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Benefits of a discussion forum

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Students react to content, share challenges, teach each other, learn by stating and understanding, clarify assumptions, experiment, own new skills and ideas.

- ① Distance education greatly **extends classroom learning**
- ① **Individualization** of learning: Personal responses to forum topics are not limited in time or the length. Students have the freedom to continue dialogues about the topics that interested them most.
- ① Encouragement of **critical thinking**: Effective forum topics are open-ended and designed to encourage students to take a position on issues. To respond to a forum topic requires organized thought and synthesis of concepts introduced in class. If a student's views were challenged, he or she typically adds carefully considered reasons to back up previous comments.
- ① Student **autonomy**: Students have the flexibility to reflect on their thoughts and read the responses of others. Many students have stated that they routinely discussed the forum topics with friends, family and colleagues outside of class before putting their comments online.
- ① **Increased interaction time**: A 45-hour semester places severe limits on the quality of discussions and experiences possible in a course. Often a course is the only one of its type required in a program. The instructor is thus under extreme pressure to provide extensive and meaningful learning. In a three-hour class meeting of an average class size, an equal division of time allots only 5 minutes of discussion per student. Regular forum discussion adds hours of interaction over a semester.
- ① More **democratic exchange**: In any class of 25-30 students, there will be dominant personalities, and students who may feel intimidated or unmotivated to speak. Therefore discussions, even in small groups, do not allow equal time to all students. In the online forum, each student has a voice that will be heard by anyone who chooses to read his or her comments.
- ① More **time to formulate responses** and opinions: Because the forum discussions occur completely online, students have the flexibility to add their input when they are prepared. Some choose to answer questions immediately, while others prefer to consider the responses of others first. Undergraduate students are often much more comfortable discussing topics online after reading the viewpoints of the more experienced students. Students are encouraged to revisit past topics during the course, as their opinions changed.
- ① **Flexibility and convenience**: Students set their own schedule for the forum. A forum is available at all times of day or night to accommodate school, work, and family demands. The forum is accessible from any Internet connection via the World Wide Web, allowing students to participate even when they were sick or traveling.
- ① Students learn about the content from **another perspective**.
- ① Students experience a **professional communication** process. Participants experience personal and academic gains as result of their communication with their peers. A goal is for the students to value such professional interchange, and seek it out among their colleagues, and for electronic communication to facilitate the process.
- ① Students find a **content/expertise resource**. Some professions tend to be somewhat isolated. The forum introduces to others who could serve as resources during the course, and into employment.
- ① Forums offer the advantage of **archiving** discussions by student, topic, or other parameter.



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