

Using On-line Academic Forums

by

Sophie Ringuet
Pedagogical Counselor
Cégep@distance



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REPORT PRODUCTION CONTEXT

In Spring 2007, I participated in an experimental on-line course developed by Cégep@distance in partnership with PERFORMA and with financial support from the Inukshuk Wireless Learning Plan. The course was targeted toward Cégep@distance tutors and college network teaching personnel and dealt with the use of different academic tools. I found the information on the electronic forum particularly interesting. I not only participated as a student on the course forum, but I worked on projects dealing with the use of electronic forums for the most part in teams with other participants. I was inspired to write this section on 'The Issue' which deals with guidelines to lead a course forum from my experiences with fellow classmates Anne-Marie Boucher, tutor at Cégep@distance teacher of Early Childhood Education at Cégep de Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu as well as her colleague Isabelle Lavigne, teaching in the same program at the same school. I hope that this file will inspire teachers looking to integrate an electronic forum into their teaching.

THE ISSUE

INTRODUCTION: TODAY'S YOUTH, INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY AND LEARNING

Many of today's cégep students are members of Generation Y, less than thirty years old and grew up with the computer. This cohort is Internet connected and has **access to a toolbox** that includes text messaging, blogs, podcasts, forums, wikis and virtual social networks like Facebook, Myspace, and multiplayer online games. These students use these **virtual networks** for more than **entertainment**; they research facts and seek advice to make informed decisions. They have a well developed cooperative spirit and credit their peers as much or more than authority figures. Furthermore, as Michel Audet, a professor of Industrial Relations at Laval University, has noted, this generation has a different world view from other generations based on virtual communication and therefore has different communication requirements and learning styles.¹

Among these many techniques of information and communication and social networking are numerous interesting pedagogical applications which enable online collaborative work and training. When allowed to use these online tools for information and communication, this generation has a solid foundation gained from prior experience. This file will deal with one of these tools which has already demonstrated its

¹ Raymond Morin. « Le transfert intergénérationnel : un enjeu majeur pour le Québec. », published in *CEFRIO* June 2003. [on line] http://www.cefrio.qc.ca/InfoCEFRIO/info_intergeneration_2.cfm (Consulted February 6, 2008).

pedagogical potential: **the electronic discussion forum.**

Let's first see exactly what this tool is.

DESCRIPTION

DEFINING A FORUM

The electronic discussion forum is multi-member online location for asynchronous exchanges. Participants publish and respond to members' posted messages. Most forums present information in the order received or in threads where queries are followed by their responses. In general, forum content is long-term, and participants can access it at any time.

Often forums are divided into different subject discussions based on specific themes or tasks. For example, in a literature course, the forum could be divided into different discussions, each reserved for a different work under study.

A SHORT HISTORY

In existence for nearly thirty years, one cannot call the forum a new technology. The earliest electronic discussion forum network named Usenet (Unix User Network) was created in 1979 as a student project in North Carolina and is in use to this day. Without going into detail, the Usenet network allows its potentially geographically distant users to exchange messages in numerous discussion groups (newsgroups) on a wide variety of subjects. Group creation, however, is complex and generally limited to large groups. Furthermore, confidentiality is problematic as all members have access to all messages.

Much more recently in the late Nineties, discussion forums on the web in browsers such as Internet Explorer and Mozilla Firefox made their appearance. As in Usenet, these online forums enabled message exchange between participants but in a much simpler and rapid format. Furthermore online forums had additional features which made them more adaptable and user-friendly. They could be used by small or large groups and could be public or password-protected for increased confidentiality as required. Obviously, these newer forums hold far greater interest for the college instructor and will be the focus of the information presented in the rest of this report.

ONLINE FORUM SOFTWARE CHOICES

There is a large variety of online forums:

- Software, both shareware and commercial, creating online forums such as [phpBB](http://www.phpbb.com) [www.phpbb.com]
- Online course management systems which include a forum among their features (([DECcliq](http://www.deccliq.qc.ca) is an example which is used in the college network); [www.deccliq.qc.ca]
- Collaborative software such as the [ELGG platform](http://www.elgg.org) which includes a forum. [www.elgg.org]

These options all will permit the user to create and manage an online forum, but certain features vary from one to another. In an academic context, the following considerations are of possible interest:

- Moderation features to allow the teacher to modify, move or erase student messages for example or the option of highlighting messages and granting student access to only certain parts of the forum etc.,
- A 'Profile' section which allows students and teachers alike to better know one another,
- Message formatting options,
- Data, audio and video file attachment features,
- Smileys to enable nonverbal emotional expression in message content,
- E-mail or other online notification of new messages,
- Posted message removal, modification and discussion change,
- Message listing option such as by date, by title, by author etc. and
- An integrated research tool to easily locate messages.

AN EXAMPLE

Before going further, let's take a few moments to present a concrete example of a small web forum created in phpBB where there is a debate over the advantages and disadvantages of different types of childcare for preschoolers.

On the forum homepage, after log in, the participant sees a list of the different sections available and a short description of their contents.

Débat
[Voir les messages sans réponses](#)

Forum	Sujets	Messages	Derniers Messages
Les types de garde			
<p>Le débat C'est dans cette section que vous êtes invités à débattre de la question :</p> <p>Qu'est-ce qui est préférable pour les enfants d'âge préscolaire (1-5 ans) et leurs parents ???</p> <p>Établir des mesures pour que les enfants puissent passer les 5 premières années de leur vie à la maison avec leur mère ou leur père. Élargir le réseau subventionné des garderies en privilégiant des places en milieu familial. Élargir le réseau subventionné des garderies en privilégiant des places en installation.</p>	8	37	Dim 20 Mai - 10:35 Anne-Marie →
<p>On parle, on jase Pour se présenter, pour parler de la pluie et du beau temps, c'est ici!!!</p>	3	10	Jeu 10 Mai - 22:52 dan →
<p>À propos du wiki Si vous voulez discutez des changements ou des points de divergence en lien avec le wiki, c'est ici!</p>	3	3	Jeu 17 Mai - 15:31 Admin →

Once a section is selected, a list of its discussion threads appears. As an example, the section on debating is shown with a list of its topics.



Débat



Activité 5


















Accueil
 FAQ
 Rechercher
 Membres
 Groupes
 Profil
 Messagerie
 Déconnexion [Julien]

nouveau
Débat » Les types de garde » Le débat
Plus !

	À lire en 1er & Important :	Réponses	Auteur	Vus	Derniers Messages
	À lire en 1er: À propos du wiki!	0	Admin	15	Jeu 17 Mai - 15:35 Admin →
	Important :: Échéancier ! Pour savoir quoi faire et quand le faire!!!	0	Admin	37	Mar 8 Mai - 15:22 Admin →
	Important :: Quelques références pour vous aider à trouver des arguments	1	Admin	15	Mar 19 Mai - 15:13 Anne →
	Pour les garderies en installation	8	Anne-Marie	50	Dim 20 Mai - 10:35 Anne-Marie →
	Pouvoir rester à la maison	10	Celine	50	Sam 19 Mai - 7:16 Mart →
	Mise en situation et répartition des rôles (d'ici 11 mai)	7	Admin	71	Jeu 17 Mai - 13:15 Admin →
	Pour les garderies en milieu familial	4	IsaIsa	51	Mer 16 Mai - 16:24 Celine →
	Message de bienvenue	0	Admin	41	Mar 8 Mai - 15:07 Admin →

Here is the beginning of a discussion thread in this section of the forum:

  Débat » Les types de garde » On parle, on jase [Plus !](#)

Votre animatrice aimerait bien savoir...	
Auteur	Message
Admin Admin Inscrit le : 02 Mai 2007 Messages : 22	<p>□ Sujet: Votre animatrice aimerait bien savoir... ⌚ Mar 8 Mai - 14:06 </p> <p>Est-ce que vous vous sentez à l'aise de jouer un rôle? Est-ce que cette idée vous plait ou vous déplaît?</p> <p style="text-align: center;">     </p>
Celine Inscrit le : 09 Mai 2007 Messages : 12	<p>□ Sujet: Jouer un rôle dans un débat ⌚ Mer 9 Mai - 17:29 </p> <p>Salut,</p> <p>Dans ce forum et parce que j'ai pris un rôle qui est proche de mes opinions, je suis à l'aise. En général, je crois que je serais à l'aise dans un rôle proche de mes opinions ou à l'opposé, mais moins pour une position mitoyenne... et encore je ne suis pas certaine. Pour avoir animé des consultations, je me suis surprise à enrichir mon animation d'une rencontre à l'autre avec des positions qui avaient été énoncées dans des sessions antérieures, mais auxquelles je n'aurais jamais pensé.</p> <p>Est-ce que c'est ça que tu voulais savoir?</p> <p>Céline</p> <p style="text-align: center;">   </p>
Admin Admin Inscrit le : 02 Mai 2007 Messages : 22	<p>□ Sujet: Re: Votre animatrice aimerait bien savoir... ⌚ Mer 9 Mai - 21:17 </p> <p>Oui, tout à fait! Je voulais savoir si vous pensiez pouvoir entrer dans le jeu et jouer votre rôle! Merci!!!</p> <p style="text-align: center;">     </p>
Anne-Marie Inscrit le : 10 Mai 2007 Messages : 5	<p>□ Sujet: Un rôle... c'est jouer ça!! ⌚ Jeu 10 Mai - 20:14 </p> <p>Jouer et pourquoi pas!! 🐸</p> <p>Je pense pouvoir être en mesure de défendre mon point de vue même si de nombreuses nuances pourraient y être apportées.</p> <p>Mais comme le font les enfants je jouerai, promis! 😊</p> <p>Je pense bien que le débat sera intéressant!</p> <p style="text-align: center;">   </p>
Admin	<p>□ Sujet: Re: Votre animatrice aimerait bien savoir... ⌚ Jeu 10 Mai - 22:52 </p>

USING FORUMS IN AN ACADEMIC CONTEXT

Let's see what a forum can add to your teaching.

PEDAGOGICAL CONTEXT

The electronic discussion forum can be used in an academic context not only to clarify content but to deliver on-line student support on an emotional level improving affective elements like motivation or orientation. This guidance can be on an individual or group basis. The forum environment facilitates group work while allowing the teacher to intervene when required to promote collaboration. Allowing rapid response to student questions and promoting teacher, tutor or teammate accessibility, the forum can promote team spirit and can reduce feelings of isolation particularly with distance teaching, a phenomenon which promotes perseverance.

The electronic forum is an asynchronous tool which is particularly useful in **discussions among several participants**. Unlike text messaging, video teleconferencing and other synchronous modes of communication, the forum allows students **time for reflection and research** before making an intervention in a discussion or contributing to a common project. It also permits insecure students the time required to express their thoughts effectively. As most messages are available over a long period, students can reread them in order to gain greater insights and teachers can review to see who contributed what to a group project.

Furthermore, unlike tools such as e-mail and distribution lists, **the forum retains and displays all exchanges in a discussion thread** making them **available at any time on the Internet**.

LIMITATIONS OF USING A FORUM COMPARED TO OTHER TOOLS

Given that access to a forum can be public or group-wide, the medium is not very appropriate in communicating privileged information to an individual student. It is preferable to use a complementary tool such as text messaging or e-mail which enables two-way communication. As well, the forum does not permit collaborative work through document sharing as easily as a wiki or online audio and video teleconferencing software. It is therefore advantageous to use the forum in tandem with other tools when discussing work in progress. Furthermore, even if a forum can be used to presents work, it doesn't offer the same presentation options as a blog or a digital portfolio. In order to learn more about different tools which can be used along with a forum, consult the Profweb file [Tools to Communicate and Collaborate With on the Web: an Overview](#) by Alain Farmer.

THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER

When one uses technological communication tools such as the electronic forum, the role of the teacher is not the same as the one operating during classroom teaching. As explained in Charlier (2002), the teacher who moderates a forum with several functions must be a facilitator, leader, 'guardian angel', collaboration expert, decision-making assistant and technical consultant. Students expect the teacher to be visibly involved in the work, react rapidly to material presented, be democratic as opposed to autocratic or uncaring and adapt to each student's individual needs². Daele (2002)³ defines four roles for the instructor:

- Social - creating an environment which is warm and friendly to facilitate learning, to encourage students and to help them to work together cooperatively towards a common goal;
- Organizational - performing managerial tasks such as the organization of work and the agenda;
- Pedagogical - facilitating learning by directing attention toward elements of importance such as answering questions;
- Technical - helping students in the technological operation of the tool.

In the case of the electronic forum, effective moderation is necessary in all of these roles in order to reach most goals. In fact moderation plays an important role in the success or failure of the academic electronic forum.

OTHER IMPORTANT ELEMENTS TO CONSIDER

A critical mass of participation in order to generate enough messages of interest to encourage regular consultation is an important consideration. The number of students enrolled in a course must be considered. Ideally, 60 to 100 students produce good results as about a third of them will

² Bernadette Charlier and others. « *Tuteurs en ligne* » : *Quels rôles ? Quelle formation ?* ». [On line], 2002, http://ep.profweb.qc.ca/inukshuk/fileadmin/Cycle_1/Activite_apprentissage/Charlier2002_2_2.pdf (Consulted February 6, 2008).

³ Amaury Daele et Françoise Docq. « *Le tuteur en ligne, quelles conditions d'efficacité dans un dispositif d'apprentissage collaboratif à distance ?* » [On line], 2002, www.unifr.ch/didactic/new_didactic/modules/icontent/inPages/amaury/2002aipu.pdf (Consulted February 6, 2008).

actively participate in a forum.⁴ However, a forum can be used with a small group of students if one can count on participation by all class members. During an APOP presentation in January 2008, teachers Steve Boucher of Cégep régional de Lanaudière and Éric Watelle of Cégep de Sainte-Foy explained that they used a forum in groups of about twenty students with near total participation and that the number of messages was sufficient to not require too much intervention on the part of the teacher.

Now, let's see some concrete examples of how as a teacher, you can use a forum in your teaching.

SUGGESTIONS FOR LEARNING ACTIVITIES

A forum can have many pedagogical applications, in class, on-line or as a hybrid between the two. Creativity is a must! On the [DECclic](#) site, several suggestions for learning activities using their forum are proposed. Barbara Class and Jacques Viens (2003) in the document '[Utilisation pédagogique d'un forum](#)' make additional suggestions. Here are some which seemed particularly interesting:

- Discussion of different subjects linked to the course

Discussion is the essence of the forum! You can have different types of discussion and exchange with your students. For example, Steve Boucher, a geography teacher at Cégep régional de Lanaudière explained at the last APOP colloquium that he used a forum in the context of a course to ask current events questions each week to prepare students for the next class. He also used the forum to encourage students to dialog with an expert online. You can learn more reading [Mr Boucher's story in Profweb](#) (*only in French for the moment*).

Students can also interact around different subjects in a forum in order to prepare a project, study for an exam or even to prepare for a work study assignment. Claudette Ouelette, counselor and member of the coordinating team of the APOP learning platform, discussed this strategy in a DECclic workshop about using the resource to efficiently supervise students participating in work study sessions on-line. Below are examples of specific activities that have used the forum as a tool:

⁴ Cégep@distance, Collège Boréal et Centre franco-ontarien de ressources pédagogiques. *Guide d'encadrement des cours Internet*. [On line] <http://www.cegepadistance.ca/cours/geci> (Consulted January 23, 2008).

- Debates

The asynchronous nature of the forum allows students the time they need to reflect and to prepare and formulate their arguments. It is also surprising how even the most reserved students, those who rarely participate in-class, will participate in debates using an electronic forum. It is especially motivating for students to debate questions or subjects which touch them directly. For example, Mr Éric Watelle, a teacher at Cégep de Sainte-Foy, explained during his workshop about class forums as a factor for academic success at the APOP Colloquium in January 2008 that he had gotten students in a course about politics to debate current issues of interest that were linked to the course material. According to him, current affairs resonated strongly with his students.

- Group Projects

It is possible to use a forum to enable students to work together on a project. For example, students can each be asked to study an aspect of a theme and then combine and synthesize their research on a forum.

- Preparing for an Evaluation

Study questions can be posted on a forum. Students can be encouraged to post their own last minute questions as well where they can receive a rapid response not only from their teacher or tutor but from their peers as well.

- Submitting Work

Peer evaluation can be valuable and motivating when work is submitted to a forum. The forum is also an effective medium for instructor comments.

- Role Plays

Assigned roles for students on a forum can lend interest to a discussion or debate. The roles assigned can be used to enrich content and present a more rounded evaluation of a topic.

- Group Work

Forums lend themselves easily to group work as explained in [a Profweb story \(in French\) by Gilles Plamondon](#), a philosophy teacher at Cegep d'Alma. When group work is done on a forum, the teacher has access to what happens in each team and can intervene as required. Knowing that the teacher is following their work, students are generally more serious and participate more actively.

This is obviously not an exhaustive list of activities possible on a forum. Bring your own creativity to the fore as you explore the potential of a forum to meet your own particular needs within your own teaching context! There is no need to be a specialist to use a forum; you must try it to discover its potential.

Hopefully, the examples above have hinted at the potential of the electronic discussion forum. The nuts and bolts of creating and moderating one are broached in the following section - Practical Applications.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

INTRODUCTION

Using a forum to motivate students or more specifically to conduct academic activities requires preparation. It also requires communication skills to moderate discussions on the forum to attain desired goals. Once concluded, a summary of your experience is advisable to judge whether you have attained your goals and to analyze improvements in your skill as a moderator. There is no magic formula to make a forum run well, but following are a few suggestions to get your project started on the right foot!

A GUIDE TO USING A FORUM

1. PREPARATION

Confirming that the Forum is the Appropriate Tool

The choice of a pedagogical tool such as a forum must be made considering among other factors your pedagogical approach and learning goals, your organizational context as well as available technology. You must also take your students' abilities into account as well as your own as the teacher and other factors such as the length of the course. Here are some questions which you should ponder before deciding to incorporate a forum into your course.

Pedagogical Considerations

Is your own pedagogical approach in harmony with a forum's functions? Do you want to encourage communication, discussion and team work?

- Why do you want to use a forum? Is there a value to its use in your course? What is it? Will the use of a forum promote your course's learning goals and targeted skills? Will it improve student perseverance and motivation? Will it ease the organization of team work?
- Is it the best tool to use? Have you considered its advantages and disadvantages? Are there other communication and collaboration tools that would be more appropriate?

Organizational Considerations

- Has your school selected a particular electronic forum to support? Is there an course management system, forum software or other collaborative tool installed which incorporates a forum?
- Have you discussed the place of IT and forums within your program? Do other teachers use this tool? Are your students familiar with it?

Technical Considerations

- If your school gives technical support for forum software, a course management system or another resource which integrates a forum, does this choice meet your needs? Does it offer the features necessary for the activities that you plan to do?
- If you want to use forum software, a course management system or another resource which integrates a forum other than the one supported by your school, are you able to make it work? Is the forum's operation easy to master for yourself and for your students? Are you able to insure the confidentiality of forum content? How will you install it? Is it possible to host the forum on your school's server? Is there a cost to use the forum? Do you have the technical support necessary in case of problems?
- Will your students have access to the equipment necessary to use the forum?

Acquiring Technical and Moderation Expertise

Technical and moderation savvy is a must before starting to use a forum. Ideally, your skills need to be updated to the point where you are at ease with the software and can offer basic help to your students as required to access and participate in the forum. You must also be able to efficiently

use the moderation features to inspire student participation. Among other requirements, the ability to write succinct yet evocative single-screen messages in clear language, possibly using smileys or other non-verbal cues which respect the netiquette (on-line politeness) can serve as a model to participants.

If you have never participated in a forum and would like some reassurance, Research 'teaching' or another subject of personal interest on the web and find a forum linked to that subject. There are thousands of web forums on almost any subject imaginable. This experience will demystify the tool and help your mastery of it. You can also consult other resources, some of which are mentioned in the 'Useful References' of this file. You can also take a continuing education course. Profweb's Professional Development pages can provide a number of interest educational opportunities to learn more about forums.

Planning a Forum

Advance planning helps to ensure the success of your forum. More specifically, the following activities are worth including in your preparations:

- Determine the goals and objectives of your forum;
- Plan your pedagogical activities;
 - Determine which themes, subjects, problems or questions will be discussed as well as which tasks will be assigned using the forum. Ensure that these discussions and tasks are linked to the interests and skills of the students;
 - Prepare open-ended questions to re-launch discussions when needed;
 - Prepare a resources list (texts, videos, internet links and others) to help students perform activities and animate the forum as required.
 - Ensure that the activities planned have a real academic value meaning that they promote student learning and motivation. It is crucial that students are interested and see a real advantage to participating. Credit for participation can in certain cases be pertinent.
 - Determine a reasonable length of time for students to accomplish the tasks on the forum and advise them of it.

- Divide your forum into different sections;
 - By creating different sections in your forum, messages can be filed according to discussion theme or assigned tasks. Evocative titles for each section are helpful as well as clear descriptions of the nature of the messages and discussions that one anticipates being posted within so that students can easily determine where to post their message;
 - Make sure that the number of sections is reasonable. Each section must receive a reasonable number of messages to sustain student interest. Conversely, too many messages can also discourage participation. The more participants in a forum, the more divisions required;
 - A section for student profiles is often of interest where students can meet and discuss subject outside of the purview of the course.
- Plan the evaluation grid for forum activities if there is to be formative or summative evaluation;
- Define your role and determine how much time and when you will be moderating. To minimize student frustration, make known your forum visit frequency. The ideal is a daily visit.
- Make a list of operating rules and a code of ethics to be respected on the forum. Normally this code deals with both message content and form (message length, title, language quality, capitalization, etc.), pertinence (repetition, quality) and respect (courtesy, privacy, copyright, advertising, etc.). Each moderator will modify these rules according to need. Please consult the 'Useful References' section for links to websites which can be used as a source of inspiration when formulating the rules on your forum.

2. MODERATING THE FORUM

Once your preparations have been made, it is time to use your talents as a communicator and moderator for your planned activities.

Write a Welcome Message

Before inviting students to participate in your forum, you must post a welcome message. This message will set the tone for posts and motivate students by convincing them of the advantages of participation. Your message should contain the following features:

- Teacher introduction and invitation to each student to introduce themselves as well,
- Explanation of the *raison d'être*, goals and importance of the forum (pedagogical value),
- Present the subject or subjects under discussion and any tasks to accomplish,
- Explain the different sections of the forum,
- Clarify how activities on the forum will be evaluated,
- Present the operating rules and code of ethics which all participants must respect. The rules must be clear and students must be made to understand that they are obligatory. Students can be asked to signify an engagement to respect the rules,
- Explain to students the estimated time that they are to spend on the forum each week,
- Explain your role as moderator and the times set aside to read and respond to posts,
- Conclude in proposing an unevaluated social activity.

Ensure Student Technical Initiation

Before starting forum moderation, student technical abilities must be ensured. It is therefore necessary to explain the forum's features to them. This can be done by sending an explanation by e-mail along with the invitation to join the forum or during an initiation course in class. Students must also be given time at the beginning of the course to try the forum out to perfect their technical activities.

Begin with a Social Activity

The first activity on the forum must be of a social nature. Each of the participants should be invited to attend to foster social interactions between them. This is an important activity particularly in distance learning situations where students do not know one another because familiarity among participants will make the forum operate more smoothly and aid in reaching objectives. Once this stage has been accomplished, ongoing social interactions should be encouraged in a section devoted to this activity.

Establish Your Moderation Style

Once students know how to use the forum and have some social connection, you need to establish your moderation style. You must be sufficiently active to make your presence felt, yet give students as much freedom as possible.

At the beginning of the forum, certain students will be enthusiastic participants whereas others will be insecure and hesitant to post. You need to be sensitive to participants' different attitudes and encourage those who need encouragement by explaining the advantages of using the forum. You should give information about how to make posts effective as required.

Later, as discussions become more assured, your presence should diminish and adapt to the nature of the forum. As participants use the forum and become at ease with its operation, contacts will be established and a sense of responsibility for the operation of the forum will develop among participants. Participants might even come to propose changes in the operation of the forum.

Concretely as forum moderator, you should have the following goals:

- Create and maintain a climate that fosters exchange and learning
 - By continuously making your presence and interest felt through regular and ideally daily visits and rapid responses to messages and posts,
 - By always respecting and enforcing the operating rules and code of ethics to avoid conflict and tension. The moderator must discretely but firmly maintain order using e-mail when required.
 - By calming excessively emotional exchanges when necessary,
 - By encouraging constructive criticism from students even when it is directed at yourself,
 - By adapting to the group and to what goes on in the forum which can imply modifying planned activities to meet the needs and interests of students.
- Encourage participation
 - By promoting discussion as required through open questions, reformulated posts, problems to solve, hypothetical situations, etc.

- By posting when required to stimulate exchanges and refraining when discussions are animated,
- By using strategies to encourage the participation of timid students such as personal invitations to post by e-mail.
- Promote learning
 - By encouraging student interaction,
 - By verifying that students have understood the subject, problem, question or assignment and that the material of the course is present in discussions,
 - By guiding student discussion toward course goals,
 - By helping students manage the flow of information to make links between different elements of the course,
 - By highlighting certain discussion threads through a change of position or a special icon,
 - By reformulating or clarifying certain posts,
 - By regularly making a synthesis between posts on the forum and the goals of the course and asking students to do so as well,
 - By asking students to explain what they have learned at a given moment,
 - By encouraging initiatives and ideas and the pure joy of learning and participating,
 - By supporting students in their learning process by activities such as guidance during difficult problems or assignments and
 - By evaluating posts and tasks effectively and asking students to correct their errors when required.

3. EVALUATING FORUM RESULTS

When your forum activities have come to an end, a final evaluation should be done in order to determine its value as a resource for students in their learning goals. This is also an excellent opportunity to evaluate your own moderation for future improvement.

In their [*Guide d'animation d'un forum de discussion*](#), Christine Hamel and Stéphane Allaire suggest making an evaluation of moderation and student participation. The evaluation on moderation should evaluate whether initial objectives were reached and should be done with

participants. Do participants feel that the initial objectives were attained? Were there unforeseen skills acquired? Why did participants post to certain activities and not to others? How could specific activities be improved? The moderator should also evaluate which actions were successful and which could benefit from changes.

CONCLUSION

The electronic discussion forum has great potential to facilitate learning and increase student motivation. The forum can be used to enhance a number of learning activities, many involving communication and collaboration. It's up to the teacher to decide whether the forum is an appropriate response to their particular needs and those of their students.

The forum is accessible for college teachers, students and tutors but cannot function in a vacuum. To stimulate student participation and to meet pedagogical objectives, its operation must be planned and moderated. Pre-testing by beginning with simple activities is advisable. With experience will come more efficient operation resulting in larger projects that are contextually relevant. Using other tools to facilitate learning, collaboration and motivation with the forum is often a winning strategy.

If you want to know more about using a forum in an academic context, consult the 'Useful References' in this report. If this information is not adequate or if you would like to propose an interesting resource or ask an intriguing question, the comments feature at the end of this report in *Profweb* is at your disposal.

USEFUL REFERENCES

There are English and French references listed. References in the English edition are not identical to those in the French edition.

How to Use and Moderate an Academic Forum

The guide below gives short capsules on aspects of using an electronic discussion forum. It targets educators and administrators. The authors explain what to do before, during and after a project for reaching your planned objectives. Easy to consult, this guide is worth a look!

HAMEL, Christine et Stéphane ALLAIRE. [*Guide d'encadrement des cours Internet*](#), [Online] (Consulted February 13, 2008).

The Guide d'encadrement des cours Internet, which follows, suggests a number of interesting uses of the electronic forum for training purposes. It presents a five stage model for using a forum and discusses the role of the tutor and factors for success.

Cégep@distance, Collège Boréal and Centre franco-ontarien de ressources pédagogiques. [Guide d'encadrement des cours Internet](#), 2002 [On line] (Consulted January 23, 2008).

The following reference will get you off on the right foot for an educational use of a forum. It presents a five step conversation-based learning model and suggested teacher approach for student support. As well, it discusses the value added to learning that can be achieved with a forum and makes suggestions on how to most efficiently use a forum in your classes.

CLASS, Barbara and Jacques VIENS. [Utilisation pédagogique d'un forum](#), March 2003 [On line] (Consulted November 13, 2007).

Alain Farmer's report gives an overview of various tools which could be used in conjunction with the forum.

FARMER, Alain. [Tools to Communicate and Collaborate With on the Web: an Overview](#), published in Profweb December 4, 2006, [On line] (French version consulted February 13, 2008).

The four following references will help you to write your rules for netiquette in your operating rules and code of ethics. The first site can give important guidelines for using the Web in general whereas the second is specifically adapted to the context of the electronic forum.

- **HAMBRIDGE, S.** [RFC 1855 Netiquette Guidelines](#) on the site of Delaware Technical and Community College, [On line] (French translation consulted February 7, 2008).
- **DUPAGNE, Dominique.** « [La Netiquette des Forums](#) », published October 27, 2007 on ATOUTE. Forums, [On line] (Consulted February 7, 2008).
- **Canadian Canoe Routes** is an online meeting place for those who enjoy exploring the lakes and rivers of Canada by canoe. Its section on netiquette at <http://www.myccr.com/netiquette.php> is well-written.
- **The British Columbia Institute of Technology's site** also contains a good section on netiquette at <http://www.bcit.ca/distance/currentstudents/online/resources/netiquette.shtml>.

Here are three video capsules produced by Cégep@distance where Denis Gilbert, an on-line moderator for the Télé-Université network with twenty years of experience, presents ten commandments to efficiently moderate a forum. Not to be missed, these videos contain all the basics for moderating and using a forum.

- GILBERT, Denis. *Les 10 commandements de l'animation (Début)*
<http://ep.profweb.qc.ca/inukshuk/fileadmin/Commun/video/Dix%20commandements.mp4>
- GILBERT, Denis. *Les 10 commandements de l'animation (Suite)*
<http://ep.profweb.qc.ca/inukshuk/fileadmin/Commun/video/Dix%20commandements%20suite.mp4>
- GILBERT, Denis. *Les 10 commandements de l'animation (Fin)*
<http://ep.profweb.qc.ca/inukshuk/fileadmin/Commun/video/Dix%20commandements%20fin.mp4>

Personal Accounts of Forums Used at the College Level ⁵

APOP workshop

Given in January 2008, *Éric Watelle*, teaching at Cégep de Sainte-Foy and at Cégep de Lévis-Lauzon, concretely explains how to use a forum as part of his political science course to incite students to debate different course-related events in the news.

Future Reference:

Workshop title: **WATELLE, Éric. *L'utilisation d'un forum de classe comme facteur contribuant à la réussite : bilan et perspectives.*** [On line]

Workshop PGG-501 given at APOP on January 10, 2008.

In this workshop at the APOP Symposium in January 2008, *Steve Boucher*, a professor of geography at Cégep régional de Lanaudière, explains how he used a forum in his course « *Défis de la planète (Planetary challenges)* » to help students to arrive in class better prepared and to interact with a guest.

Future Reference:

Workshop title: **BOUCHER, Steve. *Les forums de discussion en ligne en géographie.***

Workshop ATI-212 given at l'APOP January 9, 2008.

You can also read a story by the same teacher on his initial experiences with a forum.

BOUCHER, Steve « [*Quelques conseils judicieux pour utiliser les forums de discussion dans des activités d'apprentissage*](#) », published in Profweb October 30, 2006, [On line] (Consulted February 13, 2008).

⁵ Once APOP has put the videos from its January 2008 symposium on line, hyperlinks and references will be added.

During the APOP Symposium, Claudette Ouellette, counselor and member of the coordinating team at the DECclic collegial platform, presented this workshop where she explained how the forum, as well as other features on the DECclic platform, could be used to support students in work-study programs.

Future Reference:

Workshop title: **OUELLETTE, Claudette. DECclic pour superviser les étudiants en stage sans les inconvénients de la distance.** [On line]

Workshop ATI-608 given at APOP January 10, 2008

In this story, Gilles Plamondon, who teaches philosophy at Cégep d'Alma, tells how he used a forum for team work among his students.

PLAMONDON, Gilles. « [Les TIC au service des «natures brouillonnes» - Comment une plateforme peut devenir un outil efficace de gestion de classe !](#) », published in Profweb October 23, 2006, [On line] (Consulted January 11, 2008).

Viviane Fournier, a nursing teacher at Cégep de Saint-Laurent writes a story about how she used a forum on which students built case histories using both subjective and objective information about a patient.

FOURNIER, Viviane. « [L'enseignement par DECclic en Soins infirmiers : possible même pour une néophyte !](#) », published in Profweb March 5, 2007, [On line] (Consulted January 11, 2008).