Discussion Forum Moderation and Best Practices

Discussion forums are hugely important tools in running a successful MOOC; they allow for substantive community development, in addition to being excellent sources of feedback and ideas for future iterations of the course.

Forum moderators are the key to effectively managing these online communities. Moderators keep the discussions productive and relay important information (errata, student confusion or interest with particular topics, etc.) to the rest of the course staff. Forums may be moderated by any of a number of members of the course team, but dedicating enough moderator time to develop and sustain a positive forum culture is the best way to cultivate a successful discussion forum.

The Responsibilities of a Discussion Forum Moderator

- **Answer** basic questions posed by students, and direct students with questions to the right resources: syllabi, course documents, course updates, useful lecture segments, example problems, etc.

- **Relay** reports of errata, common misconceptions and questions, highly disruptive participants, bugs, and amusing or interesting posts to the most appropriate course staff.

- **Enforce** the Honor Code.

- **Edit** out offensive content from the forums, and remind the originators of forum etiquette and expectations.

- **Communicate** problems and successes with your fellow moderators.

- **Identify** students whose presence on the forum has a strongly positive impact. These students can be promoted to community TA's and publicly acknowledged.

- **Add** helpful items to the FAQ or Course Info page.

The Qualities of a Good Forum Moderator

- **Good or great content knowledge**: stellar students from previous years often make good moderators.

- **Solid communication skills**: the ability to organize positive, consistent, and effective communication with students, other moderators, and course staff.

- **Time**: keeping up-to-date with a large MOOC forum requires at least 5 hours per week for reading posts, replying to or editing posts, and communicating with the other moderators and course staff.

- **Enthusiasm**: this is the best predictor of forum moderator excellence!

Best Practices of Forum Moderation

- Direct students to edX's student-facing documentation on [how to use the edX discussion forums](#)

- Create a set of guidelines for students on your expectations for their behavior in the discussion forums

- Before the course starts, create a singular thread for students to introduce themselves, and direct students to post and comment on this thread. Pin this thread to keep it visible for the first few weeks of the course.

- Create a "Change Log" thread to function for important updates throughout the course. Keep this thread pinned for students to see easily.

- Always maintain a positive attitude. Keeping a positive attitude is crucial to encouraging participation in a forum community.

- Encourage discussion between students. Actively thank students who answer the questions of others.

- Use the course's FAQ and Course Info pages as resources. Provide links to these pages in your responses when appropriate. Suggest that information be added when necessary to respond to a common question or fix confusion.

- Always make it obvious that you have read the student's question. When posting a response, make sure that you are on topic. Respond in the context of the thread as a whole.

- Develop a forum persona. Try to answer your questions in your own slightly unique way or voice.

- Try to limit a thread to 75-100 posts; threads longer than this become difficult to read and follow. Create a new thread to continue the conversation from one to the other.

Guidelines for Responding to Specific Types of Posts

Time Sensitive Problems

- Try to be present on the forums when assignment due dates are approaching or new content is being released. The forums tend to be extra busy at these times.

- Please alert the course staff about problems that need to be dealt with quickly (such as problems with a graded assignment). Setting up a course email that is checked frequently is a good way to manage these alerts.

- Content Questions

  - Assist with content questions sensitively, but be careful not to post spoilers. Do not ask students to post their solutions!

  - A good guiding question can be better than an answer.

Redundant Posts

- When possible, help discourage redundancy by responding to such posts with links to an earlier or higher quality thread asking the same question.

- When responding to a post, search for similar posts and respond to the most pertinent thread. Redirect the other posts to the thread with your response and then close the redundant threads.

- Off topic, inappropriate, or offensive posts

- Don't simply delete them; instead, edit and explain why they were edited. Inappropriate posts include spoilers, solutions, and information on how to pirate educational materials.

- Check links that students post. If offensive sites and materials are found, they need to be edited quickly.

Bugs or Errors

- Create a pinned bug thread for students to report problems. This helps to centralize issues in one place, and eliminates duplicate bug reports.

- Check if there is in fact an error.

- If not, suggest to the students that they check their work.

- If so, contact course staff, and notify the thread that the error has been reported.

- Use language that does not assign blame or discourage users from the platform.

- You might say: "*Thanks for letting us know about that issue. edX is working to get it fixed as quickly as possible*."

Feature requests

- Keep an organized collection of feature requests cultivated by the course team. That list can subsequently be shared with an edX PM, who will log those requests internally.

- Reply to the post to let the person know that their request was heard, without promising that the feature will be implemented.

  - You might say: "*Thanks for your suggestion. I've logged it for review by edX staff, who will prioritize feature requests on the development roadmap*."

- Search in the forum for other similar requests, and respond to and close those as well.