

Free up Your Email AND Improve Discussion Quality with Piazza

Do you see the same student questions over and over on email?
Would you like to extend student discussion beyond the classroom?



If so, Piazza can help. Read on for a brief overview of Piazza's functions, as well as recommendations for using it effectively.¹ Visit crlt.umich.edu/piazza for more information.

Features of Piazza

- Piazza is integrated within Canvas, supported by ITS, and available to all U-M instructors free of charge.
- Piazza supports organized online discussions and Q&A that students can access 24/7.
- Students can comment on answers or post follow-up inquiries.
- Students can edit questions and answers wiki-style.
- Instructors can respond to questions and endorse a student's answer.
- There's a LaTeX editor for equations and support for multimedia.
- Tags facilitate targeted searches.
- Analytics for student usage help instructors assess participation.

Challenge #1: Handling lots of email Q&A



Amy Gottfried manages large volumes of student questions generated in Chem 230. Says Gottfried, "Piazza streamlines questions, putting them all in one spot and making them easily accessible to students. It also allows students to answer questions, learn from one another, and collaborate on answers." Gottfried

organizes content into searchable folders, which makes it easy for students to find answers. And it reduces email traffic: Gottfried redirects questions she receives on email to Piazza, where other students sometimes answer faster than she can.

Challenge #2: Getting students to participate in online discussions



Robin Queen turned to Piazza for Q&A in a large linguistics course and was pleasantly surprised when students quickly turned it into an online discussion board. They found it a particularly satisfying venue to discuss how course material related to their real life experiences. According to Queen, "It

provides a forum for students to interact with one another (and with me and GSIs, but mostly one another) and practice agreeing and disagreeing and working out concepts."

Challenge #3: Helping students prepare for exams collaboratively

Prior to each exam, **Michaela Zint** posts a series of questions to Piazza and has students work together in groups to answer them. She agrees to provide feedback as long as they make a good effort to answer, and if they continue to expand on their answer, she continues to provide feedback. Students and instructors



can see how questions and answers have been edited through Piazza's history function. Zint has been pleased by the results. "Because they answered as a group, I think the answers are much better than if they had answered individually. Seeing the questions and my comments to their responses also made the students realize, 'Whoa—wait. These are a lot harder than I thought they would be,' motivating them to study more."

Challenge #4: Including all students in class discussion and tracking participation

Seeking a way for students to share ideas in a course on Dante, especially if they were not comfortable doing so in class, **Alison Cornish** started out using Piazza as a discussion forum. She soon appreciated its ability to quantitatively track participation by 50-65 students. Qualitative judgments about the validity and thoughtfulness of students' responses also enter into her calculation of participation grades. "I don't want to attach a grade to the number of times that you need to participate, but I sometimes bring it up in class and look at the graph with the students so they know that I am looking at it. It's eye-opening to them that I can see so clearly who stands out as a good citizen."



¹Suggestions are based on a winter 2013 study of faculty and student Piazza users conducted by CRLT.

All of the faculty and over two-thirds of students surveyed recommend Piazza for use by others. Based on their experiences, faculty offer the following advice to colleagues interested in using Piazza.

Getting Started:

- Start using Piazza from the very beginning of the term.
- Take time for an in-class orientation to teach students about notifications, settings, and other preferences.
- Set clear expectations for student participation from the outset.
- Decide (and share) how quickly you will respond to questions, and encourage students to search previous posts for answers to their questions.
- Think carefully about norms for how students should approach editing each others' answers and how you will give feedback, especially in contexts where answers are unlikely to be simply right or wrong.
- While planning implementation, consider how you will organize folders and tags.
- Learn to use the analytics before incorporating Piazza into participation grades.

During the Term:

- If using Piazza for Q&A, refer emailed questions to Piazza.
- Be consistent in your frequency of use and your share of the online exchange.
- When using Piazza as a discussion forum, give students credit for contributing.
- Let Piazza posts inform the emphasis of lectures and in-class discussions.

Will Piazza save time compared to email Q&A?

Not necessarily. Although you'll spend less time answering the same questions over and over, it can be challenging in large courses to keep up with the volume of posts and student expectations for quick responses.

Is Piazza useful for small courses?

It can be valuable as a discussion tool, but for simple Q&A, students in smaller courses, or courses that offered other means of posting questions, were less eager to use Piazza.

Can Piazza be used for open-ended questions when there is no clear right answer?

Yes, it works well for open discussions, but humanities and social science faculty found the option to mark a student answer "good" less useful for open-ended questions.

How does Piazza compare to other online discussion or Q&A tools?

Piazza's features overlap with some other tools available to U-M instructors, such as *Discussions* and *Chat* in Canvas. The ability to use tags to organize content and to endorse student responses with one click are key features that distinguish Piazza. If you'd like to discuss which tool is the best fit for your course, schedule a consultation at crlt.umich.edu/techconsult.



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UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

1071 Palmer Commons, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-2218
www.crlt.umich.edu 734-764-0505

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