

Discussion Boards in Theatre Arts Education: Help or Hindrance?

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Abstract

This article seeks to explore how asynchronous discussion boards can be a service or disservice to students and instructors in the field of theatre arts at the postsecondary level. Referring to the literature, documentation of the benefits and downfalls of asynchronous discussion board use are explored and applied to the perceptions and practices in theatre arts post-secondary education.

Introduction

Through a literature review, this paper theorizes how a postsecondary academic theatre program can be enhanced by the inclusion of technology in the form of a networked learning system (NLS), in particular asynchronous communication using technologies such as discussion boards / message boards / threaded discussions (DB). Reviewing the literature in general, and applying the concepts to theatre in particular, this paper will indicate how asynchronous communication can enhance the postsecondary academic theatre course. Studies of the uses and benefits of DB in the classroom will be considered and applications to the specific needs of a theatre program will be suggested (Nicholls and Philip, 2001).

Technology can transform the teaching of any discipline (i.e., Bernard & Lundgren-Cayrol, 2001; Chang, 1999; Daugherty & Funke, 1998; Leonard & Guha, 2001; Martyn, 2002; Nicholls & Philip, 2001; Stoney, Phillips, Maczewski & Wang, 2002; Winsboro, 2002). Particularly in theatre this will be valuable, according to such researchers as Arndt (1999) and Schrum (1999). A DB may expand the classroom beyond the traditional time frame (Bernard & Lundgren-Cayrol, 2001; Brower, 2002; Curtin, 2002; Daugherty & Funke, 1998; Lock, 2002; Martyn, 2003). Before the topic appears in a lecture a DB can be used to prepare students for in-class discussion by beginning the discussion online (Converse, 1999), in place of or as additional preparation as Clark (2003) does by students to prepare notes in advance and as Levy (2001) does in beginning a theatre f2f class.

Students can present their ideas, without concern for class time being 'wasted,' and without concern that the topic has already ended (Meyer, 2003), directing the discussion toward areas that concern them (Shimko, 2003). An instructor has more opportunity to 'hear' a student's ideas and notice or praise this contribution to the class if it is asynchronous where the student can add an enhanced or documented thought (Meyer, 2003) after the class has ended (Levy, 2001, Lock, 2002).

DBs can help students to expand participation and collaboration (Lock, 2002, Meyer, 2003; Tu & McIsaac, 2002) and faculty to assess the levels of participation in and comprehension of the materials discussed (Cooper & Selfe, 1990; Smith, Ferguson & Caris, 2001). Thomson (2003), Graham and Scarborough (1999) contend that collaboration, with active participation, creates stronger learning, a shared vision which can then fuel individual creation – but only for those students who are actively participating in the learning and creating environments.

DB may also be used in place of disappearing traditional face to face (f2f) discussion-based seminars where students and faculty interact asynchronously over what was presented in the lecture (Pyle and Dziuban, 2001). Orr (2003) notes that a seminar course, with no more than 14 students, enables students to better learn play analysis. Rather than having so many small sections of a course, an instructor can teach a large lecture and in place of some of the recitation portion have students meet online for discussion and feedback utilizing the DB feature of an NLS. Johnson (2002) remarks that lectures may make learning a passive endeavor and the DB creates more opportunities for students to emerge from passivity. DB offer students an additional means of communicating their ideas in a dialogic format (Graham and Scarborough, 1999) and the opportunity of participation to students who are active in departmental productions whose late rehearsals and odd schedules might cause them to be less energetic in the classroom (Brower, 2003; Gouveia, 2001; Nicholls and Philip, 2001). Willis (1998), Murphy (2002-2003), and Phillips and Peters (1999) suggest the integration of NLS usage offers the instructor the opportunity to lessen but not replace f2f meetings of the class, thus enabling students to have less classroom hours but often more contact hours for an equivalent course (Daugherty and Funke, 1998; Gouveia, 2001; Lewis, 2002).

The DB can also enable students to give well-thought and formulated feedback on each other's work without the possibility of f2f confrontation and reducing the 'attacking' nature of criticism or the shyness inhibiting true critiquing (Brower, 2003; Clark, 2003; Cooper & Selfe, 1990; Curtin, 2002; Greenlaw & DeLoach, 2003; Hiltz, 2002; Poole, 2000; Roost, 2003; Swan, 2001) while also enabling all students to have a chance to have their say (Brower, 2003; Clark, 2003; Kettner-Polley, 1999). By having asynchronous discussions, students will be able to think, absorb, and reflect before responding to the ideas of others (Daugherty and Funke, 1998; Graham & Scarborough, 1999; Levine and Wake, 2002). DB can also be used as a place to get preliminary peer feedback on assignments before final submission to the instructor through posting preliminary versions for peer review (Roost, 2003; Shimko, 2003).

Advanced design courses, in which students take the various roles in a production team, can utilize DB as a way to discuss issues that arise without waiting for the next production meeting. Mereba (2003) points out that working in groups helps students develop problem-solving skills independent of the instructor, and to gain interdependence among members of a group (Levy, 2001; Roy & Elfner, 2002). By removing many of the logistical problems of working together as a group by providing an asynchronous method of collaborating, the students will be able to focus more on their parts of the group and less on the logistics of meeting.

The instructor who is also a practicing theatre professional sometimes needs to travel for his/her other job (Nicholls and Philip, 2001). Rather than canceling the class session or getting someone to cover the session so that the instructor can pursue scholarly / tenure-granting activities, the instructor can utilize a DB for the missed session(s) (Gouveia, 2001; Lewis, 2002; Nicholls and Philip, 2001). Students can be given a topic to discuss by the instructor, and the instructor can check the DB once or twice a day to post additions, responses or additional questions as necessary to keep the conversation moving and to correct misinformation presented by students in their discussion postings. The instructor can also use the DB feature to bring in an external expert in a topic being discussed without requiring the expert to travel (Gouveia, 2001; Kumari, 2001). The expert would participate in the DB, answering questions posed by the students, for example, as a way to bring in another perspective on questions and knowledge from the field (Levine & Wake, 2000). Guests can be used in all areas of theatre as no one person can be an expert in all areas of a course, or the instructor might want to take advantage of professional connections. According to Levine and Wake (2000),

The increase in collaboration, communication, and comprehension which DB have brought to other fields are both potentially extremely useful to the teaching of theatre arts. Theatre arts requires dialogue – between members of a team producing a play and between the student and the text or materials itself (Levine & Wake, 2000; Thomson, 2003). Whether it is a practical class (scene design or acting) where projects are analyzed and discussed, or a history class where plays are analyzed, it is the conversation that will help the students to better their work or envision more fully what they are learning about (Cooper and Selfe, 1990). Wells (1992) and Swann (2001) suggest that DB might be useful for facilitating brainstorming and for higher level cognitive and affective objectives. Furthermore, budgetary constraints often work against a department's ability to ensure the optimal amount of communication. The faculty and students are often under time constraints, and by having some of the f2f class sessions replaced by DB, as Graham and Scarborough (1999) have noted, the time constraints can be lessened.

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