Designing Focused Multi-Threaded Discussions in Canvas To Overcome Existing Design Limitations

Sridhar Ramachandran, PhD
Associate Professor of Informatics
School of Natural Sciences
Indiana University Southeast
QHTLC-006

Keywords: Modules, Discussion forums, Student-student interaction

Framework

By design, Canvas allows the design and implementation of focused discussions. Canvas also allows multi-threaded discussions. However, the Canvas design does not provide a ready use technique for focused multi-threaded discussions. This Quick Hit describes a work-around to accommodate focused multi-threaded discussions in Canvas.

Canvas Modules provide a very convenient method to organize the course into weeks, units and/or topics. The strength of using the Canvas Modules is in its uniform structure and ease of access for the student and instructor alike. For example, if the course is divided into weekly modules then the Week 1 Module may contain the Week 1 Reading, Week 1 Homework, Week 1 Project, Week 1 Discussion and the Week 1 Quiz. So, continuing with this example, if the instructor wants to engage the student in multiple focused discussions in Week 1, by the currently available Canvas design limitation the instructor will have to create multiple discussions for Week1 namely Week 1 Discussion 1, Week 1 Discussion 2 and so on. While this is a practical way to arrange multiple focused discussions within a single module it has inconvenienced my students as they navigate in and out of these multiple separate discussion topics. The Quick Hit work-around presented here provides a solution to this inconvenience and has been successful in its implementation and use thus far.

Making it Work

Step 1: Create a single Discussion Topic for each Module (e.g. Week 1 Discussion). This will be the go-to place for all discussions for that Week's Module.

Step 2: Use the Discussion Editor Box to explain the expectations for the various topics (not the topics itself). For example, students should not create a new post when posting and should instead only reply to the colored posts that already exist adhering to the color code. See Figure 1 for one such example.

Step 3: Enable *threaded replies* for the Discussion and disable the *Users must post before seeing replies* feature.

Step 4: Now post each focused topic as a color coded posting into this Discussion so that it stands distinct from each other. Make sure to start the post with its unique title. I also include the name of the color that I use for that topic for the benefit of my color-blind students. See Figure 1 for an example. The color-coded replies help with distinctly and contextually identifying student reply by topic when using the Speedgrader tool.

Future Implications

This easy to implement technique is scalable and topic threads can be added proactively by the instructor since 'New' posts are only posted by the Instructor while the student uses only the reply feature for their threaded responses. In sum, this technique simplifies the Module interface for the students and makes grading using the Speedgrader simpler for the instructor.

Comparison to Sakai/Oncourse

This Quick Hit will benefit courses that have been migrated from Oncourse. Making it Work Step 1 is similar to the 'Forum' creation on Oncourse. Step 4 is similar to the 'Conversation threads' on Oncourse.

Figure 1 : Color coded focussed multi-threaded Canvas Discussion