Blended Learning Quick Start Series:
Supporting discussion and debate in blended learning

Introduction

Engaging students in discussion and debate can help students to form their own understandings of the issues and wider contexts of their disciplinary area. Learning can be improved when students are encouraged to form their own opinions and to develop their own ideas about a particular subject or issue.

By including discussion or debate within your teaching activities, you are actively helping students achieve a deeper and broader insight into the ideas, perspectives, and opinions of others.

Embedding discussion and debate requires careful planning; some students may not be comfortable expressing opinions in front of their classmates, and so it's important to introduce activities gradually so that students become familiar with the format, and build confidence over time. Think about the subject matter, group size, and what it is you'd like to achieve pedagogically as this will help to inform the format and scope of the activity. Also, think about the different roles that students could occupy in discussions and debates, including that of moderator.

Option 1: Spark debate with Mentimeter

A poll using Mentimeter can provide a useful starting point for a discussion or debate in class. Using their own web-enabled devices, students can respond to questions in real-time, the results from which can be used as the basis of a discussion. Used in this way, classroom response systems are incredibly useful in highlighting differences in opinion and can often act to reassure students that others share similar opinions to their own.

Option 2: Asynchronous online discussions

Blackboard Discussions are a great way to engage students in discussions outside of the classroom. Asynchronous activities allow time for students to reflect and contribute thoughtfully, and the online environment can often encourage contributions from those students who prefer not to contribute in class. To maximise engagement, it's best to link the discussion board activity to an activity in class, for example, you may review a particular theory or reading in the classroom and then have students discuss the key themes and issues in the discussion board.

Option 3: Activity-based discussions

Discussions often work best when built around a pre-activity. Consider setting a pre-class digital task by asking your students to find online content (e.g., articles, videos, or images) related to a particular topic or issue. Students would then post these artefacts online using Padlet or another collaborative tool such as Microsoft Word or PowerPoint. These digital artefacts would then form the basis of in-class discussions, either in groups or as a whole.