
Forums, Chats, and Messaging

Forums

This section covers the following MTC skills: 5.4 Forums

Forums are a powerful communication tool within a Moodle course. Think of them as online message boards where you and your students can post messages to each other while easily keeping track of individual conversations. Forums are the primary tool for online discussion and are the central organizing feature in the social course format. You've already posted your first message to a forum back in Chapter 2. When you posted your news item, you were posting to a special forum used in every course for announcements and news.

Forums allow you and your students to communicate with each other at any time, from anywhere with an Internet connection. Students don't have to be logged in at the same time you are to communicate with you or their classmates. Figure 5-1 demonstrates how conversations are tracked through time, and readers can review the history of a conversation simply by reading the page. The technical term for this type of communication is *asynchronous*, meaning "not at the same time." Asynchronous communications are contrasted with synchronous forms such as chat rooms, instant messaging, or face-to-face conversations.

Because forums are asynchronous, students can take their time composing replies. They can draft and rewrite until they are happy with the results instead of feeling under pressure to respond immediately. A lot of research indicates that more students are willing to participate in an asynchronous forum than are willing to speak up in class. For students whose primary language is not that of the course, people with communicative disabilities, and the just plain shy, forums offer a chance to take as much time as they need to formulate a reasonable reply. Other students, who might be afraid of embarrassing themselves by making a mistake when they speak up in class, can double-check their responses before they send them in.

The asynchronous nature of the forums creates many opportunities for you not only to replicate the conversations you have in class, but also to create entirely new activities that are difficult in a classroom setting.

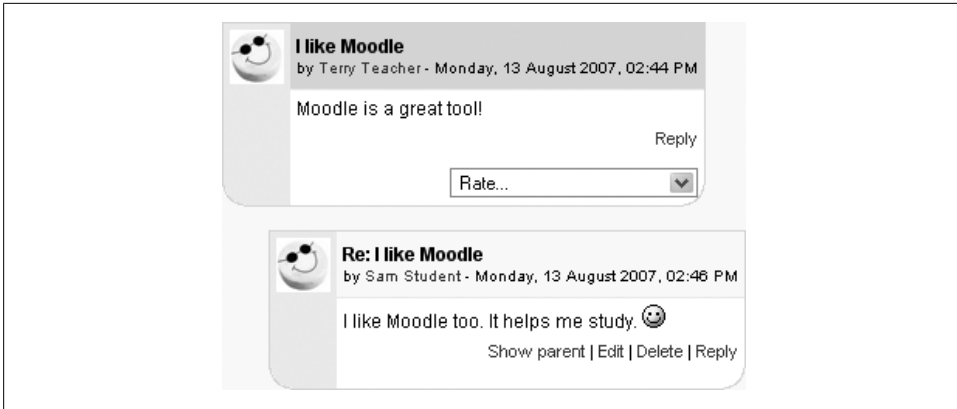


Figure 5-1. A forum discussion

Before we start creating a forum, it is important to make sure we're using the same vocabulary. It might be useful to think of the forum module as a party. Each forum is a room at the party: there's a living room, a kitchen, and a dining room. In each room, there are groups of people having discussions. Each discussion has a thread with everyone replying to each other about the topic. Without people having discussions, a forum is an empty, quiet space. Each forum can contain one or more discussions, which are comprised of one or more posts and replies.

Moodle forums also allow subscriptions. When a user subscribes to a forum, all new posts are automatically sent to the email address stored in the user's profile. This makes it easy to keep track of what's happening in the forums without constantly logging in.

Creating a Forum

Creating a forum is relatively easy. The key to success is choosing the right options for the type of forum you want to create. In addition to the news forum, Moodle has four basic forum types:

A single, simple discussion

You can create only one discussion in this forum. This will keep the conversation focused on one particular topic.

Each person posts one discussion

Each person on the class can start only one discussion. This would be useful when each person needs to post an assignment or a question. Each discussion can then have multiple replies.

Q & A forum

This forum requires students to post their perspectives before viewing other students' postings. After the initial posting, students can view and respond to others' postings.

Standard forum for general use

There can be one or more discussions in this forum, and anyone with permission can post multiple discussions.

To add a forum to your class:

1. Click the “Turn editing on” button.
2. Select Forum from the activity menu in the course section where you would like to add the forum.
3. On the “Adding a new forum” page, as shown in Figure 5-2, give the forum a descriptive name.
4. Select the forum type you want to use.
5. Write a descriptive forum introduction.
6. Select the general options:

Force everyone to be subscribed?

If you select Yes, everyone in your course will automatically receive emails of new posts. Otherwise, people can choose whether to subscribe.

Read tracking for this forum?

Read tracking highlights unread forum posts.

Maximum attachment size

When students attach files to their posts, you’ll want to limit the maximum size of their posts so you don’t use up all your server space. This is especially important if you are paying a commercial hosting company for your Moodle site.

7. Select the grade options:

Allow posts to be rated

Forum posts can be rated using either a numerical scale or a scale made up of words. By default, only teachers can rate forum posts, though you can use a role override to allow students to rate each others’ posts. This is a useful tool for giving students participation grades. Any ratings given in the forum are recorded in the gradebook (which we’ll cover in Chapter 13).

Grade

If you allow posts to be rated, you can choose a scale rating using the Grade drop-down menu. You can create your own scale (which we’ll cover in Chapter 13), but for now, just pick the default “Separate and Connected ways of knowing” scale or a number between 1 and 100. The points you choose are the total for the entire forum.

Restrict ratings to posts with dates in this range

You can allow only posts within a certain date range to be rated. This is useful if you want to keep students focused on the most recent content.

General

Forum name*

Forum type

Forum introduction*

Trebuchet 1 (8 pt) Lang **B** *I* U ~~S~~ x₂ x²

Path:

Force everyone to be subscribed?

Read tracking for this forum?

Maximum attachment size

Grade

Allow posts to be rated? Use ratings

Grade

Restrict ratings to posts with dates in this range:

From

To

Figure 5-2. Adding a new forum

8. Select the post threshold for blocking options, if appropriate. Students can be blocked from posting a certain number of times in a given period and warned when they are approaching the threshold.
9. Select the common module options:
 - Group mode*
This is another location in which to set the group mode for the activity. If group mode is forced in the course settings, then this setting will be ignored.
 - Visible*
This determines whether students may view the activity or not.
10. Click the “Save changes” button. The forum name will now be a link in the course section where you added it. If you want to go back to change any of the options, you can click on the hand icon to return to the editing forum page.

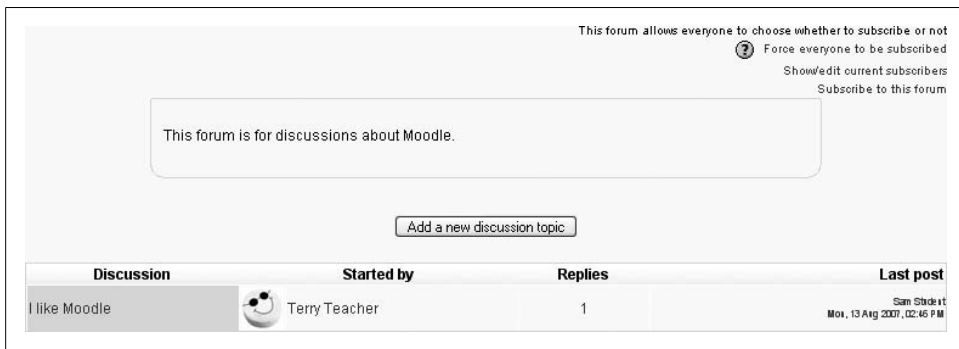


Figure 5-3. Viewing a forum

Using Forums

If you click on the forum name on the course page, you’ll see the main forum page, as shown in Figure 5-3.

There are some interesting features on this page. At the top right of the page is the text “This forum allows everyone to choose whether to subscribe or not” or “This forum forces everyone to be subscribed,” depending on whether you are forcing everyone to subscribe or not. Subscribing to a forum will send the user an email when there are new postings in the forum. The users can choose how they receive their emails in their profile. An alternative way of receiving forum posts is via an RSS feed. RSS feeds need to be enabled across the site and for the forum module by a system administrator.

If you click on the “Force everyone to be subscribed” link, you can flip back and forth between forcing subscription or not. If you aren’t forcing users to subscribe, the next link will read “Show/edit current subscribers,” which will give you an interface for seeing who’s subscribed and changing who is and isn’t receiving email. The last link will read “Subscribe to this forum,” which will subscribe you when you click it.

Below the subscription links, you’ll find the forum introduction you wrote when you created the forum. Below the introduction, you’ll see a button labeled “Add a new discussion topic.” You can use this to create the first discussion in the forum. If you’ve prohibited students from creating discussions, you’ll need to create one to allow anyone to use the forum.

To create a new discussion:

1. Click the “Add a new discussion topic” button.
2. On the new discussion topic page, shown in Figure 5-4, give your new discussion a subject.
3. Write your message in the space provided. If you don’t have the HTML editor enabled, you can choose the formatting type you used in your message. Most of

Figure 5-4. Adding a new discussion topic

the time, you'll want to leave it on Moodle Auto-Format, which will try to automatically recognize the format you used in the post.

4. You can choose to subscribe to the forum if subscriptions were enabled when the forum was created.
5. If you want to attach a file, such as an RTF document or a picture, click the Browse button, find the file on your computer, and click Open. Be sure your document is smaller than the maximum attachment size for the forum.
6. Click the “Save changes” button.

Once you submit your discussion topic, you'll see a screen telling you the post was successfully saved and how long you have to make changes to your post. The time you have to make changes is set by your system administrator for everyone on the Moodle site. The default is 30 minutes, so most of the time you'll have half an hour to go back and edit your post before it's mailed to the subscribers. After it's been sent, you can't edit it unless you have the privilege set for your role.



Unless you have checked the “Mail now” box, your post won't be mailed to subscribers until the editing time has passed. Unless your system administrator has changed the default, your forum posts won't be sent out for at least 30 minutes.

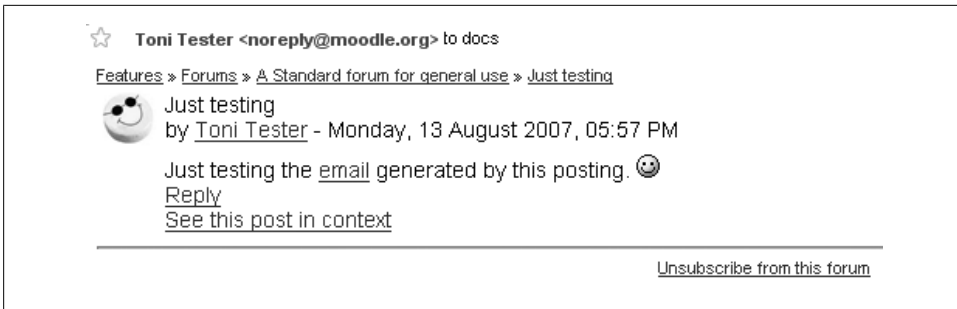


Figure 5-5. An emailed forum post

The success screen should automatically send you back to the main forum page. You'll see the discussion you just created. If you click on the discussion name, you'll see the post you wrote with any attachments in the upper-right corner of the message body.

If you can still edit the post, you'll see an Edit link at the bottom of the message body.

After the editing time has passed, your post will be emailed to all subscribers. If a student or instructor has opted to receive HTML-formatted email, she will receive an email that looks just like the posting in the browser. Otherwise, she will receive the plain-text version. As Figure 5-5 illustrates, the email will have links labeled Reply and "See this post in context," which will bring the user right to the forum post so she can post a reply.

If you've enabled ratings, you'll also see a drop-down menu at the lower-right side of other users' posts with the scale you've chosen. At the bottom of the page, below all the posts in the discussion, you'll see a button labeled "Send in my latest ratings." If you select a rating for the post and click the button, you'll submit your scores for the posts. The scores are then stored in the gradebook.

Once you've submitted a rating, it will appear next to the rating menu. If you click on the rating, you'll see everyone's ratings for that post.

Searching Forums

This section covers the following MTC skills: 3.14 Search Forums

All of the forums within a course are searchable as well as browsable. Performing a forum search can find useful information easily. All forums within the course are searched simultaneously.

The Search Forums block on your course page enables you to quickly search for a particular word within a forum post. If you obtain more than one page of results, you may wish to try an advanced search.

An advanced search enables you to refine your search in any/all of the following ways:

These words can appear anywhere in the post

One or more words you type in here will be found in all the places in the post they appear.

This exact phrase must appear in the post

The phrase you enter must appear exactly as you enter it.

These words should NOT be included

Identifying words you don't want can help narrow down the resulting list of messages.

These words should appear as whole words

The search engine will return posts that contain your words as part of a larger word. For example, if you search for "cat," posts with the word "catalog" will be returned. Selecting whole words will look for a space before and after the words you have entered.

Posts must be newer/older than this

This narrows down the number of posts according to time limits.

Choose which forums to search

This enables searching within one forum only.

These words should be in the subject

If you know the subject line of the posts you want, you can limit your searches by the subject line.

This name should match the author

If you only want posts from certain authors, enter their names here.

Managing Forums

Once you've created forums for your students, you will need to manage them during your course. As we discussed earlier, forums are great tools for getting people who don't usually talk in class to participate. If you make your discussions an important part of your class, you can really get people talking.

Of course, a lot of people talking in a forum means there's more to manage. Forums can quickly sprout and spread like an unruly weed, unless you do some management and pruning.

Managing expectations

The first key to managing a forum is managing student expectations. In your syllabus, let students know how often you intend to respond to questions and posts. Let them know if you will be checking in once a day or once a week. If you don't set expectations, some students will expect you to be on call 24 hours a day.

Jason: A professor I used to work with received a series of emails starting at 1:30 in the morning. The student wrote a question at 1:30 a.m., asked again at 2:00 a.m., and sent

an annoyed message at 2:30 a.m.. Finally, at 3:00 a.m., the student sent an email saying he was going to bed and was very upset the instructor had not answered his question in time to complete the assignment. Needless to say, the professor was very surprised to find the entire series of emails when she awoke the next morning.

Behavior issues

Dealing with rude and unruly students is another challenge of online discussions. Some students may say things in an online discussion they would never say in person. Rude or hurtful remarks can shut down a discussion or completely divert the thread of the conversation.

To avoid these situations, make your expectations for student conduct clear in your syllabus and elsewhere in the site. The use of rating scales can also moderate students' behavior if their grade depends on getting good ratings from you or their peers. Of course, if the situation gets out of control, your ultimate recourse is to simply delete the students' posts from the forum and then deal with it as you would any other disciplinary issue.

Archiving forums

When forum threads get very long, you may want to archive them and start up the conversation again with a good summary. Discussions can be archived one by one or by backing up the complete forum with user data, then restoring it.

To archive a discussion:

1. Create a forum named "Archive forum" somewhere in your course (the first or last course section is a good idea).
2. Go to the forum containing the discussions you want to archive.
3. Enter the discussion by clicking on the discussion name. At the top-right corner of the screen, you'll see a drop-down menu labeled "Move this discussion to" (see Figure 5-6).
4. Select "Archive forum" from the list.
5. You'll now see the discussion in the archive forum. Click the Forums link in the navigation bar and select the original forum from the list.
6. Post a summary of the archived discussion in the original forum to restart the discussion.

Using an archive forum allows you to keep the discussions manageable, while retaining all of the detail of the original. It's also an easy way to move good discussions from class to class or semester to semester.

Managing discussions is also easier with some help. A number of studies have reported the benefits of assigning groups of students to moderate duties for discussions around given topics. If a group of students knows they are responsible for being able to discuss

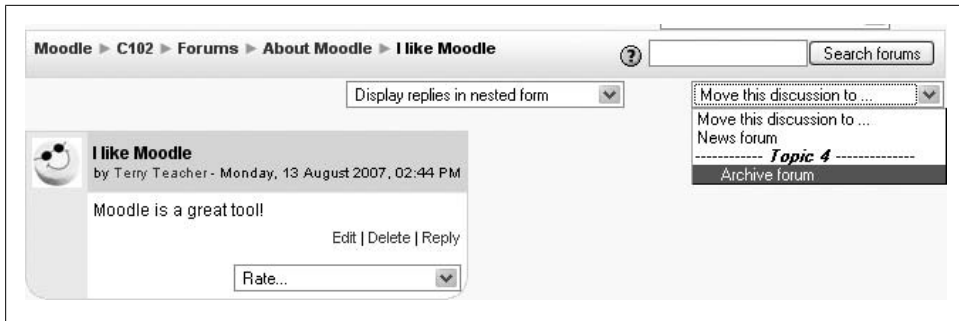


Figure 5-6. Moving a discussion

an issue intelligently with their classmates, they are much more likely to be sure they've done the reading and really understand the topic. They can be responsible for moving the conversation along, answering basic questions, and archiving and summarizing a discussion.

To create student moderator groups, assign a small team of students to each forum or discussion. Be sure to enable ratings for everyone, in order to allow the student group to use ratings.

Forum Capabilities

Forum capabilities are more fine-grained than any other module, giving you the ability to create a wide range of roles:

View discussions

The basic capability allows a user to view forum discussions but not reply or start new ones.

View hidden timed posts

This allows a user to set a display start and end date for new discussions.



Timed posts need to be enabled by your system administrator in order to make use of this capability.

Start new discussions

This allows a user to create a new discussion if the forum allows multiple discussions.

Reply to posts

This allows a user to reply to posts within a discussion. You'll probably want to override this capability, as well as the capability to start new discussions, for an archive forum.

Add news

A user with this capability can post news to the course news forum. By default, only teachers can add news.

Reply to news

This allows a user to reply to news postings in the news forum. By default, only teachers can reply to news postings.

View ratings

This allows a user to view his own forum ratings.

View any ratings

This allows a user to see forum ratings of other users.

Rate posts

This allows a user to rate forum posts if rating is allowed in the forum. By default, only teachers can rate forum posts.

Create attachments

This allows a user to attach a file to her forum post.

Delete own posts (within deadline)

This allows a user to delete his own forum posts within a certain time, usually 30 minutes.

Delete any posts (anytime)

This allows a user to delete any forum post at any time.

Split discussions

This allows a user to split discussions to create new discussions. By default, only teachers can split discussions.

Move discussions

A user with this capability can move discussions to other forums in the course.

Edit any post

This very powerful capability allows a user to edit any forum post at any time. By default, only teachers can edit any post.

Always see Q & A posts

This allows a user to view Q & A forum posts without first posting.

View subscribers

This allows a user to view the list of subscribers to a forum.

Manage subscriptions

This allows a user to edit and delete forum subscriptions.

Initial subscription

This allows a user to be subscribed initially to forums. By default, all roles have this capability, apart from administrators and course creators, so they don't receive a lot of forum subscription emails.

Throttling applies

This allows a user to be blocked from posting in a forum, according to the blocking options in the forum.

Effective Forum Practices

Forums are an important tool in your Moodle toolbox. They are the primary method for students to communicate with you and each other. Social constructivism is all about discussion and negotiated meaning.

Jason: I would argue that good moderation and intelligent deployment of discussion opportunities are more important to the success of a course than the static content.



MIT has said the same thing. It is posting many of its course syllabi, problem sets, and lecture notes through its OpenCourseWare initiative (<http://ocw.mit.edu>). Anyone can download course materials from over 700 courses for free. MIT does this because the value of an MIT education is not in the content, but in the interaction between students and the instructor. Moodle's forums are a key tool for you to add the same value to your course.

Getting students to participate in online forums can be a challenge. If you simply create a forum and expect students to communicate online, you will be sadly disappointed. Many times instructors create a forum, give some vague instructions, and then complain that the students aren't spontaneously communicating with each other.

Starting the discussion

For many students and instructors, starting the discussion is the hardest part. Once people start talking, at least a few will probably continue the discussion. As you start your class, it would be useful to have some icebreakers to help students get to know one another and to get used to discussing issues online.

The most effective icebreakers have a strong prompt to get people started. Ask specific questions like, "If you could speak to any person, living or dead, who would it be and what three questions would you ask them?" or, "What is your favorite comfort food and why?" You could also prompt people to tell stories about themselves. For example, you could ask students to tell a story starting with "On my last trip the funniest thing I saw or did was..." or "My favorite story about an animal is..." Whatever you use, make it concrete, compelling, and open-ended.

Encouraging participation

The primary key to student participation in online forums is tight integration with your course goals. Your forums should give students a chance to practice a skill, to

collaborate on a project, or to act as resources for each other. Of course, it is important to distinguish between the types of forums and the reasons for using them in your class.

Let's take an example to help make this clearer. Suppose you have a weekly reading you want students to discuss online before meeting face-to-face. There are two possibilities for this forum. If you want students to use the forum as a practice exercise, you'll want to create a place where students can practice applying the new ideas they encountered in the reading. So you may want to make each week a discussion of a case study. If you want the forum to be a resource, you may want each student to post a question about the reading. You can then use the questions as a basis for discussion in class.

The final strategy for encouraging participation is to engage with the forums yourself. If your class meets face-to-face, bring up important postings and discussions in class. By merging the online environment with the face-to-face environment, you show your students that you value their participation. One of the best examples of merging online discussions with a course happened in a management course of 400+ students. The instructor assigned groups of students to small discussion groups. She and her teaching assistants randomly read a subset of the discussions each week for assessment. The instructor would also bring the best questions and discussions to class, frequently devoting half of her lecture to talking about what was happening online.

Grading forums

Of course, being clear about the goal of the forum is only one step. As we discussed earlier, your goals for the class may be very different from your students' goals. You may want them to engage with the material because of its intrinsic value. Most students, however, are overworked, concerned about their grades, and doing only what is required in a large majority of their classes.

To help encourage alignment between your goals and your students' goals, you will need to have a grading strategy for student participation. Moodle has some great tools to help you create and manage graded forums. To be successful, you must clearly define your grading criteria. You will need to grade on quality, not just quantity. A student logging in to say "I agree" once a day is not adding to the discussion. Someone who posts a thoughtful reply once a week is adding more to the course. Of course, you will need to balance between grading for quality and allowing a discussion where everyone is trying to be more clever to get a grade.

Many students need scaffolding to be able to participate effectively in an academic discussion. A quick glance at the discussion forums on MySpace reveals a great many posts that would not be acceptable in an academic environment. Help your students understand the difference between social forums and academic forums. Do you want them to support their argument with citations? Do you want them to acknowledge the other person's point of view and then offer a critique? Do they need to support their own arguments with facts, figures, or appeals to a higher authority?

Once you have established expectations, you can begin to score according to the quality of their interactions. It is good practice to give students some credit just for participating, but full points can only be achieved with a high-quality answer.

Creative Forum Uses

There are many creative uses of forums, so we can only present a few of the most common here. Moodle forums are so flexible, there's really no limit to the types of activities you can develop to take advantage of the technology.

Peer assessment

Forums are an often-overlooked tool for peer assessment. Andy Diament, from West Cornwall in the UK, has used forums for peer assessment. His students were learning database design by developing a project over multiple weeks. Each week they would work in pairs to complete a lesson on a new topic. They would then use their new skills to complete a little more of their project and upload it to the forums for review. Each pair had their work critiqued and the best work of the week was used as a starting point for the next section of the project. Not only did the students learn from the peer review process, but they were able to develop their own project using the best work of the class.

Q & A forums for problem solving

John Rodgers, from Ontario, Canada, uses the Q & A forum type to good effect in teaching mathematics. The Q & A forum allows a single question post that the students must answer before they can see other responses. A lesson starts with the instructor asking the students to solve a math problem, identify and correct a misconception, decode the meaning of symbols from context, or engage in some other sort of exercise. The students usually spend 20–40 minutes working together in small groups to formulate a response. After the students post their answers, the Q & A forum allows them to see how others in the class have solved the problem. When that is complete, the students usually are given a series of questions to answer (using the quiz module) to see if their approach to solving the problem is robust enough. John reports, “Students are more engaged both in terms of depth (the problems force them to generate a deep understanding) and breadth within the class (the bottom of the class now engages the content at a far higher level). The time I can spend as an instructor providing quality mentoring has increased by an order of magnitude and the use of time has dramatically improved.”

This is a great example not only of using the forums but of using the power of technology to shift the role of the instructor from delivering information to mentoring students.

Interviews

Bringing outside experts into your class can be difficult. You have to coordinate schedules, tear them away from their busy lives, and then hope your students are prepared

enough to ask interesting questions. You can eliminate many of these problems by using the forums for communication between students and experts. The easiest strategy is to invite the expert into your forums as a regular participant. Simply give her an account and enroll her in your class. She can then participate in the forum and elsewhere in the course.

However, some people will be reluctant to participate in such an open-ended discussion. As an alternative strategy, create a forum in which students can submit questions for an interview with an expert. They can then vote on the best questions. You select the top 10 questions and send them via email to the interviewee. Your expert can then respond, via email, when it is convenient for her. If you post her responses to a new forum, your students can respond to her answers and even prepare a second round of questions, if your expert is up for it.

Debates

While many instructors frequently hope some level of debate will spontaneously break out between students around controversial issues or new concepts, it's sometimes difficult to get the ball rolling. Try assigning your students to groups on different sides of an issue. Each post must be a reasoned argument for their side of the issue, supported by evidence. They can be graded on how well they reason and support their argument.

Role-playing and storytelling

Tisha Bender, in her book *Discussion-Based Online Teaching*, discusses the advantages of using asynchronous discussions for role-playing and storytelling. In one course, she has students adopt a character from a story or novel and then play out a scene in character using the forum. The rest of the class watches the new drama unfold in front of them. Students have time to think about their responses and refine their contributions to better reflect the voice of the character rather than their own voices. Students are also less reluctant to fully respond as the character in an online forum, as they avoid the embarrassment of a face-to-face encounter.

Frequently asked questions

How many times do you answer the same question from three different students? Frequently, many students have the same questions about assignments, difficult concepts, or grades. If everyone is meeting face-to-face, you can answer the question out loud, but other students may not be listening to the answer. A fully online environment is harder to manage when the questions from students arrive via email. Many teachers of fully online courses complain about the constant barrage of repetitious questions. We recommend you create a forum in which students can ask questions about the administration of the course, and separate forums for questions about the subject matter. Have them consult the forums and the responses before sending you yet another email about the date of the final exam.



This feature is also useful in a business environment.

Reading study groups

A strategy to encourage students to do their assigned reading is to create reading study group forums. This strategy works well with groups of three to five students who are collectively responsible for discussing a reading before class. Each student asks one question about the reading, and the group must answer all the questions before the start of the class session. This encourages students not only to read the assignment but to think more deeply about it through the question-and-answer process.



This strategy of having groups of students asking each other questions about course material supposedly originated with a group of engineers who were taking a class together. They were all transferred as a group midway through the semester but didn't want to drop the class. The instructor agreed to videotape the lectures and mail them to the students. Very quickly, the instructor noticed the engineers' performance in the class was getting worse, so he insisted they watch the videotape together. He told them they had to stop the tape every 15 minutes, and each person was to ask a question about what they had just seen. They couldn't continue until every question was answered. By the end of the class, the remote group of engineers performed a third of a letter grade higher than the rest of the class.

Social forum

Although the majority of your forums will focus on the course material, it's important for your students to have an informal way to get to know each other, especially if the course is completely online. A social forum gives people a place to talk without worrying about being graded or having to appear really smart. It's a good idea to start your social forum with some fun questions. Ask everyone to post an introduction telling the class where they are from; what they hope to get out of the class; and their favorite food, favorite movie, or something interesting. The more interesting the introductory post, the more likely people will respond to it and get a real discussion going.

Chats

This section covers the following MTC skills: 5.2 Chat

The Moodle chat module is a simple synchronous communication tool allowing you and your students to communicate in real time. If you've ever used an instant messaging system like AOL, MSN, or iChat, you've used a system similar to the Moodle chat. In

the forums, you and your students don't have to be logged in at the same time. In a chat, everyone needs to be logged in at the same time in order to communicate.

Creating a Chat

To use the chat tool, you will need to create a chat room for you and your students and set a time when everyone will log in and meet. You can create one session for the entire course or set up repeating sessions for multiple meetings.

To create a chat session:

1. Click the “Turn editing on” button.
2. Select Chat from the “Add an activity” drop-down menu in the course section where you would like to add the chat.
3. In the resulting page, shown in Figure 5-7, give the chat room a name and provide directions on how to use the room in “Introduction text.”
4. Set the time for the first chat session in “Next chat time.”
5. Select the general options for the chat room:

Repeat sessions

There are four options here:

Don't publish any chat times

Creates a chat room that is always open and has no specified meeting times

No repeats

Creates a one-time chat room that will meet only during the time specified in step 4

At the same time every day

Creates an entry in the course calendar for a daily chat at the time specified in step 4

At the same time every week

Creates a weekly entry in the course calendar

Save past sessions

When a chat is complete, the transcript will be available for the amount of time specified here.

Everyone can view past sessions

This determines whether transcripts are available to students or just the teacher.

6. Select the common module options:

Group mode

This is another location in which to set the group mode for the activity. If group mode is forced in the course settings, then this setting will be ignored.

Figure 5-7. Adding a new chat

Visible

This determines whether students may view the activity or not.

7. Click the “Save changes” button. The name of the chat room will now be a link in the course section where you added it.

Using Chats

Even if you’ve set chat times, the chat is always open to students. Moodle does not restrict access to the chat based on the times you set when you created it. Instead, it creates entries in the course calendar that remind people to log in for the chat at certain times. If a student wants to wander into the chat at another time, he could talk to himself or anyone else who wanders by.

There are two versions of the chat room, an ordinary one and a version without frames and JavaScript, as shown in Figure 5-8.

In the ordinary version you can type messages in the text field at the bottom of the screen and/or beep other users. You may want to remind students to keep the beeping to a minimum, as it can be annoying.

Once you type a message in the text area, hit Enter and your message will be broadcast to everyone logged in to the chat. The Moodle chat works by refreshing the screen every five seconds, so you may not see your message right away.

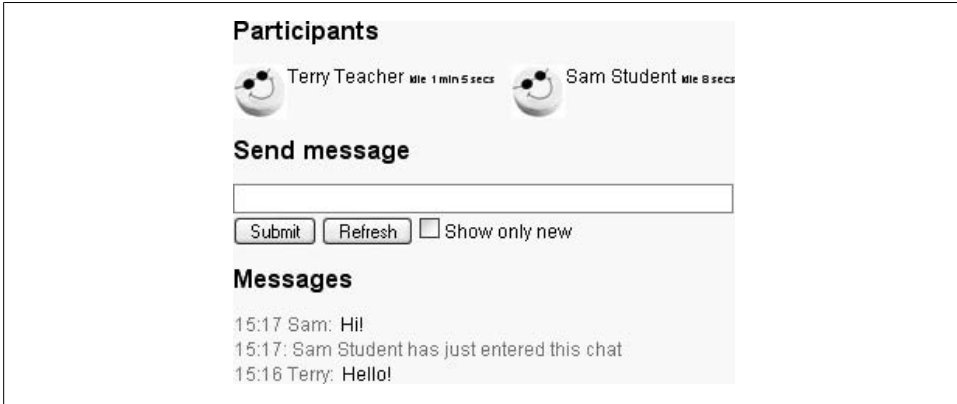
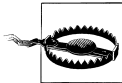


Figure 5-8. An ongoing chat

On the right side of the screen, Moodle lists the chat participants and how long they have been idle.

In the version without frames and JavaScript, you can send messages by typing in the text field and then clicking the Submit button. Clicking the Refresh button displays all recent messages.



A few larger sites have learned from hard experience that the current chat room in Moodle is not scalable to large numbers of simultaneous conversations. In fact, most servers can't handle more than three or four simultaneous chats. If you want to use chat a lot, your system administrator should consider using a chat server daemon to reduce server load.

Chat Capabilities

When compared to the forum capabilities, chat capabilities are very constrained. The three capabilities available in the chat module are:

Talk in a chat

This allows a user to chat.

Read chat logs

This allows a user to read the logs of a chat and review what was said by whom.

Delete chat logs

This allows a user to delete the logs of a chat. By default, only teachers can delete chat logs.

Effective Chat Practices

While the chat module may not be very feature-rich at this point, it can still be an effective learning tool.

Jason: I know of one professor who couldn't speak for a semester due to throat surgery. He posted his lecture notes to his course web site, and held class meetings in the chat room instead of on campus. The students were expected to come to the chat meeting having already read the materials. The chat was set up as a question-and-answer session in which students typed their questions and the professor typed his responses. The entire process was recorded in the archives. I was able to review the archives and was amazed at the quality of the interaction. The chat room was an ideal tool for this type of discussion.

The key to a successful chat is good moderation. The nature of the chat room makes it difficult to track different conversations. If everyone in the class is talking at the same time, the conversation will go by too quickly. It's important to set some ground rules to make the chat useful for everyone. Try to keep everyone on the same track of the conversation. If the conversation starts to get out of control, gently try to bring people back to the main flow.

Creative Chat Practices

Online office hours

Many students may not be able to come to your office hours, particularly working students, who have arranged their schedules to make it to class. The chat room is an easy way to allow your students to contact you during a scheduled time to ask a quick question about an assignment or a lecture.

Group chats

If you've set up student groups, each group can have its own chat. Set up a chat room and set the group mode to separate or visible groups. Each group can then use its chat room for communication between group members.

Last-minute exam preparation

You could set up a chat room a week or even a night before an examination for students to discuss any study questions. Students who are working at the last minute will appreciate the opportunity to ask each other questions about the material.

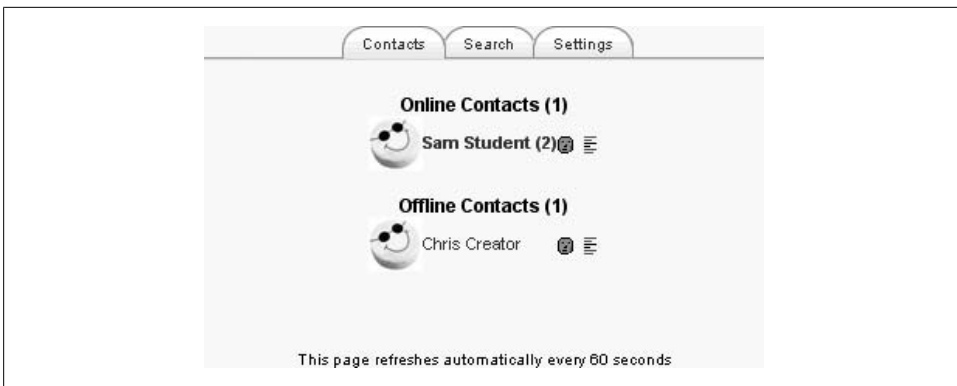


Figure 5-9. Messages window

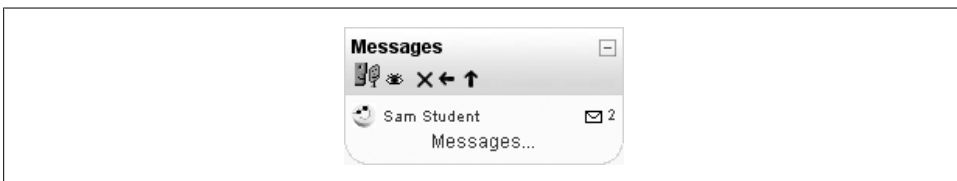


Figure 5-10. Messages block

Messaging

This section covers the following MTC skills: 3.7 Messages

Messaging is a private communication tool between student and teacher or between two students.

Using Messaging



If these instructions don't work, contact your system administrator and ask if messaging between site users is enabled.

Unlike forums and chats, messaging is not course-specific; users may send messages to each other regardless of whether they are enrolled in the same course. Your profile page contains a Messages button for opening the Messages window (see Figure 5-9).

To encourage the use of messaging in your course, you may wish to add a Messages block (see Figure 5-10) and/or an Online Users block to your course page.

To add a Messages block to your course page:



Figure 5-11. Sending a message

1. Click the “Turn editing on” button.
2. Select Messages from the “Add blocks” menu.
3. If appropriate, move the Messages block up and/or left, using the arrow icons under the block title.

The Messages link in the Messages block provides another way of opening the Messages window.

Sending messages

To send a message:

1. Open the Messages window, either using the button in your profile page or via the link in the Messages block.
2. In the Messages window, click on the Search tab to search for the person. If appropriate, check the box “Only in my courses,” then click on the person’s name.
3. Type the message in the text field in the pop-up box (see Figure 5-11), then click the “Send message” button. A copy of your message will appear above the text field.

Reading and replying to messages

When you are sent a message, the Messages window will pop up. Also, the Messages block will display the name of the person sending the message with a link to read the

message. If you have chosen to receive copies of messages via email (see “Message settings”), you will get a copy of the message in your email after the time you have specified if you are not logged in.

After reading a message, you may type a reply, then click on the “Send message” button.

Searching messages

In addition to searching for people, the Search tab in the Messages window provides the option to search for keywords, for only messages to or from you, and to include in the search people you have previously blocked from contacting you.

Managing contacts

You can add people to your list of contacts by clicking the “Add contact” icon (a face) opposite their names in the Messages window. Similarly, you can block or remove contacts added previously.

Message history

You can obtain a record of messages sent to/from a person by clicking the “Message history” icon (a few lines) opposite her name in the Messages window.

Message settings

You can change the message settings via the Settings tab in the Messages window.

Message settings include:

Automatically show Message window when I get new messages

Your browser needs to be set so that it doesn’t block pop ups for your Moodle site.

Block all new messages from people who are not on my contact list

This is a way of preventing unwanted messages.

Use HTML editor

This feature is only for browsers that support the HTML editor.

Version without frames and JavaScript

This is a more accessible version for screen reader users.

Email messages when I am offline

You can receive copies of messages via email without the need to log in to your Moodle site. It’s possible to set a different email address than the one in your profile.

Messaging Capabilities

Unlike forums and chat, messaging capabilities can only be set at the course or site level. These are:

Read all messages

This allows a user to read all messages in the given context.

Send a message to many people

This allows a user to send messages to selected users via the Participants list. By default, only teachers can send messages to many people.



To allow a user to send a message to many people, you must also allow the user to read all messages.

Effective Messaging Practices

Messaging aids private communication with students. It is a useful alternative to email because you can track all correspondence in one place and avoid clogging your email inbox.



Jason: Whilst it's true the messaging system can be set not to clog your inbox, I find email forwarding to be very useful. I'm logged in to my email more than I am logged in to all of the Moodle sites where I have an account. (At last count, I have accounts on six Moodle installations.) So I use email forwarding to make sure I get messages from people on various sites (especially *Moodle.org*).

Add contacts

The best way to manage your messages is to add as contacts people with whom you will communicate on a regular basis. The only way to access a message history with a person is through the contacts list, or by searching for the person in the search tab. It is much more convenient to have regular communication with people who are in your contacts list than to search for them constantly.

Use the participants list

One of the little-known additions to Moodle 1.6 was the ability to send messages to multiple students directly from the participants list.

To send a message to selected students:

1. Click on the Participants link in the People block on the course page.
2. Select participants from the list or use the “Select all” button at the bottom of the list.
3. Choose “Add/send message” from the “With selected users...” drop-down menu at the bottom of the page.
4. Type the message, then click the Preview button.

5. When you're satisfied with the message, click the Send button.

Creative Messaging Practices

Tutorial support

Students frequently find the messaging system a useful way of sending private questions to their tutors. There are times when a student doesn't want to ask a question in a public forum. Messaging provides students with a private communication channel.

Tutors can also use the messaging system to send messages to one or more of their students. If the students for each tutor are in a group, the tutor can use the Groups filter on the participants list to find all of his students and send them a private message.

Encouraging participation

The message system, combined with the participants list, is a great tool for encouraging students to stay engaged with your course. On the participants list you can easily filter students based on how long they have been inactive. At the top of the page, one of the options is to select students who have been inactive for any length of time from a day to five months. In a normal class of 10–15 weeks, if once a week you send a message to students who have been inactive for a week, you can remind them to participate in the course. This will keep them more engaged and improve their performance and retention.

Summary

Moodle provides various channels of communication for you and your students. Forums are an asynchronous, public method for sharing ideas. Chats are a great way to have simultaneous conversations online with a group of people. Messaging provides a private channel for you to communicate directly with your students. Communication is key to success for any class, and it's even more important in an online environment.