

## Disabled students and asynchronous communication tools in a VLE

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Use of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) can be adapted and extended to allow a more inclusive learning and teaching experience for all students and provide particular support for disabled students. This guideline presents key issues related to the use of asynchronous communication tools in a VLE, based on perspectives of disabled students and academic staff. Pedagogical, practical and strategic implications have been identified and set in context within discussion and action points to encourage extended reflection on individual, departmental and institutional practice.

### Asynchronous communication tools

Asynchronous communication tools, such as discussion boards, allow individuals to post questions, responses or comments online. Other members of the same discussion board may read that question/comment, and respond with their own remarks over time. Conversations are grouped within forums as threads and contain a main initial posting and all related replies. Students can take part at any time and any place that is convenient for them.

“You can learn more because you can develop your ideas (on discussion boards).”

**ALERT Student**

### Recommendations

#### Pedagogical

- Support the use of discussion boards to facilitate discussions beyond classroom time, to encourage extended debate and sharing of ideas.
- Consider allowing anonymous contributions. This encourages postings by all students, as they feel able to participate in an equal environment.
- Encourage access by students to the archives of earlier discussions for the purposes of study and revision.

#### Practical

- Take an active role in encouraging and guiding discussions. This will ensure more productive participation and a higher number of students engaging with the topics under discussion.
- Provide clear guidelines as to the role of the student and tutor, for example, frequency of moderation of the discussion by the tutor and expected contributions from the students.

#### Strategic

- Think about your use of discussion boards across modules and talk to colleagues, and/or develop a departmental/school policy about their use. This will enable effective scheduling of interactive activities and allow students to contribute to a variety of tasks within a balanced programme.

## Pedagogical

### Enhancing understanding and learning

For some students with disabilities being given access to a medium for extended peer and tutor communication is valued as an additional support mechanism. Use of discussion boards can be instrumental in clarifying misunderstood concepts, developing ideas and themes and synthesising ideas between student and tutor, and student and student. Tutors can use discussion boards to engage students in peer to peer sharing and dissemination of knowledge, and the students themselves can begin to respond to each other even without intervention from the tutor.

“When I get to know it (the discussion board) a bit better...it would be very much a learning tool, it will be something there as a means of support.”

**ALERT Student**

**VLE recommendation: encourage reflection by re-using discussion forums.**

### Equality

For many students, not just students with disabilities, online discussion can facilitate in establishing an environment in which they feel comfortable to exchange information and ideas. This enables each student to participate and contribute to discussion without reservations of being identified or appearing to ask inappropriate questions. Burgstahler points out that “the removal of social cues and social distinctions like disability, race, and facial expression through text-only communication can make even shy people feel more confident about communicating with others,” (Burgstahler, 1997)

“About 80% of students put anonymous posts on and so do we sometimes, just to move discussions along, with a kind of pertinent question or something.”

**ALERT Staff**

**VLE recommendation: allow anonymous participation to encourage less confident students to participate.**

### Confidence

Although to a large extent discussion that takes place online involves active participation, some passive engagement and listening also occurs, sometimes referred to as “lurking”. Lurking may raise issues of concern when the purpose of the discussion is to include all students, to foster a community and encourage peer-to-peer discussion. However, not all lurking should be associated with negative connotations (Salmon, 2000). Lurkers can also gain a valuable online learning experience by reading and learning from others’ contributions and in so doing build their confidence to contribute to future sessions. Online interaction in a variety of learning scenarios can “re-engage the unmotivated learner, and bring an authentic and challenging task within their grasp,” (DfES, 2005).

“The main use I get out of discussion boards is to see what other people put on and if I’m stuck I’ll note what other people have said, and if I’m really stuck I’ll ask a question. I’m not so interactive, I just sort of look at it and take it on board.”

**ALERT Student**

**VLE recommendation: accept that not all students will post to discussion boards, but may still be making use of them through passive interaction.**

### Reflection and revision

Archiving of asynchronous discussions within the VLE is a valuable tool for optimising the use for the purpose of reflection or revision.

Discussion boards can also be used to provide information about assessments, such as exams, and to answer any specific questions. This ensures that all students have access to the same information, giving a greater sense of equality. Archives of topics that have been previously discussed act as a productive point of reference for both staff and students in outlining questions, responses and comments that have already been raised. Students can view the archive to search for responses to common questions before contacting the tutor.

“At the end of the discussion everyone can print off the notes that they’ve discussed and then use those as a basis for their revision.”

**ALERT Student**

**VLE recommendation: clarify how discussion boards will be used for the delivery of assessment related information to avoid confusion with use of assessment tools within the VLE.**

### Inclusion

For some students with disabilities, especially those restricted by physical impairments, learning can be an isolating experience. Online learning and discussion can generate an autonomous learning community manifested through formal and informal exchanges among students and between tutor and students.

Online tutoring, mentoring and peer-to-peer exchanges can become a powerful mechanism for supporting learners with disabilities. One approach to successfully integrating isolated students into academic environments is to help create informal peer support groups and friendships (Burgstahler, 1997).

“I see making postings on discussion boards useful because you can give everybody the same deal.”

**ALERT Staff**

**VLE recommendation: encourage peer support groups by establishing smaller discussion board groups for informal interaction between students.**

## Practical

### Convenience and flexibility

Implementing asynchronous discussion in teaching offers students the flexibility to access information and support for learning in a time and place convenient to them. This is particularly important for students with physical disabilities who may not be able to easily access a particular location to participate in face-to-face discussions. It provides them with an alternative environment where they have access to discussion with tutors and other students at their own convenience. It can also extend discussion beyond regular class time to allow for more in-depth reflection and comments.

“In terms of mobility it helps...obviously, you can access the discussion boards...at home, rather than walking.”

**ALERT Student**

Discussion boards can promote a sense of belonging to a community for those who may be housebound (Debenham, 2001). A sense of equality also emerges when students post a particular question to the discussion board, they know that they all have access to the same response and are receiving the same information.

**VLE recommendation: to encourage students to extend classroom discussions, establish lecture topic specific threads.**

### Placements/year abroad

Discussion boards are useful for both students and staff while students are on placements or a year abroad. They can provide a mechanism for reporting back issues and observations, limiting feelings of isolation and helping students and tutors to keep in touch. This may be the only way students can interact as a group therefore it facilitates a supportive learning environment.

“...discussion boards allow the lecturers to be involved as well and to help solve our problems, or what queries that we've got.”

**ALERT Student**

Discussion boards set up to support those students studying abroad or in a work placement can assist by providing “up-to-date information, offering advice and offering support,” (Griffiths, 2003), which may not be otherwise so readily or conveniently available.

**VLE recommendation: use bespoke discussion boards to support placements and study external to face-to-face sessions. This gives students a central point of contact for tutors and other students in their cohort.**

## Participaion

As with face-to-face interactions, certain students will be more participative in an online environment, due to greater confidence or stronger computing or IT skills. Engaging all students in online discussion can be problematic and ensuring that online discussion is a requirement of a module has associated issues relating to assessment strategies.

A Higher Education Academy LEAP case study highlights the assessed use of discussion boards on a pass or fail basis, in order that students might work more collaboratively and learn from their peers. Here the focus is on interaction and ideas exchange rather than quality of response, and on this occasion the frequency and quality of postings increased as a result (Fairhurst, 2003). Using meaningful language in postings and headings conveys the importance of idea exchange as the basis of communication.

“...we had more use made of discussion boards...that may also have been a factor in that part of the learning had to be done when students were away so in some sense one of the only ways that they could have interacted as a group...”

**ALERT Staff**

**VLE recommendation: use meaningful subject headings and straightforward language in posts to highlight importance of ideas over format of response.**

## Strategic

### Balancing workload

A strategic approach is needed for embedding discussion boards into modules to ensure their effective use.

Scheduling tasks will enable students to contribute equally to a variety of discussion boards, and greater participation and levels of engagement will be possible where demands are balanced.

“We will only run discussion forums in one first year, second year, and third year course - the core courses...”

**ALERT Staff**

**VLE recommendation: to allow students to participate more in a variety of different discussion topics, conduct a departmental audit of when and how discussion boards are used.**

### Encouragement

The role of the tutor is crucial to the success of online discussion; they can facilitate interaction by informing, guiding and encouraging. For students, encouragement by their tutor is an important factor in the development, support and continuation of communication.

“...if the opportunity was there and it was encouraged it would be much more useful.”

**ALERT Student**

**VLE recommendation: be pro-active in discussion topics, making your participation visible to students. By starting new discussion threads and responding to queries, students will observe your level of activity, and feel assured of a timely response and changing content.**

## References

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## Discussion / reflection points

Based on the issues considered, below are some discussion points to encourage reflection on existing practice and provision.

### Pedagogical

- Do you allow anonymous postings to encourage contributions?
- Do you encourage online discussions beyond classroom time?

### Practical

- Have you clarified the tutor and students roles?
- Do you have clear guidelines as to what is expected of the students ie. rules for communication?

### Strategic

- Do you have a departmental strategy across modules, to ensure that use of discussion boards are scheduled, to enable students to contribute to each task?

## Action points

- Investigate the potential disparity of needs of your students to ensure you are utilising the correct tool. Ensure there is an alternative method of communication if this form of communication is not suited to all.
- Learn about e-moderating to be able to be an effective on-line tutor.
- Explore the other guidelines at the ALERT website – [www.dur.ac.uk/alert](http://www.dur.ac.uk/alert)