Choosing a Discussion Tool
Moodle Forums and Caucus Conferences

At present, Carleton has two tools that are well suited to facilitating discussions. This guide is intended to help you select the discussion tool best suited to your course. Moodle provides a forum course tool that is in many ways similar to the Caucus discussion board service that Carleton has used for several years. There are a few important differences, however, which may affect your choice of one tool over another.

How Moodle Forums and Caucus Conferences are Similar

Both Moodle and Caucus provide excellent tools to support conversations. Both provide:

- A similar structure for online conversations: Forums/Conferences divided up into topical Discussions/Items to which participants can add replies.
- A space which is conducive to conversations with rich responses -- postings can include formatted text, images, and other media.
- A means for faculty to track student participation in reading and responding.
- Participant lists that are tied to course enrollment, as well as supporting additional non-course members.
- Faculty the means to limit students' level of participation in individual forums -- ability to start new discussions, read-only access, etc.

How Moodle Forums and Caucus are Different

Integrated or Stand-Alone Tool
Moodle forums are tightly tied to Moodle courses, so discussions are part of the general course environment -- one-stop service for students and faculty.

Caucus is a separate service, and no work has been done yet to integrate it in the Moodle environment.

Branching or Chronological Discussions
Moodle allows conversations within a discussion to nest and branch -- that is, at any time, a participant can add a reply to any posting, and that reply is displayed with the posting being replied to. Thus, separate conversations can simultaneously be taking place at in different parts of a single discussion.

Caucus enforces a strict chronological structure -- new material is always added to the end of a discussion. One approach is not necessarily better than the other, but the structure of a discussion can affect how people participate in it.

Mailing Contributions to Participants
Students can be allowed or required to “subscribe” to a Moodle forum, which causes them to receive a copy of every posting by e-mail. They cannot contribute back the forum by e-mail, but each message contains a link back to the appropriate Moodle discussion.

Caucus does not currently provide a mail subscription feature.

Ways of Discovering Contributions
Caucus is designed to make it easy to read new material in all of the conferences you follow. It automatically keeps track of what you have read, displays unread counts and links, and provides tools for quickly reviewing all new material. Unread material remains highly visible until you have seen it. Once something has been read, it can be marked unread again if the reader wishes to keep it highly visible.

Moodle does not automatically track what you have read; forum creators have to enable this for each forum by setting “Unread Tracking” to “On” or “Optional” and users have to choose to use it (when it’s optional for a forum). Once something has been read, it cannot be marked unread. Moodle does display “Recent” activity in forums, but only in relation to a user’s last login. If someone logs in but doesn’t read a new posting, it’s not considered “recent”
the next time they log in, and could be missed. Thus, it’s important for forum creators to turn on Unread Tracking and/or e-mail subscriptions to help ensure that new forum material is seen.

**Anonymity**
Caucus allows for true anonymity -- faculty can choose to make a particular discussion anonymous if that serves a pedagogical purpose. Faculty can also choose to not make participation records available to students or to themselves.

Moodle does not support any anonymity. All postings are signed, and all activity is tracked.

**Shaping Contribution Options**
Moodle offers a few different types of forums -- one limited to a single discussion, one which requires students to post before they can see what others have said, etc.

Caucus offers a single discussion type of forum.

**Displays of Discussion Topics**
Moodle always displays the content of a forum in the same way -- a list of discussions with the most recent activity at the top.

Caucus provides a wide range of options for displaying the content of a forum, with full control of what information is shown and how it is sorted. Caucus also offers a blog-like display of forum content.

**Faculty or Peer Review**
Moodle provides a rating system for forum postings, so that either the faculty member or students can rate the quality of what they have read.

Caucus does not currently provide a rating system.

**Reorganizing Discussions**
Caucus provides tools for moving discussion content easily between different forums and discussions, giving the owner full control over where content appears. Individual discussions within a forum can also be closed to new activity or limited to individuals or groups.

Moodle offers two options for managing content -- deleting responses or splitting a discussion branch off to a new discussion.

There are many other small differences between the Caucus conferences and Moodle forums, but these are some which may have an effect on which is better suited to a particular use.