Use Case

Using Piazza for
Exercise Session Q&A

Center for Digital Education (CEDE) and Teaching
Support Center (CAPE)

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More information:
https://go.epfl.ch/flexible-teaching

Piazza is a 'forum' tool that can be used to manage questions in exercises (as well as projects, labs etc.). In piazza:

- students post questions (in text, or using LaTeX, code, files, or by attaching photos of their work from a handheld device)
- students collaboratively build good answers to each other's questions (students will learn by trying to answer each others' questions)
- TAs answer questions, or tag good student answers
- students search for already asked and answered questions
- Students can ask TAs for a one-to-one meeting (e.g on Zoom)

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Context

An exercise set & session (either partially or completely online).

Getting started
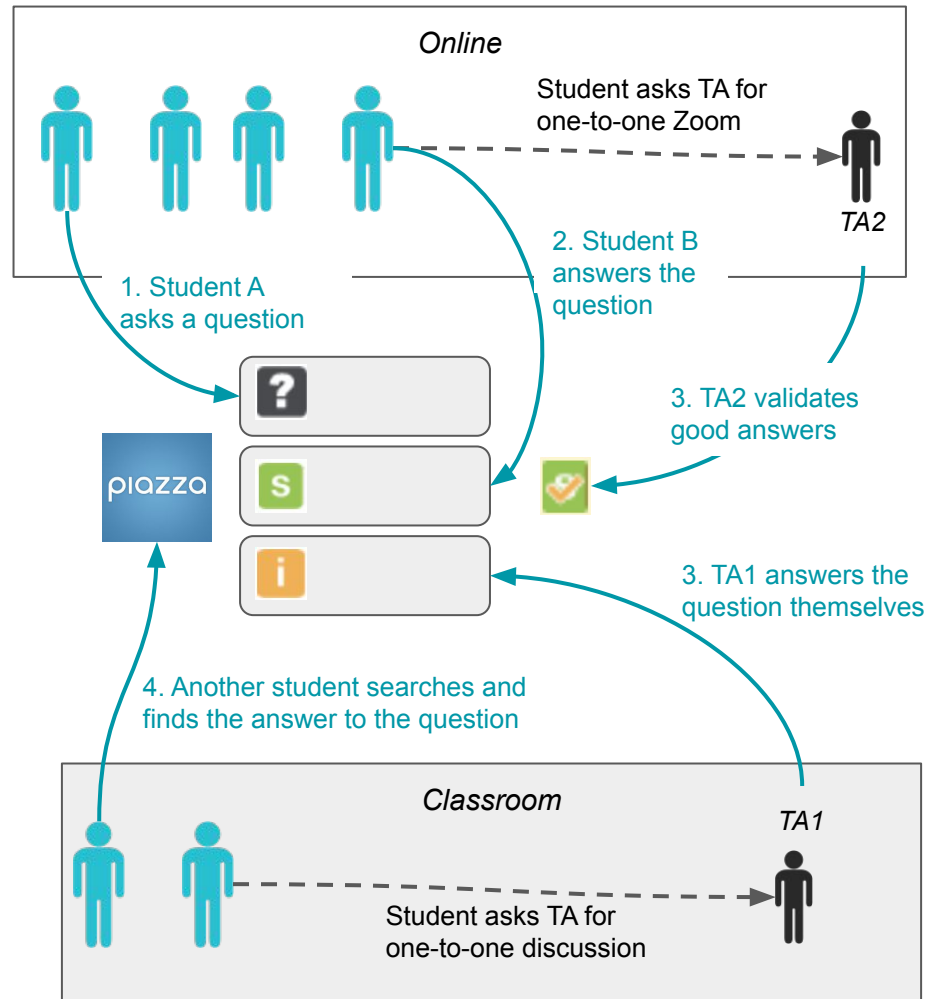
- The teacher needs to explain to students at the start of the term what piazza is and how they are expected to work in piazza (see here)
- TAs are organised with office hours and exercise sessions so that students know they will get regular responses to questions

Running a piazza forum each week

1. When students have a question they first ask on piazza (ideally both students who are online and onsite participate in this). They can do this before the exercise session begins.
2. Other students try to answer the question (piazza answers are like Google docs in that multiple students can edit/add to an answer to a question).
3. During office hours and scheduled exercise sessions, TAs validate good answers and answer unanswered questions.
4. Other students can easily search prior questions and answers, including after the exercise session.

In 'Live Q&A' mode students can

- prioritise good questions by upvoting them
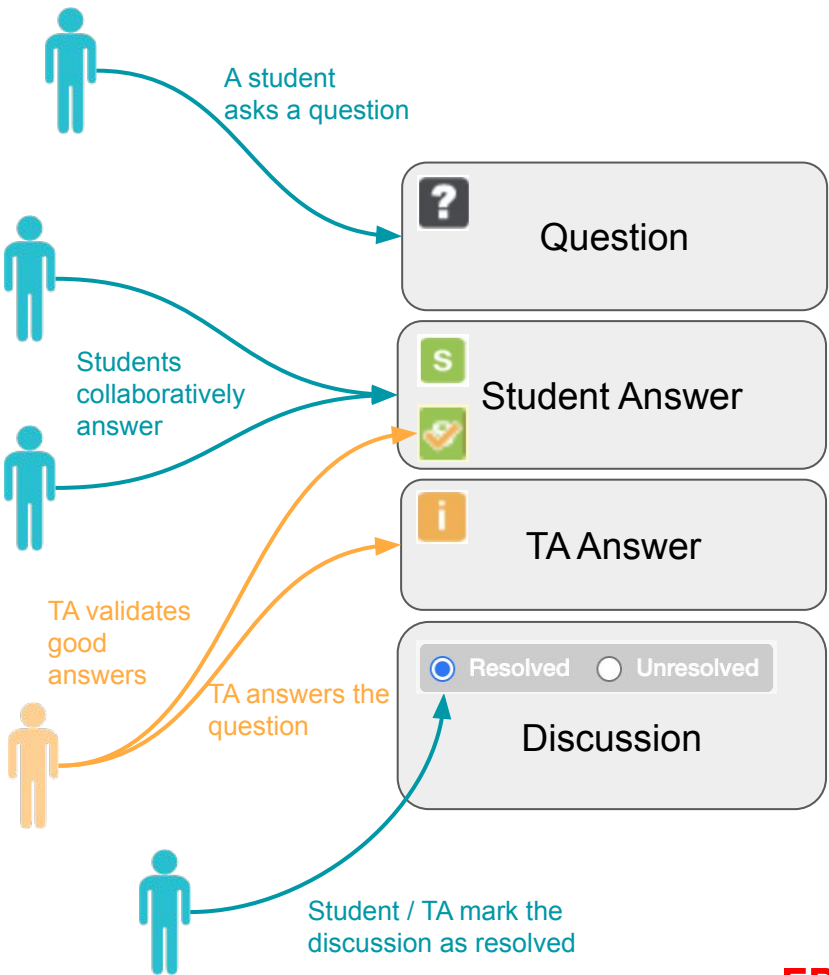- message a TA directly in piazza to ask for a one-to-one discussion

Online

Student asks TA for one-to-one Zoom

TA2

1. Student A asks a question

2. Student B answers the question

3. TA2 validates good answers

3. TA1 answers the question themselves

4. Another student searches and finds the answer to the question

Classroom

TA1

Student asks TA for one-to-one discussion

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Experience

Till Jung, Pedro M. Reis - ME104 - Introduction to structural mechanics

- N= circa 200 students, 12 TAs (6 student TAs and 6 PhD assistants) with both pencil and paper exercises and computer lab. Exercises were distributed through moodle.

- Piazza was quite straightforward to use for TAs and students.
- Students often have the same question: with Piazza each question only has to be asked and answered once, so there are fewer questions for TAs to address overall.
- Each PhD assistant was on call on a rota - they answered 10 questions then handed on to the next person. This worked well for the PhD assistants, but meant students often didn't try to answer each other's questions because TAs were reactive.
- Student TAs were on call during the scheduled exercise times.
- Students could ask for an individual Zoom meeting if they needed a more detailed discussion.

Recommendations

- The TAs answer the questions but the teacher needs to keep checking in to ensure the TA responses are of suitable quality.
- If all students post questions anonymously it makes it easier for more timid students to also post questions.

Maximising student usage of piazza

At the start of the term

- Introduce piazza to students and explain how it will be used in your course
- Manage **student expectations** by stating, for example, that TAs will read and respond to posts twice per week - during office hours and during the exercise session
- Ask students to try to **answer each others' questions** and to edit/add to an already existing answer (a piazza answer is a bit like Google docs - multiple people can edit/change a post). The goal is to answer the query - **not to provide a whole solution to the exercise**.
- Encourage students to **be constructive** and to avoid offensive or rude comments in the forum (TAs can readily delete offensive posts if required)
- If students email questions to TAs or ask them verbally, post them and the answer to piazza (anonymously)
- Post some questions to piazza yourself to model to students the way you want them to use it (e.g. naming the post with the exercise number, making their question clear, etc.)

During each session, encourage students to:

- search to see if their question has already been answered
- post their question anonymously (this encourages timid students to participate)
- use the exercise name or number as the summary line (so it can be easily found by others)
- try to answer each others' questions and to improve on each other's answers
- be constructive and to avoid offensive or rude comments in the forum
- book a one-to-one Zoom discussion with a TA using the individual messaging option in piazza

Students and TAs can:

- manage email notification settings to avoid getting too many emails from piazza

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Student Guide to Posting a Question in Piazza

Piazza is for **posting questions about an exercise**. Questions about the course or about logistics can go to the relevant moodle forum.

The "students' answer" is an answer to the question posed by another student. **Students should not post their solution to an exercise.** Students can give hints and ideas, but **should not provide full (or nearly full) exercise solutions.**

1. The default is that questions are posted to the whole class but the student may post directly to the instructors (e.g. to ask for a one-to-one discussion on Zoom)

2. It is important to ask students to use the exercise name or number as the summary line: otherwise the question feed can quickly become chaotic and students will end up posting the same question or comment multiple times

3. Students and TAs can write posts in rich text but can also use a LaTeX editor [f(x) on the menu bar] or in code [{;} in the menu bar]

4. Students can post anonymously (if all students are encouraged to post anonymously, this may encourage participation from more timid students)