Forums
Introduction

Forums are a powerful communication tool within a VISION course. Think of them as online message boards where you and your students can post messages to each other while easily keeping track of individual conversations. Forums are the primary tool for online discussion and are the central organizing feature in the social course format.

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. Conversations are tracked through time, and readers can review the history of a conversation simply by reading the page. The technical term for this type of communication is asynchronous, meaning "not at the same time." Asynchronous communications are contrasted with synchronous forms such as chat rooms, instant messaging, or face-to-face conversations.

Because forums are asynchronous, students can take their time composing replies. They can draft and rewrite until they are happy with the results instead of feeling under pressure to respond immediately. A lot of research indicates that more students are willing to participate in an asynchronous forum than are willing to speak up in class.

For students whose primary language is not that of the course, people with communicative disabilities, and 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.

The asynchronous nature of the forums creates many opportunities for you not only to replicate the conversations you have in class, but also to create entirely new activities that are difficult in a classroom setting.

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 forum module as 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 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.

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

Creating a Forum

Creating a forum is relatively easy. The key to success is choosing the right options for the type of forum you want to create. In addition to the news forum, VISION has four basic forum types:

A single, simple discussion

- You can create only one discussion in this forum. This will keep the conversation focused on one particular topic.

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.

Q & A forum

- This forum requires students to post their perspectives before viewing other students' postings. After the initial posting, students can view and respond to others' postings.

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 the "Turn editing on" button.

2. Select Forum from the activity menu in the course section where you would like to add the forum.

3. On the "Adding a new forum" page, give the forum a descriptive name.

4. Select the forum type you want to use.

5. Write a descriptive forum introduction.

6. Select the general options:

- Force everyone to be subscribed?
  - If you select **Yes**, everyone in your course will automatically receive emails of new posts. Otherwise, people can choose whether to subscribe.
- Read tracking for this forum?
  - Read tracking highlights unread forum posts.
- 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 use up all your server space. This is especially important if you are paying a commercial hosting company for your VISION site.

7. Select the grade options:

- Allow posts to be rated
  - Forum posts can be rated using either a numerical scale or a scale made up of words. By default, only teachers can rate forum posts, though you can use a role override to allow students to rate each others' posts. This is a useful tool for giving students participation grades. Any ratings given in the forum are recorded in the gradebook.
- Grade
  - If you allow posts to be rated, you can choose a scale rating using the Grade drop-down menu. You can create your own scale, but for now, just 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

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

8. Select the post threshold for blocking options, if appropriate. Students can be blocked from posting a certain number of times in a given period and warned when they are approaching the threshold.

9. Select the common module options:

- Group mode
  - o This is another location in which to set the group mode for the activity. If group mode is forced in the course settings, then this setting will be ignored.
- Visible
  - o This determines whether students may view the activity or not.

10. Click the "Save changes" button. The forum name will now be a link in the course 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 return to the editing forum page.

Using Forums

If you click on the forum name on the course page, you'll see the main forum page.

There are some interesting features on this page. At the top right of the page is the text "This forum allows everyone to choose whether to subscribe or not" or "This forum forces everyone to be subscribed," depending on whether you are forcing everyone to subscribe or not. Subscribing to a forum will send the user an email when there are new postings in the forum. The users can choose how they receive their emails in their profile. An alternative way of receiving forum posts is via an RSS feed. RSS feeds need to be enabled across the site and for the forum module by a system administrator.

If you click on the "Force everyone to be subscribed" 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 introduction you wrote when you created the forum. Below the introduction, you'll see a button 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 discussion:

1. Click the "Add a new discussion topic" button.
2. On the new discussion topic page, shown in Figure 5-4, give your new discussion a subject.
3. Write your message in the space provided. 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 VISION Auto-Format, which will try to automatically recognize the format you used in the post.
4. You can choose to subscribe to the forum if subscriptions were enabled when the forum was created.
5. If you want to attach a file, such as an RTF document or a picture, click the Browse button, find the file on your computer, and click Open. Be sure your document is smaller than the maximum attachment size for the forum.
6. Click the "Save changes" button.

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 everyone on the VISION site. The default is 30 minutes, so most of the time you'll have half an hour to go back and edit your post before it's mailed to the subscribers. After it's been sent, you can't edit it unless you have the privilege set for your role.

Unless you have checked the "Mail now" box, 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 forum page. You'll see the discussion you just created. If you click on the discussion name, you'll see the post you wrote with any attachments in the upper-right corner of the message body.

If you can still edit the post, you'll see an Edit link at the bottom of the message body. After the editing time has passed, your post will be emailed to all subscribers. If a student or instructor has opted to receive HTML-formatted email, she will receive an email that looks just like the posting in the browser. Otherwise, she will receive the plain-text version. As Figure 5-5 illustrates, the email will have links labeled Reply and "See this post in context," which will bring the user right to the forum post so she can post a reply.

If you've enabled ratings, you'll also see a drop-down menu at the lower-right side of other users' posts with the scale you've chosen. At the bottom of the page, 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 then stored in the gradebook.

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.