

Using the Discussion Forums

As a distance student the discussion forums are where you will 'talk' to your tutors and peers about the readings and other academic content. At the residential we will discuss how to use the discussion forum and specifically the roles of leading and summarising the discussion for your academic work. But there are more to the forums than that. We will use them as notice boards and cafes; we also have started one with Ask the Librarian, where you can ask specific questions for Sarah about accessing the resources online.

So, what are the advantages & disadvantages (above that of just talking).....

Advantages	Disadvantages
Flexibility: accessible 24x7, any place as long as you have an internet connection Levelling: reserved people who usually don't speak up can say as much as they like while "loud" people are just another voice and can't interrupt Documented: unlike verbal conversation, online discussion is lasting and can be revisited Encourages reflection: participants don't have to contribute until they've thought about the issue and feel ready Relevance: provides a place for real life examples and experience to be exchanged Choice: a quick question or comment, or a long reflective account are equally possible Community: over time can develop into a supportive, stimulating community which participants come to regard as the high point of their course Limitless: you can never predict where the discussion will go; the unexpected often results in increased incidental learning	Text-based: relies on inputting text which can be challenging for those who don't like to write or have poor keyboard skills No physical cues: without facial expressions and gestures or the ability to retract immediately there's a big risk of misunderstanding Information overload: a large volume of messages can be overwhelming and hard to follow, even stress-inducing Threads: logical sequence of discussion is often broken by users not sticking to the topic (thread) Time lag: even if you log on daily, 24 hours can seem like a long time if your waiting for a reply; and then the discussion could have moved on and left you behind Inefficient: it's takes longer than verbal conversation and so it's hard to reply to all the points in a message, easily leaving questions unanswered Directionless: participants used to having a teacher or instructor telling them what to do can find it a leaderless environment (and that's where tutors come in!)