# **Disqus Preliminary Investigation**

## Introduction

Disqus is a commenting platform that has been in existence since 2007. It is a social network of sorts too, in that users create “profiles” that contain (optionally) some brief biographical information as well as links to all users’ commenting activity across all sites that use Disqus. Disqus works as “plug-in” or embedded content, and usually appears below the content on sites that use it (typically news articles and blog posts). It is popular with users because it is a natural way of interacting with content directly in context (as opposed to discussions taking place on a separate site).

## Use Cases

The main use case being considered for this investigation is the insertion of threaded comment activity after the content on a World Campus course page.

## Benefits

The main benefit of the Disqus tool is that it offers a way to add an interactive discussion element directly in context on a Web page. ANGEL discussion forums, which are more traditional for hosting discussions in World Campus classes, require that the student be brought into a new window and a new context that is physically separate from content pages in the course. This can create unnecessary cognitive load for our students, often requiring them to jump back and forth between browser windows or tabs. What happens might be similar to the “location-updating effect” that causes memory loss when moving between rooms in a physical environment (<http://news.discovery.com/human/psychology/walking-rooms-forget-111123.htm>). Allowing students to engage in interactive discussion directly within the virtual environment in question eliminates this cognitive load, and the extra clicks that come with it. Students in World Campus classes that have experimented with Disqus seem to enjoy it and have engaged with it somewhat extensively (John Haubrick, personal conversation).

### Accessibility

Disqus causes no concern from an accessibility standpoint. Screen reader tests reveal no problems with the interface.

### Cost

Disqus is a free tool, and is relatively easy to set up and use, with some caveats around administration and moderation that will be noted in the next section. It plugs in easily to our course pages by simply switching to source code view and pasting in the embed code provided by Disqus once the discussion instance has been initially set up on the platform.

## Drawbacks

Despite its advantages, there are also some clear drawbacks to using Disqus in a course. The chief one is the security and possible FERPA issues that are inherent with any third-party technology hosted on servers outside of Penn State, that do not also have an agreement with Penn State. Disqus does not ask for much in the way of personal information (just an email address and a password to set up an account), but the nature of Disqus is similar to a social network in that users’ activity is all tracked and connected to the profile that they set up. Unlike many social networks, this activity cannot be kept private or hidden from other Disqus users. What this means for our purposes is that if students are using a Disqus profile to post possible sensitive content to news articles or blogs outside of their World Campus courses, their World Campus instructors and fellow students can technically discover this commenting activity. Conversely, and of more concern for FERPA purposes, anyone from the public can technically discover students’ in-class comments by following their profile link from comments on public news sites or blogs (though they still can’t access the protected course site(s) that the commenting activity is connected to). Finally, a problem with any third party technology with which the World Campus or Penn State do not have an agreement is the potential for data loss, which has possible implications for any discussion activity that is graded.

It has also been reported that there are some problems with moderation (John Haubrick, personal conversation). Mainly, instructors that are not tech savvy can find the moderator interface to be cumbersome and overwhelming, requiring intervention from design staff.

## Conclusion

There are some pretty compelling benefits to using Disqus on course pages, and there are no accessibility issues, so as such we will not strongly advise against its use. However, given the many drawbacks related to security, FERPA, and moderation, we can not advocate for its use, either. Rather, we recommend exploring other options, such as embedded Yammer threads, to support embedded discussion on course content pages. A future in-depth comparative study by the consulting team can compare and contrast the use of Yammer vs. Disqus for embedded discussions.