

## Chapter 6

# Combating the “Silo Effect” in the Online Classroom: Employing a Discussion Board– Centric Approach

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This case study explores the revision process and experience learned by teaching 12 sections of an asynchronous online graduate Homeland Security Law course over a two-year period from 2018 to 2020. The chapter charts the transition of the course from a traditional format with high-stakes episodic assessments (midterm, final, and a lengthy research paper) to a discussion board-centric class using curated reading materials, case study analysis, role-playing, structured debates, and the scaffolding of shorter, low-stakes writing assignments predominately completed in the online discussion boards increased both student engagement and satisfaction as reflected by student evaluations and feedback. The chapter further argues that a collection of low-tech, low-cost design and delivery tips derived from the insights provided from scholarship and online teaching experience can create a rich and transparent online learning environment.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In recent years, online instructors and students alike have criticized the online discussion board’s utility, a long mainstay of the online classroom, for various reasons. According to Mintz (2020), many online instructors cite increased instructor workload without an associated corresponding increase in student engagement, one of the main justifications for jettisoning the discussion boards. Similarly, overworked online students juggling multiple life, work, and school responsibilities, often raise similar complaints, characterizing the discussion boards as burdensome and tedious (Morris & Stommel, 2013). Given complaints from students and instructors alike, online instructors and their institutions have experimented with a host of high-tech solutions, including interactive games, the use of video instruction, and other tools as replacements or supplements to the online discussion boards. (Landers & Landers, 2015). These high-tech innovations, including the use of mobile gaming apps, are much welcome and may, in the long-term, supplement and greatly enrich the online learning experience (Welbers et al., 2019). Unfortunately, at present, most online instructors and institutions do not have the financial or technical resources to rapidly adopt high-tech solutions or technology discussed in other chapters of this book into a sizeable percentage of their online classes. At the same time, other time-pressed and overworked online professors have opted to eliminate online discussion boards. These online professors have opted to mimic a lecture-style approach with the submission of high-stakes, episodic assessments, converting the online instructor primarily into a grader of such assessments. This approach is short-sighted, and the adoption of this method also converts an online course into merely a delivery platform for the collection and grading of assessments setting back online education a generation.

Given the realities and constraints confronting most online instructors and their institutions, this chapter argues that low-tech, low-cost online discussion boards have a continued place in online courses. If designed and delivered with the adult learner’s unique learning needs in mind, discussion boards have continued utility inside the classroom and serve as a valuable bridge to the future (Ringler et al., 2015). Among their many benefits, online discussion boards provide students and instructors with the best- and most-readily available learning platform necessary to create rich student-to-student and instructor-to-student interaction that forms the heart of a healthy online learning environment (Lieberman, 2019).

This chapter builds upon a series of published blog articles written in 2020 (Barney, 2020a; 2020b), and it seeks to add to the already robust scholarly debate over the use of online discussion boards and gamification in online classrooms. The chapter argues that creative asynchronous online discussion boards, while imperfect, will remain mainstays of the online learning environment for the foreseeable future for two main reasons. First, creative online discussion boards like that employed in

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