Discussion forums – ten ideas for practice

1. **Spark for the week** – Start the week, or a new topic, with a ‘big question’. Link it to a real-world situation, or something students can draw on from their own contexts. ‘What three things...’ is a nice way to get students considering the topic, and posting in a low-stakes discussion.

2. **Structured controversy (Devil’s advocate)** – Post a selection of opinions by experts, including those who disagree with conventional wisdom. In the forum, students are asked to choose one, and challenge or defend that position. They then find someone else’s challenge or defence, and provide a counter argument as a reply to that post.

3. **Case study** – Provide a case study and ask for analysis of the case. Reveal detail and aspects of the case as the discussion progresses to keep students coming back to the forum.

4. **Students as moderators** – Give the students a chance to moderate a discussion. Moderator roles can include synthesising and summarising discussions, making connections between posts, encouraging interaction, answering simple questions, and feeding back questions or common themes to the lecturer. Moderators working in pairs is good practice, as moderating alone can be intimidating and time consuming.

5. **Peer feedback** – Students use a forum for scaffolded peer feedback. In step one, they complete a task and post their work in a forum thread. This can be text based, but can also be images, a link to webpages, a video, or sound files. Students are then allocated a set number of other students’ work to review, and given a rubric or guidelines for what to look for and how to leave appropriate feedback. After this process, the lecturer can add additional feedback or advice to the thread, after having seen the peer feedback.

6. **Guest speaker** – Engage a guest speaker to host a discussion. This could include leading a discussion or debate, or it could be a question and answer forum. Guests could include professionals in the field, past students, community groups or charities, or academics from different fields to give alternative viewpoints. Someone unexpected or controversial can help to spark debate.

7. **Problem/solution** – Students post problems or challenges relevant to their learning. Challenge other students to post replies with solutions, as well as comparing advantages and disadvantages of each other’s posted solutions. In this way, students can crowdsource solutions, and build their online community.

8. **Jigsaw tasks** – Create small ‘buzz groups’ where a few students gather to informally discuss a topic in a private forum (the Groups tool in Blackboard creates private forums for each group). They then report back to the larger ‘class’ forum. In this way, a task is completed, or topic analysed, as a jigsaw activity.

9. **Bookends** – Use discussions to create a regular rhythm of beginning with an exploratory thread and ending with an analytical or feedback thread. This can be bookending weeks, sections or topics.

10. **Scenario role play** – Create a real-life scenario or problem, and assign students different real-world roles. Ask students to respond in the forum according to their role. Prepare prompts and provocations as the discussion unfolds, to provoke reactions and explore the different roles the students are role-playing.