4

Using Forums, Chats, and Dialogues

Forums are a powerful communication tool within a Moodle course. Think of them as an online message board where you and your students can post messages to each other while easily keeping track of individual conversations. Forums are the primary tool for having a discussion online and are the central organizing feature in the Social course type. In fact, you've already posted your first message to a forum back in Chapter 2. When you posted your news item, you were posting to a special forum used in every course for announcements and news.

Forums allow you and your students to communicate with each other at any time, from anywhere with an Internet connection. Students don't have to be logged in at the same time you are to communicate with you or their classmates. Figure 4-1 demonstrates how conversations are tracked through time, and readers can review the history of the conversation by simply reading the page. Those of us in the computer biz call this type of communication "asynchronous," meaning "not happening at the same time." This can be compared to a synchronous forms of communication like a chat room, instant messaging, or a face-to-face conversation.
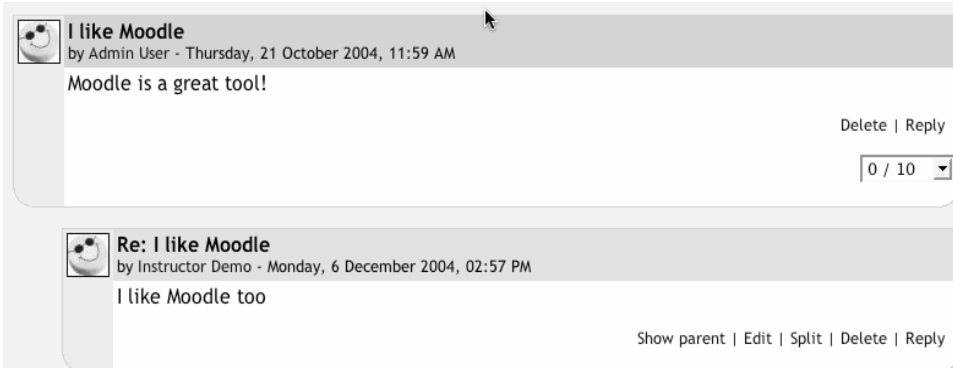
Figure 4-1. Forum posting

Because forums are asynchronous, students can take their time composing a reply. There is a lot of research indicating more students are willing to participate in an asynchronous forum than are willing to speak up in class. For learners for whom English is a second language, for people with communicative disabilities, and for the just plain shy, forums offer a chance to take as much time as they need to formulate a reasonable reply. Other students who might be afraid of embarrassing themselves by making a mistake when they speak up in class can double-check their responses before they send them in.

These features create many opportunities for you not only to replicate the conversations you have in class, but also to create entirely new activities that are difficult to do in a classroom setting.

Forums

Before we start creating a forum, it is important to make sure we're using the same vocabulary. It might be useful to think of the forums module in terms of a party. Each forum is a room at the party; there's a living room, a kitchen, and a dining room. In each room, there are groups of people having discussions. Each discussion has a thread to the conversation with everyone replying to each other about the topic. Without people having discussions, a forum is an empty, quiet space. Each forum can contain one or more discussions which are comprised of one or more posts and replies.

Moodle forums also allow subscriptions. When a user subscribes to a forum, all new posts are automatically sent to the email address stored in his user profile. This makes it easy to keep track of what's happening in the forums without constantly logging in.

Creating a forum is relatively easy. The key to success is choosing the right options for the type of forum you want to create. Moodle has three basic forum types:

A single, simple discussion
> You can create only one discussion in this forum.

Each person posts one discussion

> Each person on the class can start only one discussion. This would be useful when each person needs to post an assignment or a question. Each discussion can then have multiple replies.

Standard forum for general use

> There can be one or more discussions in this forum, and anyone with permission can post multiple discussions.

To add a forum to your class:

1. Click Turn Editing Mode On.
2. Select Forum from the activity menu in the Topic or Schedule section where you would like to add the forum.
3. On the resulting page, shown in Figure 4-2, give the forum a descriptive name.
4. Select the forum type you want to use.
5. Write a descriptive summary.
6. Choose the options you want to use for this forum.

Figure 4-2. Adding a new forum

Forum Options

Can a student post to this forum?

> There are three levels of permission you can give your students for a given forum:

- Discussions and replies are allowed. Students can post both discussions and replies.

- No discussions, but replies are allowed. Students can't start new discussions, but they can reply to discussions you start.

- No discussions, no replies. Students can read the forum but can't post anything. This is usually used for a teacher only forum.

Force everyone to be subscribed?

If you select Yes, everyone in your course will automatically receive emails of new posts. Otherwise, people have the choice to subscribe or not.

Maximum attachment size

When students attach files to their posts, you'll want to limit the maximum size of their posts so you don't eat all of your server space. This is especially important if you are paying a commercial hosting company for your Moodle site.

Allow posts to be rated

Moodle's forums allow users to rate each other's posts. This is a useful tool for the interview ratings or for giving students participation grades. Any ratings given in the forum are recoded in the gradebook (more on that in Chapter 12).

Users

You can select who can rate posts: teachers only, or students and teachers.

View

You can select whether you want students to view only their own ratings or be able to see everyone's. As the instructor, you can always see all of the ratings.

Grade

Moodle allows you to create your own grading scales (we'll cover this in detail in Chapter 12). For now, you can pick the default "Separate and Connected ways of knowing" scale or a number between 1 and 100. The points you choose are the total for the entire forum.

Restrict ratings to posts with dates in this range

You can allow your users to rate posts only within a certain date range. This is useful if you want to keep students focused on the most recent content.

Once you've created your forum, the name will be clickable in the section where you added it. If you want to go back to change any of the options, you can click on the hand icon to go back to the forum-creation screen.

If you click on the Forum name in the section, you'll see the main forum screen, as shown in Figure 4-3.
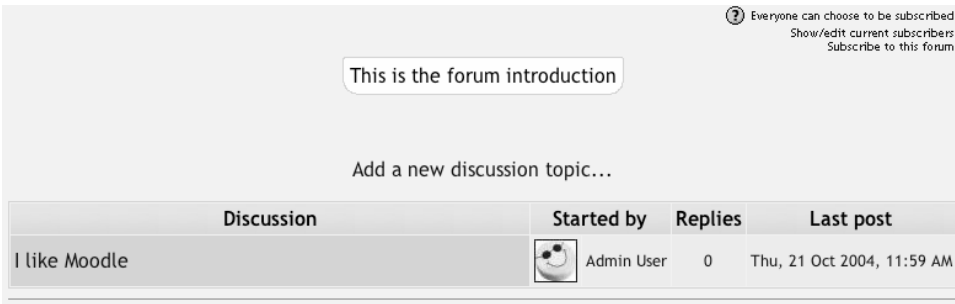
Figure 4-3. Forum main screen

There are some interesting features on this screen. Below the navigation bar at the top of the screen, you'll see a Help menu question mark button and three links. The first link with read "Everyone can choose to be subscribed" or "Everyone is subscribed to this forum," depending on whether you are forcing everyone to subscribe or not. If you click on the link, you can flip back and forth between forcing subscription or not. If you aren't forcing users to subscribe, the next link will read "Show/Edit current subscribers," which will give you an interface for seeing who's subscribed and changing who is and isn't receiving email. The last link will read "Subscribe to this forum," which will subscribe you when you click it.

Below the subscription links, you'll find the forum description you wrote when you created the forum. Below the description, you'll see a link labeled "Add a new discussion topic…." You can use this to create the first discussion in the forum. If you've prohibited students from creating discussions, you'll need to create one to allow anyone to use the forum.

To create a new post:

1. Click on the "Add a new discussion topic..." link.
2. On the new discussion topic page, shown in Figure 4-4, give your new discussion a subject.
3. Formatting: If you don't have the HTML editor enabled, you can choose the formatting type you used in your message. Most of the time, you'll want to leave it on Moodle Auto-Format, which will try to automatically recognize the format you used in the post.
4. Subscription: You can choose to subscribe to the forum if subscriptions were enabled when the forum was created.
5. Attachment: If you want to attach a file, such as an RTF document or a picture, click the Browse button, find your document on your computer, and click Open. Be sure your document is smaller than the maximum attachment size for the forum.

6.   Click Save Changes.

Figure 4-4. New forum post

Once you submit your discussion topic, you'll see a screen telling you the post was successfully saved and how long you have to make changes to your post. The time you have to make changes is set by your system administrator for the whole Moodle site. The default is 30 minutes, so most of the time you'll have a half hour to go back and edit your post before it's mailed to the subscribers. After it's been sent, you can't edit.

> *Warning: Your post won't be mailed to subscribers until the editing time has passed. Unless your system administrator has changed the default, your forum posts won't be sent out for at least 30 minutes.*

The success screen should automatically send you back to the main screen for your forum. You'll see the discussion you just created. If you click on the discussion name, you'll see the message you wrote with any attachments in the upper righthand corner of the message body (see Figure 4-5).

If you can still edit the post, you'll see three links at the bottom of the message body. You can choose to edit or delete the post, or post a reply.

After the editing time has passed, your message will be emailed to all subscribers. If a student or instructor has opted to receive HTML-formatted email, they will receive an email that looks just like the posting in the browser. Otherwise, they will receive the plaintext version. As Figure 4-6 illustrates, the email will have a link labeled "Reply to forum," which will bring them right to the message in the forum so they can post a reply.
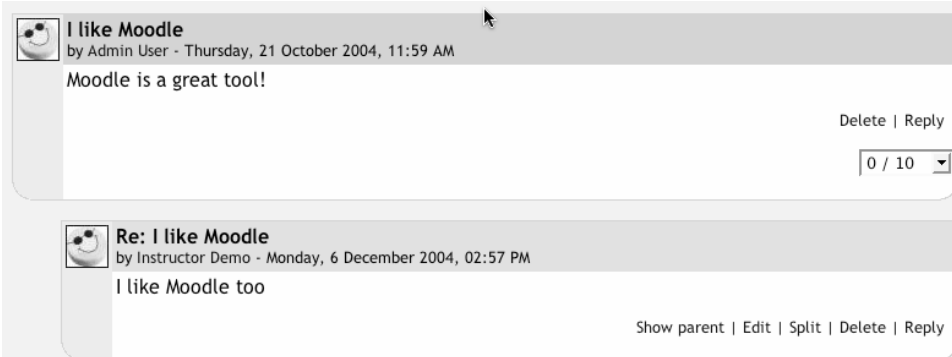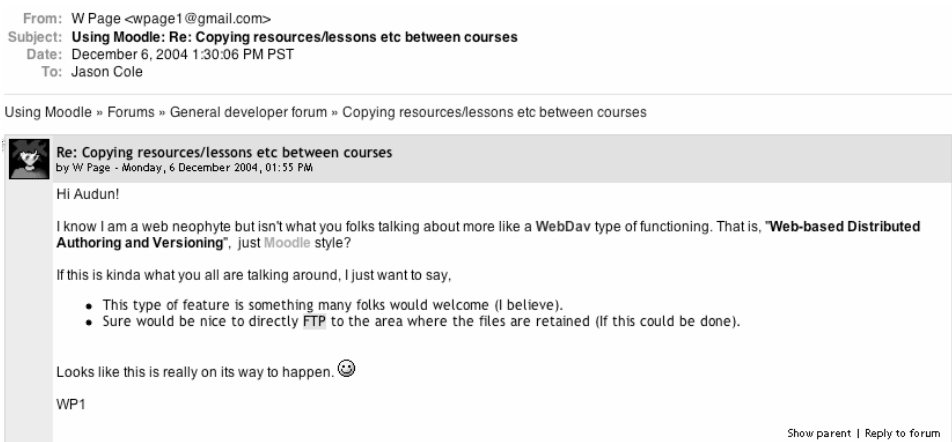

Figure 4-5. Discussion post

Figure 4-6. Emailed discussion posting

If you've enabled ratings, you'll also see a drop-down menu at the lower righthand side of the message body with the scale you've chosen. At the bottom of the screen, below all the posts in the discussion, you'll see a button labeled "Send in my latest ratings." If you select a rating for the post and click the button, you'll submit your scores for the posts. The scores are the stored in the grade book (more on that in Chapter 12).

Once you've submitted a rating, it will appear next to the rating menu. If you click on the rating, you'll see everyone's ratings for that post.

Managing Forums

Once you've created forums for your students, you will need to manage them during your course. As I discussed earlier, forums are great tools for getting people to participate who don't usually talk in class. If you make your discussions an important part of your class, you can really get people talking.

Of course, a lot of people talking in a forum means there's more to manage. Forums can quickly sprout and spread like an unruly weed, unless you do some management and pruning.

Managing expectations

The first key to managing a forum is managing student expectations. In your syllabus, you should let students know how often you intend to respond to questions and posts. Let them know if you will be checking in once a day or once a week. If you don't set expectations, some students will expect you to be on call 24 hours a day. For example, a professor I work with received a series of emails starting at 1:30 in the morning. The student wrote a question at 1:30, asked again at 2 a.m., and sent an annoyed message at 2:30. Finally, at 3 a.m., the student sent an email saying he was going to bed and was very upset the instructor had not answered hid question in time for him to complete the assignment. Needless to say, the professor was very surprised to find the entire series of emails when she awoke the next morning.

Behavior issues

Dealing with rude and unruly students is another challenge of online discussions. Some students may say things in an online discussion they would never say in person. Rude or hurtful remarks can shut down a discussion or completely divert the thread of the conversation.

To avoid these situations, make your expectations for student conduct clear in your syllabus and elsewhere in the site. The use of rating scales can also moderate student behavior if their grade is dependent on getting good ratings from you or their peers. Of course, if the situation gets out of control, your ultimate recourse is to simply delete the students' posts from the forum and then deal with it as you would any other disciplinary issue.

Archiving forums

Once forums get too long, you may want to archive them and start up the conversation again with a good summary. While there is no built-in tool for creating archives, with a little ingenuity, you can easily create a repository for old conversations.

To archive a discussion:

1. Create a forum named Archive Forum somewhere in your class (the first or last content block is a good idea), as shown in Figure 4-7. You'll probably want to prohibit students from posting new discussions or replies.

Figure 4-7. Archive link

2. Go to the forum with the discussion you want to archive.

3. Enter the discussion by clicking on the discussion name. At the top-right corner of the screen, you'll see a menu labeled "Move this discussion to…" (see Figure 4-8).
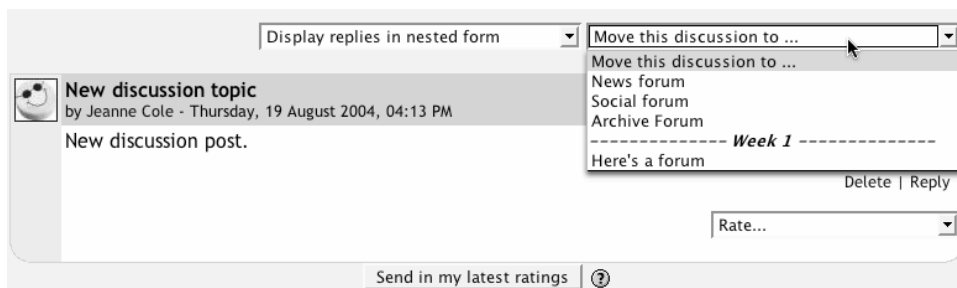

Figure 4-8. Discussion move menu

4. Select "Discussion Archives" forum from the list, as shown in Figure 4-9.

5. You'll now see the discussion in the Archive forum. Click the Forums link in the navigation bar and select the original forum from the list.

6. Post a summary of the archived discussion in the original forum to restart the discussion.

Using an archival forum allows you to keep the discussions manageable, while retaining all of the detail of the original. It's also an easy way to move good discussions from class to class or semester to semester.

Managing discussions is also easier with some help. A number of studies have reported the benefits of assigning groups of students to moderate duties for discussions around given topics. If a group of students knows they are responsible for being able to discuss an issue intelligently with their classmates, they are much more likely to be sure they've done the reading and really understand the topic. They can be responsible for moving the

conversation along, answering basic questions, and archiving and summarizing a discussion.

General forums			
Forum	**Description**	**Discussions**	**Subscribed**
Archive Forum		0	No
Descriptive Forum Name	Descriptive forum summary.	1	No
News forum	General news and announcements	0	Yes
Social forum	An open forum for chatting about anything you want to	2	No
Teacher forum	A forum for teacher-only notes and discussion	0	No

	Learning forums		
	Forum	**Description**	**Discussions**	**Subscribed**
1	Here's a forum	This is the forum introduction	1	No

Figure 4-9. Forum list

To create student moderator groups, assign a small team of students to each forum or discussion. Be sure to enable ratings by everyone, to allow the student group to rate ratings.

Effective Forum Practices

Forums are an important tool in your Moodle toolbox. They are the primary method for students to communicate with you and each other. Social constructivism is all about discussion and negotiated meaning. I would argue that good moderation and intelligent deployment of discussion opportunities are more important to the success of a course than the static content.

> *Tip: MIT has said the same thing. It is posting many of its course syllabi, problem sets, and lecture notes through its OpenCourseware initiative (*http://ocw.mit.edu*). Anyone can download course materials from over 700 courses for free. MIT does this because the value of an MIT education is not in the content, but in the interaction between students and the instructor. Moodle's forums are the key tool for you to add the same value to your course.*

Getting students to participate in online forums can be a big challenge. If you simply create a forum and expect students to communicate online, you will be sadly disappointed. Many times instructors create a forum, give some vague instructions, and then complain that the students aren't spontaneously communicating with each other.

Encouraging participation

The key to student participation in online forums is tight integration with your course goals. The forums should be a practice activity and a resource for students. Of course, it is important to distinguish between which forums are for practice and which are resources to engage in effective practice.

Let's take an example to help make this clearer. Suppose you have a weekly reading you want students to discuss online before meeting face to face. There are two possibilities for this forum. As a practice exercise, you'll want the forum to be a place where students can practice applying the new ideas they encountered in the reading. So you may want to make each week a discussion of a case study. If you want the forum to be a resource, you may want each student to post a question about the reading. You can then use the questions as a basis for discussion in class.

Of course, being clear about the goal of the forum is only one step. As we've discussed earlier, your goals for the class may be very different from your students' goals. To help encourage alignment between your goals and your students' goals, you will need to have a grading strategy for student participation. Moodle has some great tools to help you create and manage graded forums. To be successful, you will need grading criteria for each forum type. Are you just going to grade practice forums? Give extra credit for good resource postings? How much of the grade will be based on forum participation? How will you and any student raters distinguish between good posts and poor ones?

The final strategy for encouraging participation is to engage with the forums yourself. If your class meets face-to-face, bring up important postings and discussions in class. By merging the online environment with the face-to-face environment, you show your students their participation is valued. One of the best examples of merging online discussions with a course happened in a management course of 400+ students. The instructor assigned groups of students to small discussion groups. She and her teaching assistants randomly read a subset of the discussions each week for assessment. The instructor would also bring the best questions and discussions into her lecture, frequently devoting half of her lecture to talking about what was happening online.

Creative Forum Uses

There are many creative uses of forums, so I can only present a few of the most common here. Moodle forums are so flexible, there's really no limit to the types of activities you can develop to take advantage of the technology.

Interviews

Bringing outside experts into your class can be difficult. You have to coordinate schedules, tear them away from their busy lives, and then hope your students are prepared enough to ask interesting questions. You can eliminate many of these problems by using the forums for communication between the students and experts. The easiest strategy is simply to invite the expert into your forums as a regular participant. Simply give her an account and enroll her in your class. She can then participate in the forum and elsewhere in the course.

However, some people will be reluctant to agree to such an open-ended discussion. As an alternative strategy, create a forum in which students can submit questions for an interview with an expert. They can then vote on the best questions. You select the top 10 questions and send them via email to the interviewee. Your expert can then respond when it is convenient for her and email back her responses. If you post her responses to a new forum, your students can respond to her answers and even prepare a second round of questions, if your expert is up for it.

Debates

While many instructors frequently hope some level of debate will spontaneously break out between students around controversial issues or new concepts, it's sometimes difficult to get the ball rolling. Try assigning your students to groups on different sides of an issue. Each post must be a reasoned argument for their side of the issue, supported by evidence. They can be graded on how well they reason and support their argument.

Frequently asked questions

How many times do you answer the same question from three different students? Frequently, many students have the same questions about assignments, difficult concepts, or grades. If everyone is meeting face to face, you can answer the question out loud, but other students may not be listening to the answer. A fully online environment is harder to manage when the questions from students arrive via email. Many teachers of fully online courses complain about the constant barrage of repetitious questions. I strongly recommend you create a forum in which students can ask questions about the administration of the course, and separate forums for questions about the subject matter. Have them consult the forums and the responses before sending you yet another email about the date of the final exam.

Reading study groups

A strategy to encourage students to do the reading they have been assigned is to create reading study group forums. This strategy works well with groups of three to five students who are collectively responsible for discussing a reading before class. Each student asks one question about the reading, and the group must answer all the questions

before the start of the class session. This encourages students not only to read the assignment, but to think more deeply about it through the question-and-answer process.

> *Tip: This strategy of having groups of students asking each other questions about course material supposedly originated with a group of engineers who were taking a class together. They were all transferred as a group midway through the semester but didn't want to drop the class. The instructor agreed to videotape the lectures and mail them to the students. Very quickly, the instructor noticed the engineers' performance in the class was getting worse, so he insisted they watch the videotape together. He told them they had to stop the tape every 15 minutes, and each person was to ask a question about what they had just seen. They couldn't continue until every question was answered. By the end of the class, the remote group of engineers performed a third of a letter grade higher than the rest of the class.*

Social forum

Although the majority of your forums will focus on the course material, it's important for your students to have an informal way to get to know each other, especially if the course is completely online. A social forum gives people a place to talk without worrying about being graded, or having to appear really smart. It's a good idea to start your social forum with some fun questions. Ask everyone to post an introduction telling the class where they are from, what they hope to get out of the class, and their favorite food, movie, or something interesting. The more interesting the introductory post, the more likely people will respond to it and get a real discussion going.

Chats

The Moodle chat tool is a simple synchronous communication tool allowing you and your students to communicate in real time. If you've every used an instant messaging system like AOL, MSN or iChat, you've used a system similar to the Moodle chat. In the forums, you and your students don't have to be logged in at the same time. In a chat, everyone needs to be logged in at the same time in order to communicate.

Creating Chats

To use the chat tool, you will need to create a chat room for you and your students and set a time when everyone will log in and meet in the chat room. You can create one session for the entire course or set up repeating sessions for multiple meetings.

To create a chat session:

1.   Click Turn Editing Mode On.

2.   Select Chat from the "Add an activity…" menu.

3.   In the create chat page, shown in Figure 4-10, give the chat room a name and provide directions on how to use the room in the Introduction text.

Figure 4-10. Create chat

4.   Set the time for the first chat session in the Next chat time.

5.   Set the options for the chat room:

Repeat sessions
   There are four options here:

Don't publish any chat times
   Creates a chat room that is always open and has no specified meeting times

No repeats
   Creates a one-time chat room that will meet only during the time specified in step 4

At the same time every day
> Creates an entry in the course calendar for a daily chat at the time specified in step 4

At the same time every week
> Creates a weekly entry in the course calendar

Save Past Sessions
> When a chat is complete, the transcript will be available for the amount of time specified here.

Everyone can view past sessions
> Determines whether transcripts are available to students or just the instructor.

6. Click "Save Changes".

The chat you created is now available.

Using Chats

Even if you've set chat times, the chat is always open to students. Moodle does not restrict access to the chat based on the times you set when you create the chat. Instead, it creates entries in the course calendar that remind people to log in for the chat at certain times. If a student wants to wander into the chat at another time, he could talk to himself or anyone else who wanders by.

During the chat, shown in Figure 4-11, there are two things you can do. You can type messages in the text field at the bottom of the screen or beep other users. I don't know why the developers thought it was important to include the beep function, but it's there and it can be annoying. You may want to remind students to keep the beeping to a minimum.

14:44: Instructor Demo has just entered this chat

14:44 Instructor: Hello

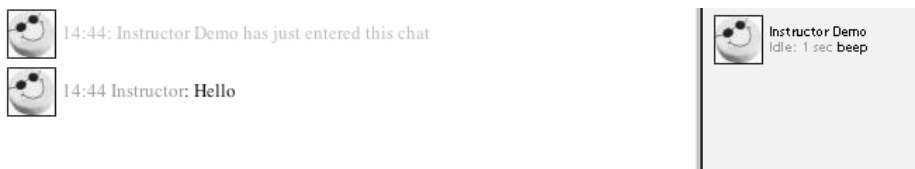Instructor Demo
Idle: 1 sec beep

Figure 4-11. An ongoing chat

Once you type a message in the text area, hit Enter and your message will be broadcast to everyone logged in to the chat. The Moodle chat works by refreshing the screen every five seconds, so you may not see your message right away.

On the right side of the screen, Moodle lists the chat participants and how long they have been idle in the chat room.

The chat room is very basic. As of this writing, the community is looking at improving the chat functionality to bring it up to par with some of the better synchronous communication tools on the market.

Effective Chat Practices

While the chat room may not be very feature-rich at this point, it can still be an effective learning tool. I know of one professor who couldn't speak for a semester due to throat surgery. He posted his lecture notes to his course web site, and held class meetings in the chat room instead of on campus. The students were expected to come to the chat meeting having already read the materials. The chat was set up as a question-and-answer session in which students typed their questions and the professor typed his responses. The entire process was recorded in the archives. I was able to review the archives and I was amazed at the quality of the interaction. The chat room was an ideal tool for this type of interaction.

The key to a successful chat is good moderation. The nature of the chat room makes it difficult to track different conversations. If everyone in the class is talking at the same time, the conversation will go by too quickly. It's important to set some ground rules to make the chat useful for everyone. Try to keep everyone on the same track of the conversation. If the conversation starts to get out of control, gently try to bring people back to the main flow.

Creative Chat Practices

Online office hours

Many students may not be able to come to your office hours. For working students, it may be difficult to make it to office hours because they have arranged their schedules to make it to class. The chat room is an easy way to allow your students to contact you during a scheduled time to ask a quick question about an assignment or a lecture.

Group chats

If you've set up student groups, each group could have its own chat. Set up a chat room and set the group mode to separate or visible groups. Each group can then use its chat room for communication between group members.

Dialogues

The dialogue tool is a private communication channel between two people in your class. You can set up dialogues to allow student-to-teacher communication or student-to-student communication. Each dialogue you create can host a number of different conversations. You may only need to create one dialogue for the entire class, depending on how you want to use them.

Creating Dialogues

To create a dialogue:

1. Click Turn Editing Mode On.

2. Select Dialogue from the Activity menu.

3. The Introduction text entered in the dialogue-creation screen shown in Figure 4-12 will be displayed when anyone enters the dialogue.

Figure 4-12. Dialogue creation screen

4. Set the dialogue options:

    Delete Closed Dialogues after (Days)
    > You can close dialogues after they are finished. After they've been closed, the participants can see the transcripts until they are deleted.

    Type of Dialogue
    > This setting selects whether the dialogues should be teacher-to-student or student-to-student.

    Allow more than on Dialogue with the same person
    > This setting determines whether you can have more than once conversation with a given person within a dialogue tool.

Mail Default

This setting selects whether mail notifications of dialogue postings should be mailed to the participants.

5.   Click Save Changes.

Once you've set up the dialogue, you and your students can begin communicating using the dialogue.

Using Dialogues

Once you've set up your dialogue, you can begin conversing with a student. You can set up dialogues with multiple students within a single dialogue tool. To start a dialogue:

1.   Click the dialogue you created above.

2.   Select the student you want to start a dialogue with from the drop-down menu, as shown in Figure 4-13.

3.   Type your subject and message.

4.   Click Open Dialogue.

If you've set email default to Yes, the student will receive an email telling her she has a dialogue message. Moodle won't send her the text of the message but instead will tell her she has a message waiting for her and give her a link to the dialogue tool.

Students use the same interface to send a message back to you.

The main dialogue interface has four tabs that help you keep track of the current dialogues. The leftmost tab allows you to open a new dialogue with a student. The next two tabs track messages awaiting replies from you and messages awaiting replies from the student. The final tab lists the closed dialogues.

Once a student has replied to your initial message, the message will appear in the list of messages awaiting replies from you. Click on the tab and then click on the name of the student to whom you want to reply. The next screen will list the messages sent so far and give you a text area to type your reply. In the upper left of the screen is a link to close the dialogue.

Once a dialogue has been closed, it cannot be reopened. Both you and the student can see the transcript of the dialogue until it is deleted at the end of the time frame you set in the dialogue options.

Figure 4-13. Main dialogue screen

Effective Dialogue Practices

The dialogue tool is designed to aid in communicating privately with your students. If you need such a communication channel, dialogues are a useful alternative to email because you can track all of your correspondence in once place without clogging your inbox.

Summary

Moodle provides three channels of communication for you and your students. Forums provide an asynchronous, public method for sharing ideas. The chats are a great way to have simultaneous conversations online with a group of people. Dialogues provide a private channel for you to communicate directly with your students. Communication is a key to success for any class, and it's even more important in an online environment.