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Community building in asynchronous online learning

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IBERS

The benefits to learning and teaching that can be gained through interpersonal interactions and community building are widely acknowledged but so are the challenges of doing this in asynchronous online learning.

The IBERS Distance Learning team, who deliver online part-time post-graduate courses, have been grappling with these challenges for over a decade. Practice quickly showed us that an element of assessment was the most effective way to incentivise student-student interaction, and, for some time, we relied on assessed discussion forums to achieve this. While there are definite merits to these forums, student feedback on this assessment type was always mixed, and we weren’t sure they were really helping us to meet our aim of building community.

To get a clearer picture, we used data from student feedback and interviews to assess their perceptions of and views on the role, benefits and drawbacks of these forums. As a result of our findings (Kipling et al., 2022) and, accelerated by a more recent change from three to two assessments per module, we have trialled a range of assignment types, still making some use of Blackboard's discussion boards, designed to encourage student-student interaction.

Our latest module questionnaire responses suggest that these may be getting closer to achieving our aim with a higher proportion of students agreeing that the interactive assessment helped them to feel connected to other students. We would like to share our experience and some examples of what seems to be working well now.

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