# Discussion Boards (DB) CHEAT SHEET FOR TAs

## Basics

**What is the purpose of your DB?**
Many course units are likely to have discussion boards. These are forums on which students can ask questions and fellow students and teaching staff can respond and discuss.
You may want to achieve different things with a discussion board. Here are a few purposes and not all of these are likely to be compatible with each other:
- Create a Q&A with answers students can rely on
- Encourage students to interact with each other
- Encourage students to challenge themselves by asking and responding to challenging questions
- Discuss peripheral issues to core content
- Provide feedback to student understanding
- Run Q&A sessions in real time or create polls and quizzes to enhance student engagement while running a class
- Facilitate the building of a community between students and teaching staff.

**Will I have to monitor my email and the DB for student questions now?**
Advise students to pose ALL content questions to the DB. In the first weeks you will get email queries. Don't answer them on email. Copy and paste the question into a DB post and answer it there. If you do this consistently you can eliminate all but personal messages from your email.
Agree with your course director how often you should check the DB. Perhaps you can agree on a rota for monitoring between the TAs and the course director.
Use the discussion board settings to control the amount of notifications you get.

**Spend some time housekeeping**
To make the discussion board as usable as possible it is important that post summaries (titles) are informative. You can edit student's posts to make them more meaningful. Also, if you see repeat posts you could link to the initial post and close the new post to avoid duplication.

**What persona do you take on the DB?**
It is very important that students know what they can expect from the teaching staff on the discussion board. The two extremes are:
- Teaching staff try to answer all questions completely and as quickly as they can
- Teaching staff are merely monitoring that students behave appropriately but leave it to other students to answer questions

There is a trade-off between the two extremes. It is likely that you get many questions but little student interaction in the former case and fewer questions but better interaction in the latter.
It is the course director's role to determine which of these roles (or a combination thereof) teaching staff should take.
You need to have a conversation with your course director to understand what role (s)he expects you to take and you should certainly adhere to this.
If you feel that the role adopted is not as useful as it could be you should seek a conversation with your course director.

**Show presence!**
For students to see the DB as an integral part of the course they need to see and feel the presence of the teaching staff on the DB. That doesn't mean that you should be answering all questions.
But whenever possible you should acknowledge points made, approve of them if appropriate, or challenge them if needed. It is likely that a probing question could lead students to continue their reflection.

## How to respond?

First of all you need to ensure that your responses are of whatever form your course director instructed you to give. If you believe that the guidance of your course director may not be productive you should seek a conversation with the course director.

**A few example posts and potential responses**

"Where can I find the reading list?" → If that information is on the VLE, do link that or say where to find it. Students need to learn to use the existing resources.

**"I tried to solve Question 3 in Problem Set 2. I don't even know where to start."** → **You may want to wait for a day or two and see whether another student responds. But you could help the student by indicating which lecture slide or textbook pages may be a good starting point. "Have a look at the textbook, it has a similar example on page 34. Give it a go and if you get stuck show us your working here as far as you have it."**

"Does anybody know the difference between,
- Concept A
- Concept B, and
- Concept C???
I still cannot get it." → Most likely this was explained somewhere in the course and you don't want to just repeat the material delivered elsewhere. This is a difficult balance between sending the student away and ask him to do the reading and then put their best thoughts on the board and not appearing too stand-offish. So something like: "Please give us your best understanding of the differences between these. Then we can better help you. I often think it helps to think about …" – So give a little tip!

**"Will topic D be on the exam?"** → **Don't even think about touching this question. This is well and truly in the course director's territory. Your advice should always be "The entire syllabus is examinable."**

Sometimes you may find that a student responds to another student in an unkind manner. → This is difficult territory to tread on. If someone is unkind because someone made a mistake, then you should be firm in the sense of stressing that you should always be supportive of fellow students. Remember you want to create an atmosphere in which students feel safe to be wrong.
If the dispute is a disagreement about a substantial issue and tempers flare you should attempt to make participants focus on the arguments while maintaining a civil attitude. Any indecent, threatening or offensive language is totally unacceptable and you need to contact your course director for follow up.

**A student may phrase the question in a way that is unclear or the question may be incomplete** → **If a student posts a question that refers to course material, ask the student to add a screenshot of the relevant material so it is easier for other students (and teaching staff) to follow.**
**If a question is unclear but you understand what is being asked, clarify the question (either by rephrasing the question in your answer or, if possible, by editing the student's question). If a question is unclear and you don't understand what is being asked, ask the student to clarify.**

## Student Engagement

**How do you get students to use the DB?**
Students need to see that the DB is an integral part of the unit. For this to happen you should try and link from and to the discussion board in other settings (lectures, classes).
In a tutorial you may want to pick up on a question or comment in the DB. Or at the end of the tutorial you could send students to the DB to keep discussing a controversial point from the tutorial.

**Praise incomplete, controversial and wrong answers – and use them**
When a question is posed ensure that either the original poster or another student responds before you jump in (this is very difficult!).
Demand that students show their attempts at answering.
Acknowledge that being wrong is part of the learning process and establish a supportive environment.
Pick up on any misunderstandings on the DB by referring to them in other settings

## Resources
- [BB help](#) on discussion boards
- BB discussion board [intro video](#)
- [Piazza homepage](#) with help and videos
- Piazza [intro video](#) (in UoM context)
- Look [inside a Piazza DB](#)
- Further advice on running discussion boards is available from: [Blackboard](#)