<title>BRIEFING PAPER</title>

<subtitle>Still Awaiting Further Innovation with Forums</subtitle>

About Us

Every virtual learning environment (VLE) provides forum or discussion board support. Unfortunately, the resulting forums rarely develop into well ordered, well established dialogues, capable of meeting the educational needs for all of the participants. In some well publicised failure cases, student cohorts simply abandon them and setup their own elsewhere using Facebook, Twitter or Google+ which offer further benefits such as mobile support, just-in-time loading of content and sleek aesthetics. In other cases, it may be worse if students don't abandon them, and waste too much time and effort trawling through numerous, extensive and disorganised message collections for poor reward.

There are many reasons for poor performance with forums, and in general they relate to how well they are setup, managed and used. However some relate to how capable the forums system is, and in turn how well it can support the individual teaching and learning processes that the surrounding VLE must frame.

This briefing paper will home in on the fitness-for-purpose of today's forums systems, and in particular a small number of issues that today's forum systems just do not address. It will also attempt to identify why this is, and offer possible solutions many of which are yet to be implemented.

Issue #1 Integration of service components

In the past six years since this briefing paper was first written, integration of some discussion forum systems has got much easier with new independent Web services such as Muut offering embed capabilities, meaning you don't need to download a package and upload it to your own web host. However, this comes at the cost of maintaining your conversations in a third party-site, outside your own managed learning environment.

Other new forums systems such as Discourse offer more educationally optimised features such as anonymous posting and support for bigger blocks of text than most social medial platforms, helping to support deeper, more meaningful educational conversations. However Discourse isn't embeddable in current VLE systems, so users still have to go to a separate forums component or service to record their contributions in that context.

In short, VLEs still don't do what our personal computing environments do, and vice versa. We are still awaiting a better integration of these information technology services and components. Come back again in another 6 years.

Issue #2 Personal workflows

To achieve real integration, forums should be a defined part of a course structure or, in CAPDM design terms, a course component 'onion'. When using a standalone forums system it becomes difficult to structure discussions within the context of an ongoing course. A student can be distracted by all the other forums available and would need to self-navigate to the appropriate discussion.

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With an integrated system, the student stays within the VLE course specific pages and the forum just becomes a part of their workflow.

Arguably a student's view of a course should be a simple set of instructions (a workflow), around which are built in all the content and tools you need at each point. The environment then services the workflow, rather than having the workflow hosted in the environment.

Issue #3 The synchronous/ asynchronous messaging spectrum

Forums are stuck at the asynchronous end of this spectrum of messaging. Better might be a semi-synchronous debate when the student actually learns on-line. They may be in a learning context at a particular point in time, or have the need to be in one, but they need to resolve any problems or questions they have when they arise (today, this afternoon or whenever). The answer is not to be fully synchronous as this is often too distracting and stressful. However, being fully asynchronous is not the best option either, as there is no confidence that messages won't languish. The half-way house of committed semi-synchronous, where a group of learners can commit to a debate this afternoon (or whenever) at their asynchronous convenience seems best. For this to be effective, students need to be able to control:

- the publication of their presence;
- notification of message contributions;
- to have fast rapid re-entry to the debating context.

This is a bit like a combination of the features of Skype within a forums system like phpBB. The closest attempt so far has been the Apache Wave project which worked well for small groups of collaborative workers, but failed to take off more widely.

Issue #4 Presentation and access

Forum debates should be either in an 'open' or a 'FAQ' state. Open means they are regularly visited, and hence worthwhile contributing to and managing – this definition is key for this context. FAQ means they have been digested and turned into a useful reference. There should be no other state. Obviously, just as an open forum may be closed and reduced to become an FAQ one, there is always the potential of opening up an FAQ list to turn it back into an Open forum.

Finer control over how forums are presented and accessed is therefore needed. Rather than having a standalone forums system providing access to all forums in one go, the VLE should provide a more context-dependent access. For example, only accessing course-specific forums when inside the course pages within the VLE. This sounds an obvious requirement, but the context-dependency can be quite intricate.

It may also be desirable to have a contribution-driven access policy, e.g. to support a Delphi process – a research process which involves encouraging respondents to thinking laterally and conceptualise while structuring their contributions through a number of stages. Once students make their contribution, only then can they progress to the next stage and see other's contributions. Everybody must contribute and all contributions count, though they may be of specific form such as doing ten content 'searches' first before being able to contribute to a message.

How well does your current forums system exploit the benefits of structuring debate?

Issue #5 Part of a domain of content

Forums should be a good way for students, and other users, to make effective use of a **Domain** of content. For example, adding a hyperlink into a specific context (perhaps into a relevant section of a core text) is a good example of adding value to a message. However, doing this ten times, augmented by a few paragraphs around the links, gives students an ability to publish their own 'paths' through the content domain.

Going further, simply referencing any learning object (e.g. a diagram, Flash object, or applet) from within a forums message opens up the ability to self-publish using the content assets of the Domain. This 'empowers the students' who otherwise have to take what they are given in a published domain or programmed unit. Sounds simple (and it is) but how do the students find the reference to the content item? In rich, managed content domains, with good meta-data and resource discovery tools, this becomes eminently possible. This effort should also potentially be part of an overall student activity report, allowing tutors access to a ready summary showing which students have posted what messages.

Issue #6 Meta-data and linking[1]

Forums need more metadata. Contributed content could be digested and then labelled with value for certain contexts by any user. "This is a key point", or "this is high priority", or "this is a misconception" or "this is erroneous" are all valid labels that could significantly improve the painfully serial process of trawling through forums looking for nuggets of value.

All of this requires rich and easy linking. By integrating forums more closely with the content it becomes possible to allow messages to reference other parts of the VLE, including its content, in a natural way. A student could post a link to

[1] "Linking is Power": James Hendler on the Semantic Web

a specific part of an on-line workbook. This also works the other way – the workbook could link to a forum, and a question (or its answer) could link to the relevant section of the course materials.

Again, this sounds simple and obvious, but it requires a content and systems infrastructure that is rich in meta-data, coupled with a high level of flexibility and integration, to put this functionality in place.

Issue #7 Feature convergence

This is becoming more evident as new versions of VLEs roll out new features such as file attachments to forums messages. However, as far as we know, none yet offer a single integrated system that can provide a shared link mechanism that supports general usage within the VLE – all content and features. When one does come along, it is likely to want to take exclusive control of all of your content again, so watch out!

Jag Singh co-founded MessageSpace, the UK's first digital political advertising agency and built the technology stack for it ground-up. He also sees a convergence in the features and functionality provided by forums and blogs.

> "A number of power-bloggers are beginning to create communities (forums) around their blogs (TechCrunch etc.), and some political megasites (Kos, et al.) can already be considered forums that resemble blogs."

Other contributors to MessageSpace find that posts start like 'regular' blogs, but often take on a very different feel after a dozen or so comments as they morph into something more akin to forum posts, and become increasingly unwieldy to follow and read as a result.

Conclusion

In the emerging "Web 2.0" world of improved communication, information sharing and collaboration that we increasingly live in, forums systems feel 'old hat', and somewhat bypassed by today's popular social media platforms.

Your forums systems may do all of these things for you, in which case write and tell us what you are using. However, for the general masses out there, forums are a bit restrictive when it comes to supporting learning.

The next generation of VLEs will have to blur the feature boundaries of today's system components, if they are going to be able to successfully support the evolving needs of educators. In the future, VLEs need to allow educators to model different types of discussion, as well as to conduct and facilitate good quality educational dialogue online.

If you want to become an innovator yourself in this critical area of education technology development, custom VLE developments using open source assets like Moodle or Discourse are probably your best option. If you don't have the development capability to do this in-house, work with organisations like CAPDM who have.

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CAPDM Ltd.

22 Forth Street
Edinburgh
EH1 3LH
United Kingdom

capdm.com
enquiries@capdm.com
+44 (0)131 477 8630
@capdmltd