User Needs Report: Discussion Tool

Fall 2018

Currently, NYU supports two platforms with which faculty can set up a digital discussion space, NYU Classes and NYU Web Publishing, neither of which are sufficient to satisfy the various types of interactions faculty want their students to have. Web Publishing is an underused platform due to a general lack of knowledge about NYU WP as well as its perceived complexity. Meanwhile its native blog is designed to be a chronological, linear, 1-way journaling platform, not a multi-directional conversation tool. The discussion options available in NYU Classes, which include the blog, chat room, and forum tools, are poorly designed and lack the flexibility required for satisfactory classroom use. According to the 2018 NYU Classes Survey, multimedia discussion tools and social reading annotation tools ranked the 3rd highest in unmet needs. In previous years, “Tools for enhanced student collaboration” ranked highest in the 2014 and 2016 surveys at 42%.

Attempts to find an existing tool that would adequately serve the various needs of NYU’s faculty have failed. This document therefore outlines the user needs for a proposed new platform for online student interaction, one that would be flexible enough to offer various interaction options, including:

1. **Chat/Brainstorm**: casual, synchronous, unthreaded, multi-directional. Users are free to respond or to raise a question about a topic, but there are no specific prompts.

2. **Discussion/Conversation**: formal, asynchronous, threaded, multi-directional. Users respond to a topic or prompt and comment on each other's responses (hence the need for threading). Role management will offer the option of limiting the introduction of new topics or prompts to a discussion manager and/or moderator(s).

3. **Response**: formal, asynchronous, unthreaded, uni-directional. Users respond directly to an instructor’s prompt, and to no one else. Administrators will have the option to hide users’ responses from each other, or set a designated date/time to release responses.

4. **Annotation**: essentially, each of these three kinds of conversations can be pinned to a document (or a location in a document). In Annotation mode, you could discuss a line in a document, or use it as a topic/prompt from which to request responses. [Note: the needs for discussion and annotation/social reading have much in common; while tools currently tend to serve primarily either the annotation or the discussion context, the user needs around both might be met in the same platform]

For the sake of clarity, we will use the following terminology:

- **Post**: generic term to indicate any type of message added to a discussion. A “post” can take the form of a:

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1See the the [UAG Report on NYU Web Publishing Survey](https://example.com)
○ **Topic**: An original post that indicates what the topic is, as in a chat/brainstorm discussion environment.
○ **Prompt**: An original post by the user who will guide the discussion, and to which other users respond.
○ **Response**: A post in response to a topic or prompt
○ **Comment**: A post that comments on a response

- **User**: anyone participating in a discussion. A “user” can have the role of:
  ○ Administrator
  ○ Moderator
  ○ Participant

### Needs

#### Immediate Needs

- **Standard Compliance**:
  ○ SSO
  ○ Accessible
  ○ LTI-compliant
  ○ NYU Analytics standards compliant

- **Menu of interaction type options**, such as the four listed above
- **Administrator ability to customize selected interaction type**, including:
  ○ threaded/not threaded
  ○ moderated/not moderated
    - **Moderation options**:
      ○ approve/not approve of posts before publishing
      ○ Create topics/prompts for discussion
      ○ Delete other participants’ posts
      ○ The ability to transfer moderator ownership to someone else (for example, a student moderates a discussion instead of an instructor)
  ○ Make posts visible to participants immediately or at a selected time (always visible to admin), which would include requiring participants to post before reading others’ posts
  ○ Create discussion group of whole class roster or Google group, an NYU Classes subgroup, or individually-selected users
  ○ Ability to allow/not allow participants to edit (includes deleting) their responses (after posting)
    - Ability to not allow editing after comments to responses
    - Ability to automatically mark a response or comment as edited
    - Ability to see the edit history of posts (per Google Docs), visible only to participant and admin, who could give/not give permission to other users
- **Ability to search/sort responses**
  ○ Administrators have dashboard ability to aggregate responses by participant
(including content of responses), sortable in various ways:

- Date
- Forum
- Posts as moderator v posts as participant
  - Participants have ability to search/sort discussion responses (e.g., using hashtags or categories)

- Ability to aggregate data (admins)
  - Number of posts/comments
  - Dates of posts
  - Word count

- Time-stamped posts (with automatic time-zone adjustment)
- Opt-in email notifications of activity (immediate, daily or weekly), depending on role
- Post Edit Features:
  - Ability to include multimedia, links, embedded content, attachments, code snippets, mathematical formulas, etc.
  - Field for tags/keywords
  - Ability to save drafts
  - Ability to link to other posts
  - Ability to preview post
- Upvoting (especially critical for large courses):
  - “Upvoting” by participants or another way to indicate a “best response”
  - “Upvoting” by participants or another way to indicate a “best question” (distinct from best response)
  - Ability for admin to flag a best response or comment and have it float to top (with option for that action to close the discussion)
- Ability to rate responses and comments on a numerical scale with admin or moderator option to make anonymous or not anonymous (or pseudonymous/not pseudonymous) (especially critical for large and online/blended courses)

Eventual Needs

- Customization options
  - Allow/not allow anonymous or pseudonymous posts (auto/no-auto identification by NetID; pseudonym could be connected to actual identity)
- Ability to save a customized discussion type as a template
- Ability to spawn sub-topics/sub-prompts from a discussion, with marker within original thread, with sub-group creatable around the sub-topic/sub-prompt (admin/moderator/participant cascading permissions model for this—admin can give moderator permission to create sub-topics/sub-prompts and groups, admin or moderator can give participants permission...)
- For opt-in email notifications of activity (daily or weekly), ability to reply to notification which appears as a response or comment
- Ability to notify person tagged (“@person X”) in a post, who would then receive a notification to which they could reply (with reply posting to discussion, as above)
- Integration with Gradebook, Rubrics
• Ability to feed rating as percentage of grade to gradebook

Nice to Have

• Conversation visualization options: 1) threaded, 2) timeline, 3) network, 4) tag cloud
• Polling: participants respond with a short answer or menu option response to a posted question and responses are aggregated to show rate of each. [This may best be considered a post type]
• Multiple formats for posting a response or comment (as text, as video comment, as audio comment, etc.)
• Embed common document, image, and video file types for live edit within conversation window