

MANCHESTER
1824

The University of Manchester

The University of Manchester

Institute of Teaching and Learning

RALF BECKER EFFECTIVE USE OF ONLINE DISCUSSION BOARDS

ITL FELLOWSHIP 2020/21 PROJECT REPORT

[www.staffnet.manchester.ac.uk/umitl/
teaching.learning@manchester.ac.uk](http://www.staffnet.manchester.ac.uk/umitl/teaching.learning@manchester.ac.uk)



ITL Fellow 2020/21

DR. RALF BECKER

Ralf received his undergraduate degree in Economics from the Johannes Gutenberg University (Mainz, Germany) and his PhD from Queensland University of Technology (Brisbane, Australia), after which he worked as a Lecturer at QUT before joining The University of Manchester as a Lecturer in Economics in January 2005. His research interest is in econometrics and financial econometrics. He teaches econometrics, particularly time-series econometrics. Ralf is a member the Center for Growth and Business Cycle Research and the National Centre for Econometric Research (Australia).

Fellowship Student Partner Intern

FAITH NEWMAN

EFFECTIVE USE OF DISCUSSION BOARDS

ITL Fellowship project

This project explored potential outcomes and the different engagement patterns of student groups with online discussion boards. A set of resources was developed to help both teaching staff and students make the best possible use of online discussion boards for learning and community-building.

Context

Even before online teaching became a mainstay of University education as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, discussion boards had seen increasing use in Higher Education, particularly in the delivery of large course units. The need to go fully online during the pandemic made the use of discussion boards even more important.

Objectives of the Fellowship project

- To understand the role of discussion boards in the process of students' learning.
 - To identify student and staff behaviours relating to discussion boards which improve student learning
 - To produce support materials for staff and students
-

Project activities

Student survey

- A key objective of the project was to learn how students used discussion boards, and the main activity we did around this was to issue a detailed student survey.
- This was supplemented by an analysis of Piazza discussion board usage statistics.
- The creation and analysis of the survey was ably supported and guided by the two Student Partner Interns allocated to this project

Staff and student resources

We also created support materials for staff and students in order to help them in the running and use of discussion boards.

Again, my Student Partners were instrumental in the production of these.

Student partnership

The contribution of the Student Partners was important and much appreciated in the process of creating and administering the student survey.

Equally, the creating of the student facing support material benefited significantly from Student Partner contributions.

Collaborative work

I liaises with a number of colleagues across the University who also ran Piazza discussion boards in order to acquire usage statistics.

This was important both to broaden the evidence base but also to obtain an insight into the extent of variation in usage patterns.

Challenges faced

There were no major challenges to this project. The information acquisition was straightforward and ably supported by Professional Services staff. Perhaps, in hindsight, where I felt most challenged was in the process of offering advice and expertise. I used the University of Manchester's TALON (Teaching and Learning Online Network) Yammer group and personal contacts.

Outputs

1. My Experience with Discussion Boards

A blog post for the Faculty of Humanities Teaching Academy

2. Royal Economic Society Newsletter (October 2020)

A short piece on discussion boards

3. Discussion boards: an introduction for students

An introduction to discussion boards for students using Adobe Spark.

4. Cheat Sheets on the use of discussion boards

- for Course Convenors/Directors
- for Teaching Assistants, plus a video clip (8 min) discussing the role of Teaching Assistants on discussion boards

Outputs

5. Video on how to build a discussion board in Blackboard using Piazza

A 20 minute video on how to build a Piazza discussion board from within Blackboard, including some basic usage tips (assumes that Piazza is tied in to Blackboard as it is at The University of Manchester).

6. A 1-page infographic for staff on why and how to use discussion boards

Online discussion boards - a quick guide for staff

Impact

The use of discussion boards, and in particular Piazza discussion boards, has significantly expanded over the last year (2020/21). So much so that The University of Manchester committed to significant licence purchases. It is of course impossible to identify exactly what this project's contribution to this development was, but I think it is fair to say that the above outputs and discussion with colleagues contributed to this institutional action.

Whether this eventually led to an improved student experience is impossible to judge on a broad scale. However, I have seen student survey responses from a large range of units in Economics and know that well-functioning discussion boards are frequently mentioned as positively contributing to student learning.

Reflection

- **Findings:** Overall I am very happy with the outcomes of this project. I have gained a much clearer understanding of the elements of discussion boards which contribute positively to student learning. Some of these findings were expected (e.g. students want more detailed answers) but others were somewhat surprising (e.g. students much appreciate a well-organised board and have high expectations of how other students should contribute to this).
- **Dissemination:** I disseminated the findings through the University's online Yammer group, Teaching and Learning Online (TALON), and beyond The University of Manchester through my connections at the Economics Network. It is, however, difficult for me to judge how effective these various means of communication were.

Next steps

- I feel that discussion boards (certainly locally in Economics and perhaps even across the School of Social Sciences as a whole) are now clearly embedded into the delivery of most of our course units. This will remain true even beyond the predominance of online teaching.
- However, I expect that the adoption of appropriate staff and student behaviours to best support student learning will require continuous support and encouragement. I therefore expect to continue to offer support to departments and individuals in that respect.

Dr. Ralf Becker

July 2021
