Studying at Uni
UniSA Online Discussion Groups

University of
South Australia

For the Division of Health Sciences

What is an online discussion?

Many courses and resources that are offered online have a discussion group. This facility gives you the opportunity to have a discussion with your lecturer(s) and other students electronically. Discussion groups can be called forums, discussion lists, electronic conferences, computer conferences, chat rooms or just discussions. In your learnonline course (where your course and program information are located) these discussion groups are called forums.

The forums used in learnonline are *asynchronous threaded discussion groups*. This means that participants contribute at any time—they don't need all to be online at the same time.

A forum within a course can only be accessed by other members of your course. Once a discussion topic is posted, other members can 'post' a reply, which will appear on the list under the message they're replying to. This format of messages allows you to follow the *thread* or progression of the discussion.

Why participate?

Online discussions provide an opportunity to learn collaboratively with others. You may be required to participate in an online discussion as part of your course requirements. By exploring ideas with others you can enhance your knowledge and understanding and develop your communication and critical thinking skills. You can also get to know others students in your course and discuss common issues with them.

How to participate

To learn more about how to participate in the forum in your learnonline course, go to http://resource.unisa.edu.au/mod/book/view.php?id=39613&chapterid=17308 which is the student help guide for learnonline forum. Click on the links on the left hand side of the page.

Making the most of online discussions

When taking part in an online discussion, interact with the other participants as you would in a face-to-face discussion. Here are some suggestions for courteous and effective online communication.

Communicating courteously

You will be following accepted standards of 'Netiquette' by:

- introducing yourself briefly when making your first contribution – as you would when meeting someone for the first time
- constructing your contributions as suggestions, eg '*It seems to me*...', '*I think*…'. Absolute, definite statements like '*It is obvious that*…', '*Clearly*…', '*We all know…*' are difficult to substantiate and may inhibit contributions from others.
- challenging ideas in ways that are respectful of others. If possible, offer a positive comment before a negative one. Note that your name may be automatically associated with your comment

- reading your contribution carefully before you send it. Remember that it will be read and not spoken. The tones and pauses that we use in speech may not be clear and the message may be interpreted differently to your intention. Choose your words carefully.
- using humour carefully. It can be misunderstood and cause unintended offence.
- responding to others and not just 'lurking' (reading others comments without contributing). We have a commitment to each other to join in and let the other person know that we have read their ideas, even if we don't have a lot to say about them.

Communicating effectively

Effective communicating in online discussions also involves:
- being moderate in your contributions. Over-long contributions are self-defeating in that others will not read them. Present your ideas in digestible screen-sized chunks.
- keeping to the topic under discussion. This is not the place for tirades against the lecturer, other students or the world in general. Keep your questions and comments relevant to the focus of the discussion group.
- making sure that you have addressed any specific questions or topics that the lecturer has requested.
- being aware of the audience that you are writing to and the range of beliefs and attitudes they may hold.

Adding your ideas to a topic being discussed

You will gain much from an online discussion if you can enrich your understanding by building on the contributions of others. You can do this by:
- agreeing with what they have said and explaining why you agree
- re-stating or clarifying or explaining in your own words what they have said
- suggesting implications or logical consequences of their ideas
- giving examples or evidence supporting their ideas
- making a 'yes, but…' statement, partly agreeing with what they have said and then offering a further perspective
- explaining why you disagree with their statement
- suggesting a completely different viewpoint on the topic
- asking another participant to justify, explain or elaborate on their contribution
- inviting others to comment on - add to or critique - your views
- summarising or finding patterns in the contributions that have been made so far
- suggesting another direction the discussion could take
- inserting links to web sites in your discussion
- sharing journal references or other useful resources which are relevant to the discussion
- asking a question.

Introducing a new topic

Some ways that you can start a discussion on a new topic are by:
- saying what you understand the topic to mean , eg 'What I think xxxx means is …, or by offering a definition you have come across , eg 'I like Blogg's definition of xxxx as …''
- saying why you think the topic is significant, eg 'I think xxxx is important because…''
- saying what you find interesting or surprising about it
- telling of the insights you have gained from your reading, listening, thinking.
- explaining why you consider the topic to be irrelevant or unimportant.
- stating what you don't understand or like about a topic; what puzzles you.
- asking a question relating to a new topic