feel that your and the others' contribution is not being fully acknowledged.

Do you:

a.   Get annoyed and reply rudely that they should stop and that you don't care what they think.

b.   Stop bothering to contribute as it is a waste of time

c.   Read their posts again and explain that you appreciate their perspectives and:

d.   ask whether they have also considered …

  ○   challenge their ideas and use evidence from the course to support your ideas

  ○   invite other members of the group to contribute.

e.   Choose another post from a different student that is less well developed. Reply to that one directly, by asking an open question, to acknowledge their contribution and further the discussion overall

> *Provide your answer...*

Discussion

There will always be participants who may be further ahead or have read more or want to contribute more to a forum. Contributing may help them to develop their own learning, so this is important for them. However, all students have a perspective on

what they have studied, so all contributions are important. There may be several ways (responses (c) and (d)) in which you could help to support each other, so that all contributions are valued. In addition, most forums have moderators, who are usually experienced in working with people who sometimes dominate discussions. Moderators can advise you about how to respond in these situations, as well as intervene directly, if necessary.

In the next section, you will reflect on your learning during this course.

5 Reflecting on your learning

In this course, you have considered:

- the benefits of online learning forums
- forums as playful spaces
- engaging and participating in forums
- netiquette and the barriers to contributing to forums.

In the final activity you will reflect on what you have learned in this course. You will then move on to thinking about how you can use that reflection and knowledge to develop your use of forums in the future.

Activity 7 Reflecting on the course
Allow about 10 minutes

Think about the different aspects you have considered in this course and reflect on your responses to them. Note down your answers to the questions below.

1. What are the key messages that you have taken from this course?
2. What new ideas have you gained from this course?
3. In which two ways will completing this course change how you use and respond to forums?

> *Provide your answer...*

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6 Summary of Session 4

There are many reasons to contribute to online learning forums. Short and long contributions all add up to be valuable elements of any whole conversation, forming a varied and interesting discussion on different subjects or topics.

Online conversations, as with face-to-face ones, can comprise thoughts, ideas and debates that are expressed through direct and straightforward statements. Or they can be articulated through more playful and unpredictable messages. There is potential, then, for any participant on online learning forum discussions to explore both the known and the unknown, shaping interactions in interesting ways, while acquiring a range of interpersonal skills along the way.

Remember: the more people who get involved in the conversation, the more interesting your online learning forum will be. If you are already part of one, why not use some of the techniques introduced here to help you with your next contribution?

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Acknowledgements

Introduction

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Week 2

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Week 3

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Week 4

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