



# Use of online asynchronous discussion boards to engage students, enhance critical thinking, and foster staff-student/student-student collaboration: A mixed method study



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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** The ongoing challenges of managing large student enrolments and increasing demand from students for online learning platforms and teaching strategies has helped drive tertiary implementation of asynchronous online discussion boards (AOD). However, supporting and assessing students in such a forum remains contentious.

**Methods:** This explorative, mixed methods study examined and evaluated the usage and perceptions of a unique form of AOD used in a postgraduate nursing course. Student survey and semi-structured interviews with staff ( $n = 3$ ) were used to explore the structures, processes and outcomes of inclusion of an AOD in this online course. Triangulation of themes emerging from the staff interviews, survey outcomes, and student free text responses enabled appraisal of AOD, focusing primarily on its contribution to course content and assessment.

**Results:** Students' survey responses (approx. 24% of the cohort;  $n = 34$ ) were largely positive. Themes that arose from the qualitative data included i) AOD to build a sense of student community, ii) AOD to encourage interaction with and deliberation of course content, iii) stimuli and challenges around assessing the discussion board, and iv) easy to use IT interface made it a more positive experience. Student responses suggested that scaffolding, feedback and sufficient time allocation were required. Many factors impacted on student interaction with the AOD, including a lack of time due to paid work and other coursework and assessments.

**Discussion:** Overall, staff and students reported the assessed AOD was a positive course component. It encouraged engagement with staff, other students and the subtleties of complex course content, critical appraisal and discussion of evidence, and application to clinical practice. Exemplars and explicit marking criteria setting out the need for informed contributions were considered crucial by all stakeholders.

## 1. Introduction

In response to the ongoing challenges of managing large student enrolments, and an increasing demand from students for online learning platforms, online learning and teaching strategies are increasingly visible in healthcare undergraduate programs. Such strategies are used both as engagement and assessment tools. There is a developing body of research evidence that supports the value of online discussion boards (AOD) to meet key pedagogical aims (Campbell et al., 2008; Hudson, 2014). However, supporting, and assessing students in such a forum remains contentious (Lunney and Sammarco, 2009).

## 2. Background

As students increasingly utilise technology for educational purposes (Sinclair et al., 2016; Thomas, 2013), there is a commensurate demand for online learning platforms. Add the ongoing challenges of managing large student enrolments, online learning and teaching strategies have grown exponentially over the last decade, and have gained increasing visibility in the academic arena. While the number of online courses and enrolments has grown considerably, the research around optimising these platforms for content contribution, the interactive experience, and assessment opportunity is still evolving.

Online discussion boards are one of the most commonly used tools

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in online teaching to encourage student participation, collaboration, and deeper learning (Lyons and Evans, 2013). There are two main types of online discussion boards, asynchronous (AOD), that allow participants to contribute at any time and synchronous (SOD), where users must be online simultaneously (Campbell et al., 2008). Through discussion boards, students can communicate their ideas and create thoughtful and composed dialogue that unfolds over time, allowing for individual reflection and exploratory learning, and the development of literacy skills (Abell and Williams, 2014; Campbell et al., 2008; Kala et al., 2010). This supports the constructivist approach to teaching and learning that frames this innovation, and which promotes active and deep learning. This concurrently promotes social interaction to scaffold students' learning and knowledge development (Kala et al., 2010; McGarry et al., 2015).

Electronic, asynchronous discussion boards can be a highly effective means of engaging students remotely to share learning experiences and develop collaborative problem-solving skills that can become critical in effective clinical workplaces (Hampton et al., 2017). While there is a growing body of literature supporting the use of AOD in academia (Cameron, 2009b; Campbell et al., 2008; Geer and Barnes, 2001; Glaser, 2006; Hampton et al., 2017; Hudson, 2014; McGarry et al., 2015; Murphy, 2013), it is unclear how best to support such strategies and the students who engage with them (Cameron, 2009a; Hudson, 2014; Smith, 2008).

Assessment is a strong motivating factor for student engagement, particularly assessment that can be somewhat flexible in timing/due date and content. Thus, assessed discussion boards could be a valuable part of the healthcare academic's assignment arsenal. While using discussion boards to assess students' learning is indeed an emerging teaching and learning strategy used in many health areas (Cameron, 2009a; Hudson, 2014; Linjawi et al., 2012; Moore-Davis et al., 2015), there is a paucity of evidence about their efficacy as an assessment item. The current literature lacks clear examples of *how* students should engage with assessed discussion board threads, and how they can use them to *demonstrate* higher order thinking (Pucer et al., 2014; Schmid and Pozehl, 2014).

This study attempts to bridge some identified knowledge gaps and contribute to this emerging teaching and learning space. We explored themes of engagement/disengagement of postgraduate students within a course where the discussion board is both a pedagogical strategy and a mode of assessment. The current research utilised an AOD, which also contained three assessment items, and included supporting exemplars as to how to construct a discussion thread. These exemplars will also be explored in terms of their contribution and impact on student engagement. Thus, the aim of this study was to examine if this mode of communication facilitated student engagement to promote learning and critical thinking, and foster student collaboration within a postgraduate, multidisciplinary nursing leadership course, and particularly whether the use of AOD aligned with tertiary assessment requirements.

### 3. Methods

This explorative, mixed-methods study examines and evaluates the usage and perceptions of a unique form of AOD presented to students in a postgraduate healthcare course via the blackboard software system, an online learning environment and course management system. This mixed-methods approach used online surveys and interviews to obtain data to explore the processes, outcomes and perceptions of the discussion board as a contributor to the course and course assessment.

#### 3.1. Sample/setting

Students enrolled in the post-graduate course 'Health Leadership and Management' were provided with an interactive AOD as an integral part of the Masters-level course. The course is open to all healthcare professionals and designed to foster advanced leadership and

management skills for contemporary healthcare practise. It is designed to up-skill practitioners to develop creative and effective approaches to leadership and evidence-based strategies for decision-making and health care management. This course is offered through a multi-campus University in South-East Queensland, Australia, in two modes: on and off campus.

Students commenced a 13-week semester and after one week were instructed to commence contributions in the AOD. Required readings and associated guided questions were made visible to students every 2 weeks, and they had a subsequent two weeks in which to engage with the material and each other, before the platform was closed and the next AOD opened. Students were required to provide peer feedback and comment on other students' responses to create a dialogue around different experiences and the required readings. Two independent markers assessed the AOD contributions based on a marking guide developed by the course convenor. Components of the assessment guide included understanding of core concepts and the development of ideas, evidence of critical thinking, academic literacy and effective engagement with peers.

Despite provision of an exemplar, and clear instructions, students tended to initially write formally in the form of a 'mini essay'. Generally, students did struggle with this style of critical writing, or 'discussion', and it was deemed important to give them comprehensive feedback on the first AOD a week before they were required to submit their second. Feedback was provided directly onto the AOD to enhance student engagement with it as a source of important course related information.

A copy of the University code of conduct for social media guidelines, framed within the University policies relating to conduct, copyright and intellectual property, privacy, use of information technology and information security was provided to students to help ensure that comments were constructive.

#### 3.2. Quantitative data

An online survey was designed and created using the online survey platform 'LimesSurvey' (2016). The survey was designed and developed based on the limited existing literature and was reviewed and revised by a small panel of tertiary educational experts. A pilot run was conducted with previous students and staff to establish functionality, and content and face validity prior to release. The online survey commenced with an information sheet and consent form. Participants needed to 'click' to consent before they could access, complete and submit the survey, thus consent was implied by participants progressing beyond the information sheet and consent form, to the online survey. The survey itself took approximately 10 mins to complete, with 45 questions within 5 distinct sections, (i) broad demographic information, (ii) content value of AOD within the course, (iii) AOD to build a student learning community (virtual classroom), (iv) factors influencing use of AOD, (v) the use of the AOD as an assessment item (see Table 1 for Survey questions). Answer options were a mixture of 5-point Likert-scale responses (from strongly agree to strongly disagree), short response and free-text answer options.

Students from the Health Leadership and Management course were contacted through their Griffith University email, in Semester 1 2017, with information about the purpose of the study and an information sheet and consent form. This email contained an electronic survey link for students to access the survey (GU, 2016). No additional course credit or incentive to participate was offered for participation, participants accessed the survey after they had completed the course itself, and respondents remained anonymous. Participants were informed that they could choose not to participate without any impact on ongoing academic or professional support. Participants could close the survey window and not submit their responses at any time, if they chose not to participate or to 'withdraw' from participation.

Likert responses were averaged across students and presented as

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