Online Discussion Forums in Distance Learning
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Web based courses can be designed to facilitate learning and interaction using a number of different applications and tools. One popular and effective example of these tools are online discussion forums. Online forums are one of the oldest methods of web interaction: offshoots of the historical web bulletin boards used for almost as long as the Internet has existed.

Discussion forums have evolved to become well-used and active means of sharing information, opinions, stories, news and questions in virtually any topic one can think of. Most are open to the public, drawing a diverse array of participants from all walks of life. Educational discussion forums are set up and utilized in much the same way as public ones, with one big and important difference: the dialogue is conducted in the secure course management system web area, and usually restricted to enrolled students and teachers.

Utility of Discussion Forums

Because discussion forums can be participated in at any time of day around the clock, students can engage in the "conversation" when they feel motivated to do so, at their leisure. Teachers can post thought provoking questions, eliciting responses from the students. Students can work together on projects using forums to share their thoughts, ideas, and give progress reports to one another. Forums can also be used to address student questions that can benefit the whole class. They can also be used as a way for students to get to know one another, and offer peer support and insights. The expectation of regular participation can help students to actively engage in the learning experience and keep up to date on course topics and requirements. Students can learn even more about the content being studied by reading the writings of their fellow students as well as the teachers' responses to them.

Pedagogy of Forums

Discussion forums can be used to both construct and share knowledge, serving to promote cognitive

learning, reflection and critical thinking. Collaboration and dialogue are both cultivated, which can also promote affective learning and invite a sense of belongingness. Perspectives can be widened, as well as a deeper awareness of the world views and experiences of others. The online environment often gives students a sense of safety, which tends to encourage all students to join in the discussion, not just the more confident ones. In fact, it is basically the teacher's role to set up initial questions, establish netiquette rules, and encourage all students to engage in the discussions. It is important for teachers to respond to questions and ideas though on a regular, if not immediate basis. The learners however often tend to carry the energy and fill the forums with their ideas and opinions when they feel safe to do so. Quite often, students report that the interactiveness of the discussion forums is a favorite part of online learning.

Developing into an Online Learning Community

If online discussion forums are established well, and supported by rigorous dependable infrastructure, the interaction can lead to the development of online learning communities. These are groups of people who gather together to share learning, engage in intellectual exchange, and even form long lasting relationships between like-minded participants.

Resources for Online Discussion Forum Success

- **Open Learn: Making Educational Resources freely available**

  This site offers a number of education related forums for helping both teachers and learners develop skills in participating in dynamic, openly accessible online education.
- **Five rules for building a successful online community**

  Prolific Internet writer and editor, Robin Miller discusses the ins and outs of using forums to build community, interactivity and retention.
- **Towards The Development of Successful Virtual Learning Communities**

  University of Saskatchewan Education Graduate student, Sharon Porterfield describes the process of using forums and other interactive learning tools to create relationships within the learning milieu.
- Opening Successful Communication Channels in Online Learning

  Tracy Alberry, acting Director of the OEA, Online Educators Association shares how educators can use forums and the web applications for making the learning experience more meaningful for students.