

Assessed Discussions

PURPOSE

Assessed discussions enable you to demonstrate and develop your knowledge, understanding and skills through engaging with others in a way which helps their learning as well as yours. Being able to learn from and with others, and to enable their learning, is a skill that you are likely to use in a variety of professional, ministerial or vocational settings.

CONTENT

In an **assessed discussion** you will be set by the tutor a question or topic for discussion in a group. Often you will be asked to set out your initial response to this, then to expand on or modify that response in the light of comments and questions you receive from other students (and sometimes also from the tutor). You are likely also to be assessed on how you make comments on and ask questions about what others say.

An assessed discussion will often be an asynchronous online forum, i.e. one in which students engage with each other over a period of time of at least several days through written posts online. However assessed discussions can also be – in whole or part – synchronous (where participants are responding immediately to one another), in person and/or oral. You will be given clear guidance on the format of the discussion and the expectations for it. For example, if it is an online discussion you are likely to be given a minimum number of posts to make and/or expectations for the word length of what you post.

You will need to have engaged with the subject matter of the discussion before it begins so your initial contributions are informed and helpful. But the discussion should show that you are continuing to learn – benefitting from the perspectives of others, expanding your ideas, or perhaps nuancing or even changing them. It should also show that you can identify strengths and weaknesses in what others say and respond in a way that is helpful to them. This is a matter both of what you say and how you say it (for example, is it appropriately respectful and encouraging even when you think they are mistaken?).

WHAT WE ARE LOOKING FOR

First and foremost, we are looking to see how your contributions to the discussion demonstrate that you have met the relevant learning outcomes of the Module Outline. In particular, we will be looking to answer the following questions:

1. Have you demonstrated the relevant knowledge, understanding and (where appropriate) skill?
2. Can you set out your views clearly and well, offering reasons for them?
3. Can you respond well to comments and questions from others – whether giving more explanation for what you have said, supplementing it, or recognizing the need to change your views?

4. Can you help others learn through making good comments on or asking good questions about what they say, and doing this in a way which is constructive, respectful and encouraging?

TECHNICAL MATTERS

For the tutor:

- It is important that you set clear expectations for the discussion. This both establishes how it should achieve its learning goals and means students know what they are required to do. The expectations include setting out what it is meant to cover (for example, the initial question or task) and how students should participate – for example, you might need to indicate a minimum number of posts each should make or how often they should post or the length of those posts. You need to ensure through your design that there is no danger of any student receiving no responses to what they say if that will disadvantage them.
- The exercise may involve effectively each student leading a separate discussion (probably parallel if they are asynchronous) or there may be just one bigger discussion.
- It is often helpful to expect each student to make a reasonably substantial initial contribution to set the discussion going.
- The ‘length’ of the assignment is the length of the student’s own contributions, not the total of the contributions of all students. In the case of a ‘live’ discussion this will have to be calculated as an average – if a group of six students each lead a half hour discussion for the group, this can be taken as each doing an assignment 30 minutes in length (though each will have spent three hours involved in discussions). For an asynchronous online discussion it may not be practical to require students to submit an exact overall word count for their posts, since this may not be easy to obtain and could hinder discussion. You may therefore offer students guidance on a word-count equivalence for their participation, for example based on an average number of expected posts of an approximate specified length. You should also give clear guidance on when an asynchronous discussion begins and ends, e.g. running a thread on a topic over the course of 2 weeks and then directing students to a new thread for the next topic.
- In an online discussion you need to decide whether students are required to follow the conventions of academic writing and the particular expectations of your TEI for this, or whether they should be free to engage in a more informal style as they might more naturally do with their peers. You also need to set out whether and how students can share material other than text as part of their response (e.g. a video or image).
- Think about whether and how you will be involved in the discussion. Tutor involvement can help the process and give valuable pointers to the students on the subjects of the discussion, or can act to disempower students if they think they can leave it to you to move the discussion forward.
- Especially in online learning, it is likely to be helpful for students to have interacted with one another in a similar way beforehand. This could be built into the course design throughout, with regular use of a discussion forum for example, or you could set students a specific formative task prior to their summative assessment in this form. You may also think about whether there need to be agreed ground rules / netiquette established ahead of the discussion.
- If the discussion is oral, best practice is for it to be recorded in such a way that it can be straightforwardly accessible to the moderator and external examiner. If that is not possible, there will need to be consideration of how to ensure appropriate moderation and external scrutiny can take place. This is likely to involve having two markers present and keeping detailed notes of what was said in the discussion.
- In an assessed discussion, you are expecting the student to learn through a process of engaging with other students. Where engagement with others is less central to the task, it is

likely to be better for the assignment to be, as appropriate, a written assignment, reflective journal or oral presentation. If the student is primarily facilitating the learning of others, it is likely to be better viewed as a practical skills assignment. If you are asking for a significant agreed output (for example, an agreed summary of a biblical book but not a short definition of a theological term), it would be worth thinking whether it would be better conceived as a project or group project, which might also suit the creation of a blog or wiki.

For the student:

- Make sure you know the expectations for the discussion and follow them – are you expected to make a certain number of posts, for example, or do you have to follow formal academic writing conventions?
- Even if you are not expected to follow formal academic writing conventions, you still need to ensure that the way you write is clear to the others who will read it – spelling and punctuation still matter! Follow your tutor’s guidance about conventions and abbreviations and non-textual forms of response (sharing images or videos for example, alongside your comments).
- The discussion itself is meant to be a process of learning. So your first post needs to show that you have begun to get to grips with the topic, but does not have to be a final statement, and you may want to indicate questions you still have or areas where you are uncertain. Similarly it is a strength rather than a weakness if you develop or modify your views in response to good points made by others.
- In what you say in response to others, think about how you can help them develop their views, rather than just how you can show off your knowledge or understanding. This can mean asking good questions as well as making relevant comments. It also includes thinking about how you say things – so if you are disagreeing with them how can you do so respectfully and in a way that encourages them to think carefully about what you are saying rather than to react defensively?
- Your contributions to the discussion should show you drawing on relevant reading and other appropriate sources, and as in any work you must make sure your dependence on this is clearly acknowledged (even when you are not being required to follow the normal academic writing conventions).

MARKING CRITERIA

The questions that your marker will be considering when assessing your work are as follows:

1. How do your contributions to the discussion demonstrate that you have acquired the knowledge, understanding and skills of the relevant learning outcomes of the module?
2. To what extent have you fulfilled these? These standards – by which your work will be graded – are described in the **Assessment Criteria for Assessed Discussions** for the level of your module. The criteria against which your work will be marked fall into four categories:

Evidence of learning:

Have you demonstrated thorough and accurate knowledge and understanding of the subject matter?

Where appropriate, did you show good skills in engaging with practice?

Argument and reasoning:

Were you able to explain and defend your views, providing evidence for them as appropriate?

Did you demonstrate the ability to think critically and analytically?

Were you able to explain or develop your thinking in response to what others asked or said?

Working with others:

Does how you engage with others show the ability to recognize what will help them learn, both in what you say and how you say it?

Presentation:

Were your contributions to the discussion clear and expressed in a way that helped others understand them?

