

Preferred Teaching Methods in Online Courses: Learners' Views

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Abstract

Online learning platforms with asynchronous discussion boards provide such a different setting from traditional face-to-face classrooms that they urge educators to investigate online teaching methods. The purpose of this study was twofold: first, to identify the recommended online teaching methods in asynchronous discussion boards, and second, to explore learners' perceptions about the identified teaching methods and correlate the learners' perceptions with learners' characteristics, including computer skills, experiences, and activity ratios in online discussions. Bruner's classification of two modes of analytical and narrative thought was used as a theoretical framework. Accordingly, two teaching methods, narrative and episodic, were identified. Descriptive survey and correlation designs were used to examine the perspectives of 30 purposefully selected online students through two sets of questionnaires with close and open-ended questions. Findings indicated that the narrative with a higher interactivity level, was the preferred method. The interactivity of online instructors and perceived success of courses were moderately correlated. Participants with stronger computer skills preferred teaching methods with lower interactivity. Some participants did not prefer a specific teaching method for performing various instructional tasks but rather preferred combining the narrative and episodic methods. Such findings inform educators about possible changes to improve the quality of online teaching.

Keywords: online teaching methods, asynchronous discussion, narrative and episodic teaching methods, online learner' preferences, distance education

Introduction

Online courses in higher education have become increasingly popular in the last decade in the United States. In the years 2006-2007, two-thirds of two and four-year colleges offered online or hybrid/blended courses (Parsad & Lewis, 2008). Recent statistics indicated that in the years 2003-2008, there was an average 12-14% annual increase in online course enrollments (Allen & Seaman, 2010), while in the years 2009-2010, there was a 21% increase in the number of students registered for online courses compared to 2% expansion in campus-based enrollment (Allen & Seaman, 2010). Similarly, online class enrollments in 2011 increased 10% while overall college enrollments increased only 2% (Allen & Seaman, 2011). Online enrollments in 2012 remained very robust while overall higher education enrollment declined (Allen & Seaman, 2012). By 2014, it is predicted that more than 80% of all college students will be taking some online courses (Bates, 2011). Evidently, the nation's higher education landscape has changed, as online education becomes one of its permanent components, and this may be the time that we will look back upon as "The Great Migration" to online education (Moore, 2011). Such an adaptation is promising; however, a number of concerns have emerged as online education has been rising, including a higher drop out rate in online learning as compared to that in the traditional setting (Morris, Xu, & Finnegan, 2005; Roby, Ashe, Singh, & Clark, 2013; Stanford-Bower, 2008; Tyler-Smith, 2006) as well as learners' feeling of isolation and disconnectedness (Willging & Johnson, 2004). Many factors including students' personal preferences and learning styles may contribute to these problems; nevertheless, the teaching methods of online instructors are one of the major factors that greatly influence the atmosphere and effectiveness of online courses (Mayes, Luebeck, Yu Ku, Akarasriworn, & Korkmaz, 2011; Whipp & Lorentz, 2009).

The enormous amount of attention devoted to the use of technology in online education distracts educators from addressing important changes in technology-based education. It seems that the adoption of online education has outpaced the knowledge of how it might best be used (Bair & Bair, 2011; Lane, 2013). Particularly, online learning platforms or learning management systems (LMS) (e.g., Blackboard, Moodle) provide such a different educational setting from that of traditional face-to-face classrooms that they urge educators to redefine the role of every component in this new setting (Evrin, Correia, & Thompson, 2011; Sherry, 1996).

The redefinition of the role of instructors is one of the critical issues which requires more study. Learning management systems are more student-centered as compared to traditional teacher-centered classrooms. Such a shift of emphasis requires instructors to redesign the way that students interact with one another, with the new environment, and with their instructors (Berge & Collins, 1996; Hathaway & Norton, 2012; Swinglehurst, Russell, & Greenhalgh, 2008; Syverson & Slatin, 1997). The role of instructors is not only changed but also expanded in LMS.

To clarify the recommended and effective changes in online teaching methods, the researcher in this study identified the recommended online teaching methods in the literature. Then the researcher explored which of the recommended methods were preferred by the learners. Finally, the researcher investigated the correlation between learners' preferred online teaching methods and the characteristics of the learners; the correlation between instructors' interactivity and perceived productivity of the online teaching; and the correlation between instructors' teaching methods and perceived productivity of the online teaching.

Literature Review

To find out about the recommended teaching methods, a literature review was conducted to examine empirical studies, including quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods, as well as literature reviews related to online teaching methods published in peer-reviewed journals since 1985. The keywords that were used included *online teaching methods*, *online discussion moderation*, *online instruction*, *online pedagogy*, and *online instructor role*. The databases that were used for the literature research included Google scholar, Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), ProQuest, and EBSCOhost. The review of literature resulted in identifying multiple roles for online instructors and narrative and episodic as the two major teaching methods as explained below.

Four different roles are identified for online instructors including pedagogical, social, managerial, and technical responsibilities (Berge, 1995; Goodyear, Salmon, Spector, Steeples, & Tickner, 2001; Redmond, 2011). Pedagogical roles refer to the teaching methods, social roles to the ways that instructors establish social relationships with the students, managerial roles to administrative and organizational tasks, and technical responsibilities to technical support that instructors provide for students. The educational purposes of online teaching are mainly fulfilled through performing pedagogical tasks. To examine online teaching methods, this study focused on the pedagogical roles of instructors in the online asynchronous discussion boards, which are the most popular platforms and are used to maintain pedagogical roles in online settings (Jones, 2011; Muilenburge & Berge, 2010).

Narrative and Episodic Teaching Methods

Two methods of narrative and episodic teaching were identified for fulfilling pedagogical roles based on the review of literature. Some instructors believe that in order to provide a productive learning experience in LMS they need to actively engage in the learners' group interactions to guide and support group discussions while others suggest that students must solely rely on their own abilities to direct their discussions. These instructors mainly stay outside of group discussions, observe group interactions, and occasionally post messages to guide discussions. The former method was termed narrative and the latter was termed the episodic method (Robertson, 2000). Narrative and episodic are two contrasting modes of thoughts (Bruner, 1986) which can be used as two distinctive teaching and learning methods in education (Doll, 1993) and two distinctive teaching methods in online discussions (Robertson, 2000).

Narrative has a Latin root that suggests close connection with knowledge or skillful practice (Gudmundsdottir, 1995). The essence of narrative is its approach of employing interactive dialogue to construct knowledge. The narrative method helps learners construct the knowledge through engaging

them in interactive dialogue with the content and teacher. A number of studies (Laurillard, Stratford, Luckin, Plowman, & Taylor, 2000; Weller, 2000) developed interactive activities for learners, allowed them to learn the subject through dialogue, and encouraged them to construct meaning through reflecting on and revising their understanding of the subject. Robertson (2000) suggested that narrative instructors who become involved in dialogue with learners provide a more effective teaching method than non-narrative or episodic instructors who have a low degree of involvement in dialogue with the learners.

Narrative instructors engage in online discussion directly and create a shared context with students upon which all further interactions develop. In the narrative method, knowledge is constructed through dialogue in online discussions and authority and control is developed within dialogue by asking questions and suggesting ideas. Episodic instructors, on the other hand, engage in online discussion indirectly. They are outside of online discussions and observe them.

In the episodic method, knowledge is transmitted to students in online discussions and authority and control is imposed by applying rules such as setting required numbers and lengths of postings in discussion. Episodic instructors provide more space for students to collaborate and rely on each other to develop their understanding of the topic at hand (Swinglehurst et al., 2008). The comparison of these two methods is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. *Fundamental features of narrative and episodic teaching*

	Narrative		Episodic	
Context	Shared		Separated	
Knowledge	Transformed	Constructed	Transmitted	Received
Control	Developed	Internal	Imposed	External

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this study was grounded in Bruner's (1986) classification of two modes of analytical and narrative thoughts which were closely related to the episodic and narrative methods. In analytical mode, knowledge is transmitted through clear explanation while in narrative mode knowledge is transformed and constructed through interaction. Based on these two modes of thought, Doll (1993) categorized two modes of narrative and analytical teaching.

The key difference between these two teaching modes is that analytical teaching is explanatory while narrative is interpretive. The analytical teaching method suggested by Doll (1993) is very similar to the episodic method suggested by Robertson (2000). In both methods, teachers are lecturers who are outside the learning process and explain the subject so that learners receive the subject. They interact formally and occasionally with learners. Thus, the analytical teaching method is classified as the episodic method in this study.

There is widespread interest in studying and using the narrative method as a way of knowing, learning and teaching in a variety of disciplines such as literacy criticism, philosophy (Bruner, 1986, 2002), cognitive psychology, anthropology, research methodology (Gudmundsdottir, 1995; Middleton, 2005), postmodernism teaching, learning, and curriculum (Doll, 1993), and interactive media in education (Aylett, 2006; Hazel, 2008; Laurillard et al., 2000) and online courses (Diekelmann & Mendias, 2005; Ironside, 2006; Ritchie & Peters, 2001; Robertson, 2000; Weller, 2000). Despite such interests, as Hazel (2008) suggested, the definition and characteristics of the narrative teaching method are vague, specifically in online education. Thus, in this study, the characteristics of both narrative and episodic methods in the context of the online setting were formed based on the literature. These characteristics were used in the study questionnaires to explore participants' perceptions about each method.

Narrative classification of pedagogical roles

To organize a narrative classification for pedagogical roles, it is considered that a narrative has two parts, story and discourse (Chatman, 1978; Culler, 1975; Hazel, 2008). A story is held together by a series of organized events and settings called plots that constitute the content of a narrative. The story has the makeup of a beginning, a middle, and an end (Gudmundsdottir, 1995; Scholes, 1981; Whyte, 1981). The

discourse is the expression, presentation, and narration of the story (Gudmundsdottir, 1995). The subject content of the course can be classified as story. The teaching methods used by instructors to perform the pedagogical roles can be classified as discourse. As the discourse of a story takes place within the constitution of a beginning, middle, and end, teaching roles are held together with the constitution of a beginning, middle, and end. In other words, by integrating suggested roles in literature (Berge, 1998; Coppola, 2002; Davie, 1989; Feenberg, 1989; Rossman, 1999) the narrative classification of pedagogical roles is formed based on the sequence of teaching functions in online discussion, from the initiation and maintenance to the conclusion and assessment of the discussions.

Discussion Initiation. The main functions of discussion initiation are proposing goals, forming prompts for discussion, making group discussions, and setting norms and agenda (Davie, 1989; Feenberge, 1989). Narrative is a transformative teaching mode in which knowledge is constructed while episodic is a transmission mode in which knowledge is received. Narrative instructors allow learners to learn by constructing and discovering the meaning based on their own perceptions, while episodic instructors require learners to receive prepared and lectured subjects by the instructors.

Narrative instructors provide a flexible syllabus and try to modify it during the course based on the students' preferences while episodic instructors use a preplanned and fixed syllabus. Narrative instructors moderate an open-ended discussion while episodic instructors maintain a closed-ended discussion. Narrative instructors form small group discussions while episodic instructors include the entire class in one discussion. Narrative instructors ask students to begin the discussion with their own questions while episodic instructors assign discussion questions (Weller, 2000).

Discussion Maintenance. The main functions of the maintenance of discussions include controlling and monitoring the discussion (Feenberge, 1989) and guiding, coordinating, energizing, and perpetuating discussion by seeking opinion and information (Davie, 1989). Additionally, encouraging discussion, commenting on postings, managing interaction, and adjusting the pace of discussion are categorized as discussion maintenance. Narrative instructors utilize scaffolding at various degrees of intensity from step-by-step instruction to transferring of the total responsibility to learners, which provides opportunity for interpretation and provokes extra dialogue; on the other hand, episodic instructors provide clear and precise explanation through formal question and answer that reduces further dialogue (Doll, 1993; Robertson, 2000).

Narrative instructors intervene within the context informally as a fellow discussant and interact directly and consistently, while episodic instructors intervene as needed to perform a teaching role with a formal manner and interact indirectly and occasionally (Robertson, 2000). Narrative instructors encourage discussion participation through sending encouraging discussion postings, while episodic instructors encourage participation through establishing rules (Robertson, 2000).

Narrative instructors control information overload through conversation and dialogue, while episodic instructors establish rules to control information overload such as assigning a maximum number of postings. Narrative instructors develop control and authority internally within conversation, while episodic instructors play the role of lecturers and impose their controls (Bruner, 1986; Robertson, 2000).

Discussion conclusion. This classification includes a series of tasks that instructors perform to put together the discussed ideas and close the discussion. The main functions include weaving together different ideas (Feenberge, 1989), summarizing and synthesizing discussed ideas (Chandler-Crichlow, 1995), and categorizing similar and different ideas. Narrative instructors work together with students to interpret postings, develop discussion summaries, and try to raise new questions at the end of discussion, while episodic instructors summarize discussions without working with the students and try to formulate a clear explanation at the end of the discussion (Doll, 1993; Robertson, 2000).

Discussion Assessment. The instructors' tasks include functions to improve the quality of discussion by providing feedback and forming a process of critiquing between learners and instructors (Doll, 1993; Hazel, 2008; Laurillard et al., 2000). The purpose of evaluation in the narrative mode is to help learners achieve a higher order of learning while in the episodic mode it is to measure how much the learners acquire a specific body of knowledge (Doll, 1993; Hatziapostolou & Paraskakis, 2010; Rich & Dereshiwsky, 2011). Narrative instructors provide formative feedback during the course of the discussion

that encourage students to improve their understanding while episodic instructors provide summative feedback at the end of the course.

The detailed characteristics of narrative and episodic instructors in online discussion as drawn from the literature (Berge, 1995; Coppola, 2002; Davie, 1989; Hazel, 2008; Feenberg, 1989; Robertson, 2000; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1991) are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. *Narrative and episodic characteristics in performing pedagogical roles*

Discussion Role Classification		Narrative	Episodic
Initiation	Knowledge mode	Transformative, Higher order of thinking	Transmission , Set body of knowledge
	Discussion Prompt	Students' questions	Pre-defined questions
	Syllabus	Flexible, can be modified throughout the course	Predetermined, fixed
	Type of discussion	Open-ended postings sent continuously throughout the week	Closed-ended postings sent once or twice per week
	Interaction tone	Informal	Formal
	Interaction frequency	Consistent	Occasional
	Group formation	Small groups	Entire class
Maintenance	Control	Directly within dialogue	Through assignment of rules
	Topic presentation	Scaffolding	Clear explanation
	Reason for mediation	Within the context's requirements	To fulfill teaching task
	Type of intervention	As a fellow discussant and by interacting directly	As an authoritative position when needed to perform a teaching role
	Summary	Cooperate with students	Work alone
Conclusion	Close	Generate new questions	Clarify and close
Assessment	Assessment goal	To help learners achieve a higher order of learning	To measure how much the learners acquire a specific body of knowledge
	Feedback type	Formative and summative	Summative

In general, instructors followed one of these approaches based on their personal preferences, the number of students, and the subjects at hand. However, it was unclear which approach could better reinforce productive discussions, expand students' understanding, and support their learning. Additionally, preferences of learners about their instructors' teaching methods and the relationship between the learners' characteristics and their preferences were vague. This study was conducted to address these

issues and examine online learners' views on their preferred teaching methods. The following questions guided the study:

1. Which online teaching method (episodic or narrative) was preferred by online learners?
2. To what extent were the learners' preferred teaching methods and their computer skills, experiences in online courses, and activity ratios in online discussions correlated?
3. To what extent were the degree of interactivity of online instructors in online courses and perceived productivity of online courses correlated?
4. To what extent were the teaching methods of online instructors in online courses and perceived productivity of online courses correlated?

Method

Descriptive survey design was used to answer the first research question. Survey research is an appropriate design to answer research questions with the purpose of gathering perceptions, opinions, or beliefs about a current issue from a group of people (Lodico, Spaulding & Voegtle, 2010). In this study, the first research question looked for online learners' perceptions about their preferred online teaching methods; thus, a survey design was an appropriate approach to address this question.

Additionally, correlational design was used to answer the second and third research questions. The purpose of correlational design is to measure two or more variables and examine whether there are any relationships among the variables (Lodico et al., 2010). In this study, for the second question, participants' preferred teaching method and their level of computer skills, experiences in online course, and activity ratios were measured through questionnaires and then a correlation was tested. Similarly, for the third question, degree of online instructor involvement and perceived course productivity were measured through the questionnaire and then a correlation analysis was examined between the variables. Further explanations are provided in the data analysis section.

Participants

To answer the research questions, a purposeful sampling method was used to recruit graduate students. Participants were students in a master program that offered a mix of face-to-face and online courses. The sample size included 30 online graduate students in four online courses in the college of education of a prestigious North American campus-based university. The courses were taught by four different professors who utilized their own teaching methods and were not briefed about the aforementioned episodic and narrative teaching methods. The subject of all four courses was the same and related to adult education in a master degree program. To recruit research participants, upon permission of the four online course professors, invitation letters along with consent forms were sent to the courses. Invitation letters explained the research purpose, procedure, and benefits. Students who wished to participate in the study were asked to read and sign the consent form. They were then taken to the questionnaire websites. The participants' demographics are provided in the result section.

Instrument and Data collection

The recommended steps for developing a questionnaire suggested by Lodico et al. (2010) and Leedy and Ormrod (2010) were used to develop questions in the two sets of questionnaire of A and B (see Appendices A and B). The questionnaires included 5-point Likert scale, dichotomous, and opened-ended questions. The first questionnaire, questionnaire A, was administered at the beginning of the four online courses and collected information about the learners' gender, age, ethnicity, computer skills, number of previous online courses, and their preferred online teaching methods (see Appendix A). The four online courses lasted for four and half months. The second questionnaire, questionnaire B, was administered at the end of the online courses and re-examined learners' preferred teaching methods to find if participants' preferences changed over the period of the four and half month online courses. Questionnaire B also investigated participants' views about their instructors' teaching methods, the perceived productivity of the courses, and the degree of course facilitators' interactivity in the online course discussions (see Appendix B). Two sets of questionnaires were used to examine participants' preferences over time to ensure consistency of their preferences. The questionnaires were administered through Survey Monkey which is an interactive survey website.

Questionnaire A included 15 questions developed based on the characteristics of the two narrative and episodic teaching methods explained in the theoretical framework section and listed in Table 2. The internal consistency of questionnaire A for the 15 questions that examined narrative and episodic methods was tested using Cronbach's alpha with the sample of 30 participants to estimate reliability of the questions. The test indicated Cronbach's alpha was .77, which indicated an acceptable level of internal consistency for the questions with this study sample. Questionnaire B presented the same 15 characteristics of teaching methods in a table format. Cronbach's alpha for the table in Questionnaire B with 15 items was .81, indicating a good level of reliability.

Two experts in the field verified construct validity of the questionnaires. In addition, to ensure the clarity and validity of the questionnaires, they were pilot tested with a group of four online students who were similar to the study participants. The pilot group had similar demographics and studied in the same program as the research participants. They examined the clarity of language and psychometric properties of the questionnaires. The questionnaires were then revised based on their comments. The four students who pilot tested the questionnaires were not included as research participants.

Data analysis

To analyze the quantitative data collected through the closed ended questions, descriptive and correlational approaches were used. The descriptive survey method was used to analyze data for participants' demographics and the first research question by calculating the percentage of the participants who preferred each teaching method.

Participants' choices of teaching methods of narrative and episodic were identified by using Questionnaire A (See Appendix A). As aforementioned, Questionnaire A included 15 questions related to the characteristics of the two teaching methods of narrative and episodic. Participants were asked about their choices of teaching method characteristics. The participants' choices were rated based on their selected number of narrative or episodic characteristics.

As summarized in Table 3, participants who selected 13-15 narrative characteristics or 1-3 episodic characteristics were considered as fully narrative selectors and given a score of 5. Participants who selected 10-12 narrative characteristics or 4-6 episodic characteristics were considered as nearly narrative selectors and given a score of 4. Participants who selected 7-9 narrative or episodic method characteristics were considered as having mixed choices of narrative and episodic and were given a score of 3. Participants who selected 4-6 narrative characteristics or 10-12 episodic characteristics were considered as nearly episodic selectors and given a score of 2. Participants who selected 1-3 narrative characteristics or 13-15 episodic characteristics were considered as fully episodic selectors and given a score of 1.

Table 3. Participants' preferred teaching method categories and scores

Selected number of teaching method characteristics out of 15	13-15 Narrative	10-12 Narrative	7-9 Narrative	4-6 Narrative	1-3 Narrative
	1-3 Episodic	4-6 Episodic	7-9 Episodic	10-12 Episodic	13-15 Episodic
Preferred method category	Fully Narrative	Nearly Narrative	Mixed choice	Nearly Episodic	Fully Episodic
Score	5	4	3	2	1

To answer the second, third, and fourth research questions, the correlation method was used to analyze data through Spearman's correlation test in SPSS. Spearman's correlation test was used because the level of the measurements of preferred teaching, learners' characteristics, instructor interactivity, and teaching method was ordinal. In addition, the study sample was not normally distributed as it was purposefully formed (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010), and Spearman's correlation is a robust test for non-

normally distributed samples (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). To examine the normality of the sample, a Shapiro Wilk test of normality was used in SPSS for the preferred teaching method variable. The result of Shapiro was significant with $p < .05$, indicating that the study sample was indeed not normally distributed.

To analyze qualitative data collected through the open-ended questionnaire, the participants' answers were reviewed to detect patterns and themes related to the questions. The emerged patterns were then summarized, categorized, and presented in the results section.

Results

The research findings based on the two sets of open and closed-ended questionnaires are provided in this section.

Participants' Demographics and Characteristics

Characteristics of the research participants taken from the first and second set of questionnaires are presented in Table 4. The majority of participants were female, between the age of 33 and 50, and Caucasian. The participants mostly had professional or excellent computer skills, preferred to interact with the discussion instructor twice per week, posted four or more weekly messages to the online course (considered active or very active in the discussions), logged into the discussions four or more times per week, and spent four hours or more per week to participate in the weekly discussions.

Table 4. *Participants' demographics and characteristics*

Characteristic					
Gender	Female	Male			
	80%	20%			
Age	20-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	60+
	18%	34%	27%	11%	10%
Ethnicity	Caucasian	African American	Hispanic	Asian	Other
	78%	8%	5%	9%	0
Number of previous online courses	Four or more	Three	Two	One	None
	40%	18%	16%	14%	12%
Computer skills	Professional	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor
	38%	33%	19%	10%	0
Preferred frequency of Weekly interactions with the instructor	Four times or more	Three times	Twice	Once	None
	10%	19%	42%	26%	3%
Number of weekly postings	Six or more	Five or Four	Three-Two	One	None
	31%	36%	22%	11%	0
Frequency of weekly logging to the course	Four times or More	Three times	Twice	Once	None
	76%	17%	5%	2%	0

Weekly average spent time in the discussions	Five hours or more	Four hours	Three hours	Two Hours	One Hour
	33%	47%	12%	6%	2%

Preferred teaching methods

The results collected from the first questionnaire indicated that the narrative method, which has a higher teaching involvement ratio than the episodic method, was the preferred teaching method. As summarized in Table 5, the findings indicated that 58% of participants selected 10 or more out of the 15 characteristics of the narrative teaching method and were therefore considered nearly or fully narrative selectors. On the other hand, 37% of participants selected 10 or more characteristics of the episodic method and they were considered as episodic selectors. Meanwhile, 8% of participants had mixed views and selected 9 or less of the characteristics of each method.

Table 5. *Participants' selections of narrative and episodic methods*

Preferred method	Fully Narrative	Nearly Narrative	Mixed choice	Nearly Episodic	Fully Episodic
Percentage out of 30 participants	24%	31%	8%	21%	16%

In addition, Table 6 shows the percentage of participants who selected each characteristic of the two teaching methods. Accordingly, 56.93% of participants selected narrative method characteristics and 43.07% chose episodic method characteristics as their preferred teaching method in online discussions. The majority of participants preferred that their instructors participated in the course discussion as a discussant, kept the discussions on the right track, helped the learners to understand the objectives of the discussions, controlled the discussion and intervened only if necessary, and provided frequent feedback during discussions.

To identify if participants' preferred teaching methods changed over the four and a half months duration of the online courses, their preferred teaching methods based on questionnaire A and B were compared using a paired samples *t* test. The *t* test results indicated no significant $t(29) = 0.37, p > .05$ differences between their teaching method choices.

Table 6. *Participants' selections of narrative and episodic characteristics*

Discussion Role Classification		Narrative	Episodic
Initiation	Knowledge mode	Transformative, Higher order of thinking	Transmission, Set body of knowledge
	Selection percentage	61%	39%
Discussion Prompt	Discussion Prompt	Students' questions	Pre-defined questions
	Selection percentage	42%	58%
Syllabus	Syllabus	Flexible, can be modified throughout the course	Predetermined, fixed
	Selection percentage	46%	54%

	Type of discussion	Open-ended postings sent continuously throughout the week	Closed-ended postings sent once or twice per week
	Selection percentage	76%	24%
	Interaction tone	Informally	Formally
	Selection percentage	73%	27%
	Interaction frequency	Consistently	Occasionally
	Selection percentage	71%	29%
	Group formation	Small groups	Entire class
	Selection percentage ⁴⁷⁶	52%	48%
Maintenance	Control	Direct within dialogue	Assign rules
	Selection percentage	68%	32%
	Topic presentation	Scaffolding	Clear explanation
	Selection percentage	43%	57%
	Reason for mediation	Within the context requirement	To fulfill teaching task
	Selection percentage	67%	33%
	Type of intervention	As a fellow discussant and through direct interaction	As an authoritative position when needed to perform a teaching role
	Selection percentage	65%	35%
	Summary	Cooperate with students	Work alone
	Selection percentage	48%	52%
Conclusion	Close	Generate new question	Clarify and close
	Selection percentage	45%	56%
Assessment	Assessment goal	To help learners achieve a higher order of learning	To measure how much the learners acquire a specific body of knowledge
	Selection percentage	76%	24%
	Feedback	Formative and summative	Summative
	Selection percentage	86%	14%
Mean of percentages		56.93%	43.07%

Based on the results provided in Table 6, bar charts are presented in Figure 1 to compare learners' preferences for teaching characteristics within narrative and episodic methods. As shown in Figure 1, mostly participants preferred characteristics related to the narrative method. However, there are a number

of exceptions in which the majority of participants preferred episodic characteristics. Most of the participants preferred predefined not student-based discussion prompts. They preferred a predefined and fixed but not flexible syllabus. They chose for their instructors to present the topics with clear explanations not scaffolding. They also preferred their instructors to work alone to form online discussion summaries and to close the discussions with clarifications and not generation of new questions at the end of discussions.

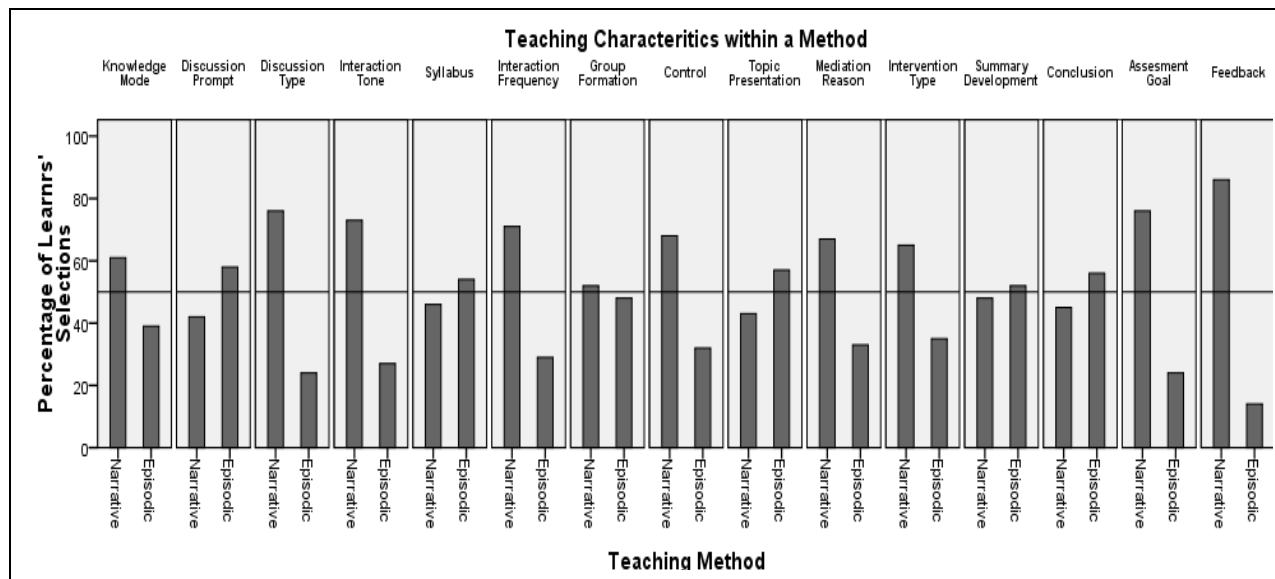


Figure1. Learners' preferences for characteristics within narrative and episodic teaching methods Preferred teaching method and participants' characteristics

To examine the correlation between the preferred teaching method and participants' characteristics, a Spearman's correlation test was conducted using the preferred teaching method of the participants as the criterion variable and the participants' activity ratio (number of postings per week), computer skills (in five levels), and previous experience in online courses (number of previous online courses) as the predictor variables. The preferred teaching method is ordinal as shown in Table 3. The three learners' characteristics were collected through 5-point Likert scale questions and the level of measurements was considered ordinal (see Appendices A and B). The assumptions for conducting Spearman's correlation were met as all of the variables were ordinal. A Spearman's correlation can be used when the variables are not normally distributed.

The results showed no significant relationship between the characteristics of learners and their preferred teaching methods, except for their computer skills. The preferred teaching method and participants' activity ratio had a correlation coefficient of $r_s(30) = -.033, p < .05$ which is a low negative correlation. As such, participants who were less active preferred teaching methods with higher activity ratio such as narrative and participants who were more active preferred teaching methods with lower activity ratio such as the episodic method.

The preferred teaching method and participants' previous experiences in online courses had a coefficient of $r_s(30) = .1, p < .05$ which was very low and indicated that there was almost no correlation between these two variables. The preferred teaching method and participants' computer skills had a moderate negative correlation with coefficient of $r_s(30) = -.52, p < .05$ which revealed that participants with a higher degree of computer skill preferred instructors with a lower degree of involvement and interactivity in online course.

Interactivity and perceived productivity of online discussions

To examine the correlation between interactivity as the predictor variable and the perceived degree of the productivity of online discussions as the criterion variable, a Spearman's correlation was conducted. The

variable of instructor interactivity in the discussions included five levels of excellent, good, acceptable, fair, and poor. The variable of the learners' degree of perceived productivity in the online discussions included five levels of excellent, good, acceptable, fair, and poor (see Appendix B).

Findings indicated a positive moderate relationship $r_s(30) = .56, p < .05$ between the teaching methods of narrative and episodic and the perceived productivity of the online course. As the interactivity of the instructors in the online discussions increased, the participants' perceived productivity of the online discussions increased.

Teaching methods and perceived productivity of online discussions

To examine the correlation between the teaching method as the predictor variable and the perceived degree of the productivity of online discussions as the criterion variable, a Spearman's correlation was conducted. The variable of the learners' degree of perceived productivity in the online discussions included the five-level scale of excellent, good, acceptable, fair, and poor (see Questionnaire B in Appendix B). The variable of the instructor's teaching method in the online discussions was collected through the 15 characteristics of the teaching methods provided in questionnaire B. Instructors were considered as narrative, nearly narrative, mixed choice, nearly episodic, or episodic as explained in Table 3.

Findings indicated a positive moderate relationship $r_s(30) = .5, p < .05$ between the teaching method of narrative and episodic and the perceived productivity of the online course. As the teaching methods incline from the episodic method toward the narrative teaching method, the participants' perceived productivity of the online discussions increased.

Emerging issues

The participants' responses in closed and open-ended questions indicated that some participants did not prefer a specific teaching method for performing all different teaching tasks. They preferred different methods for fulfilling different roles. For instance, some preferred the episodic method for providing a preset syllabus for the course but a narrative method for providing both formative and summative evaluation. Yet, some other participants preferred a combination of different methods for successful teaching. However, the majority of participants preferred their online instructors to use the following approaches in courses' online discussions:

- Participate as discussant
- Organize structure for discussions
- Control and intervene only if necessary
- Provide frequent feedback during discussion
- Engage in dialogue
- Be responsive, interactive

These common preferences pointed out that interactivity, dialogue, and consistent communication are essential characteristics for online instructors. Despite the technology advancement, online instructors and learners still mostly communicate through text-based messages. This lack of visual clues affects the productivity of online discussions and courses, as one of the research participants reflected, "[without visual clues] how could instructors find that the learners are perplexed, worried, bored, or angry?" Frequent and consistent interactions with learners help instructors reduce the impact of lack of visual clues by establishing a friendly and close relationship with learners, becoming aware of learners' difficulties, keeping learners on the right track, and adjusting the pace of discussions.

Discussion and Conclusion

There is a growing trend of using online courses in the United States' higher education system. Online education has become a permanent component of higher education. However, there are still major issues that need to be addressed to improve online courses. Particularly, online learning systems provide such a

different platform for learning that a redefinition of the roles of instructors in online learning systems is needed.

Narrative and episodic teaching methods have been identified in the literature for teaching online courses using online asynchronous discussions; however, the definition of narrative teaching roles has been vague (Hazel, 2008) and no empirical study was found to explore learners' perspectives about these methods. Thus, this study was conducted to establish a literature-based classification for the role of online instructors within these methods as suggested in Table 2 and to examine learners' views about them.

The findings suggested that the perceived success of online discussions was moderately correlated with the degree of instructors' activity and involvement in online discussion. The narrative method is the preferred teaching method, as the majority of learners preferred the narrative characteristics of having highly interactive and responsive instructors. These findings support Bruner's (1986) theory and previous studies' suggestions of the perceived productivity of the narrative teaching method (Diekelmann & Mendias, 2005; Doll, 1993; Ironside, 2006; Rich & Dereshiwsky, 2011; Ritchie & Peters, 2001; Robertson, 2000; Weller, 2000).

Emerging findings revealed that although the majority of participants preferred the narrative method with a high level of involvement, there was a group of learners who preferred a teaching method with a low level of involvement in online courses. A close examination of learners' preferences for characteristics of narrative and episodic methods, provided in Table 6, revealed learners' most preferred characteristics within the two teaching methods as discussed below.

Most of the participants (61%) preferred to gain a higher order of thinking as compared to gaining a set body of knowledge in online discussions. This finding supports the goal of narrative teaching as suggested by Burner (1986), Doll (1993), and Swinglehurst et al. (2008). The majority of the participants (76%) preferred open-ended postings sent throughout the week, as compared to closed-ended postings sent one or twice per week. This finding is in agreement with the importance of maintaining deep and meaningful interaction in online discussions suggested by the previous studies (Aylett, 2006; Diekelmann & Mendias, 2005; Hazel, 2008; Ironside, 2006; Laurillard et al., 2000).

Additionally, most participants (73%) preferred that their instructors adopt an informal manner in their online discussion interactions. They mostly (71%) preferred consistent rather than occasional interactions with their online instructors. These findings support the importance of maintaining close and frequent interactions between the online learners and instructors as suggested by the previous studies (Diekelmann & Mendias, 2005; Ironside, 2006; Ritchie & Peters, 2001). Finally, the preference of the majority of the participants (86%) for formative assessment as compared to summative assessment is consistent with the results of the previous studies which suggested formative assessment is the more effective approach as compared to summative evaluation (Vonderwell & Boboc, 2013).

The study revealed that participants' computer skills had a negative moderate correlation with their preferred teaching methods. The participants with higher computer skills felt more confident and independent in online courses and consequently preferred less support and involvement from their instructors. However, other characteristics of the participants did not have any significant correlation with their preferred teaching method. This finding can be related to a previous study that indicated participants' characteristics such as their achievement level played a less significant role in their online performances as compared to in a face-face setting (Huh, Jin, Lee, & Yoo, 2010).

Interestingly, the participants' preferences for the teaching method did not change over the course of the four and half months. This can be due to the fact that the majority of the participants were not novice online learners and had some previous online learning experiences. They had already formed their preferences, which may not have been changed within one online course. This also indicates that learners' teaching preferences can be considered as a stable inclination, which may be applied to other online courses using asynchronous discussions with similar populations.

Limitation and Future Study Recommendations

Caution should be taken in generalization of the results due to the study's small sample size. In addition, the sample was not randomly formed and it may not be considered as representative of a larger

population. The majority of participants were Caucasian and female. Additional demographics and characteristics of the sample are provided in the result section of the article. The results may be only applied to a population with similar demographics and characteristics.

Future research with a larger group of participants will be useful to further investigate learners' preferences. In addition, it is recommended to randomly form the sample to increase the potential for generalization of the results. It is hoped that this study provides guidance for educators and instructional designers in redesigning teaching methods in online learning platforms which mostly rely on asynchronous discussions for teaching as well as increases the effectiveness and productivity of online courses.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire A

This questionnaire was administered at the beginning of the online courses.

1. Provide your name.
2. Specify your gender.
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
3. Specify your age range.
 - a. 20-30
 - b. 31-40
 - c. 41-50
 - d. 51-60
 - e. 60+
4. Specify your ethnicity.
 - a. Caucasian
 - b. African American
 - c. Hispanic
 - d. Asian
 - e. other
5. How would you rate your experience in online courses within scale of 5 to 1 in based on number of your previous online courses?
 - a. [5] Four or more
 - b. [4] Three
 - c. [3] Two
 - d. [2] One
 - e. [1] None
6. How would you rate your computer skill level within scale of 5 to 1 in terms of managing your online course requirements?
 - a. [5] Professional
 - b. [4] Excellent
 - c. [3] Good
 - d. [2] Fair
 - e. [1] Poor
7. How would you prefer the role of facilitator in helping you learn the concepts within an online discussion?
 - a. The facilitator transfers the concepts to students and students are the recipient of the concepts.
 - b. The facilitator engages in dialogues with the students, as independent knowledge builders, to help students form their understanding of the concepts.

Please explain how and why your above choice makes the discussions productive.

8. How would you prefer your facilitator initiate the discussions?

- a. The facilitator assigns predefined questions related to weekly reading materials.
- b. The facilitator invites students to begin the discussions based on their own questions related to the weekly reading materials.

Please explain how and why your above choice makes the discussions productive.

9. What type of online discussion would you prefer the facilitator provide?

- a. The facilitator provides weekly closed-ended discussions.
- b. The facilitator provide open-ended discussions, which may continue throughout the course

Please explain how and why your above choice makes the discussions productive.

10. How would you prefer your facilitator provide syllabus for the online discussions?

- a. The facilitator provides fixed, predefined syllabus that can not be modified through out the course.
- b. The facilitator provides flexible syllabus that can be modified through out the course.

Please explain how and why your above choice makes the discussions productive.

11. How would you prefer your facilitator participate in an online discussion to deepen your understanding of the discussed topic?

- a. The facilitator makes occasional communication as needed with the students.
- b. The facilitator makes consistent communications with the students.

Please explain how and why your above choice makes the discussions productive.

12. How would you prefer your facilitator participate in an online discussion to deepen your understanding of the discussed topic?

- a. The facilitator makes formal communications with the students.
- b. The facilitator makes informal communications with the students.

Please explain how and why your above choice makes the discussions productive.

13. How would you prefer your facilitator form discussion groups for weekly discussions?

- a. The facilitator composes only one large class discussion group.
- b. The facilitator composes small discussion groups with four or five members.

Please explain how and why your above choice makes the discussions productive.

14. How would you prefer your facilitator control the online discussions?

- a. The facilitator assigns rules to control the discussions.
- b. The facilitator engages within dialogues with students to control the discussion.

Please explain how and why your above choice makes the discussions productive.

15. How would you prefer your facilitator teach the discussion topics in the online discussions?

- a. The facilitator provides clear explanations.
- b. The facilitator provides scaffolding to support students reach an understanding about the discussed topics.

Please explain how and why your above choice makes the discussions productive.

16. Why would you prefer your facilitator mediate the online discussions?

- a. The facilitator mediates whenever needed based on his/her teaching duties.
- b. The facilitator mediates whenever the dialogue context requires. Please explain how and why your above choice makes the discussions productive.

17. How would you prefer your facilitator intervene into the online discussions?

- a. The facilitator as an authoritative position intervenes the discussion through sending occasional postings.
- b. The facilitator as a fellow discussant directly engages within the discussions and frequent dialogues.

Please explain how and why your above choice makes the discussions productive.

18. How would you prefer your facilitator summarizes the weekly discussions?

- a. The facilitator provides summaries for weekly discussions.
- b. The facilitator requires students to summarize their weekly discussions.

Please explain how and why your above choice makes the discussions productive.

19. How would you prefer your facilitator concludes the weekly discussions?

- a. The facilitator closes the discussions by providing clarifications and restating the discussion objectives at the end of each discussion.
- b. The facilitator leaves the discussions open throughout the course and points out to new perspectives generated based on the weekly discussions.

Please explain how and why your above choice makes the discussions productive.

20. How would you prefer your facilitator sets goal for the weekly discussions assessment?

- a. The facilitator assesses the learners' performance to measure how much they acquire a specific body of knowledge.
- b. The facilitator assesses the learners' performance to help students modify their performances and achieve a higher order of learning.

Please explain how and why your above choice makes the discussions productive.

21. How would you prefer your facilitator provides feedback for the weekly discussions?

- a. The facilitator provides summative feedback for the discussions at the end of the weekly discussions.
- b. The facilitator provides both summative feedback at the end of discussions and formative feedback throughout the discussions.

Please explain how and why your above choice makes the discussions productive.

Appendix B

Questionnaire B

This questionnaire was administered at the end of the online courses.

1. Provide your name.

2. How would you rate your activity ratio in the online discussions within scale of 5 to 1 based on your average number of weekly postings?

- a. [5] Five
- b. [4] Four
- c. [3] Three

- d. [2] Two
 - e. [1] One
3. How would you rate frequency of checking the weekly online discussions within the scale of 5 to 1?
- a. [5] Five times or more per week
 - b. [4] Four times or more per week
 - c. [3] Three times per week
 - d. [2] Twice per week
 - e. [1] Once per week
5. How would you rate the amount of time that you spent every week to read postings and reply to the postings in your weekly discussions within the scale of 5 to 1?
- a. [5] Five hours
 - b. [4] Four hours
 - c. [3] Three hours
 - d. [2] Two hours
 - e. [1] One hour
6. How would you rate the productivity of the online discussions within the scale of 5 to 1?
- a. [5] Excellently productive
 - b. [4] Well productive
 - c. [3] Fairly productive
 - d. [2] Poorly productive
 - e. [1] Not productive
7. How would you rate the level of interactivity of your facilitator in the online discussions within the scale of 5 to 1?
- a. [5] Very highly interactive
 - b. [4] Highly interactive
 - c. [3] Moderately interactive
 - d. [2] Slightly interactive
 - e. [1] Not interactive

7. Review the table the following table describes characteristics of narrative and episodic teaching methods. Choose the characteristic of your facilitator by clicking under Actual option. Choose the characteristic of your facilitator that you preferred by clicking under Preferred option.

Facilitator's Discussion Related Responsibility	Narrative	Actual	Preferred	Episodic	Actual	Preferred
Knowledge mode	Transformative, Higher order of thinking	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Transmission, Set body of knowledge	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Discussion Prompt	Students' questions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Pre-defined questions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Syllabus	Flexible, can be modified throughout the course	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Predetermined, fixed	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Type of discussion	Open-ended postings sent continuously throughout the week	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Close ended postings sent once or twice per week	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Interaction tone	Informally	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Formally	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Interaction frequency	Consistently	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Occasionally	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Group formation	Small groups	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Entire class	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Control	Directly within dialogue	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Assign rules	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Topic presentation	Scaffolding	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Clear explanation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reason for mediation	Within the context requirement	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	To fulfill teaching task	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Interaction Type	As a fellow discussant and interact directly	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	As an authoritative position when needed to perform a teaching role	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Summary	Cooperate with students	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Work alone	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Close	Generate new questions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Clarify and close	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Assessment goal	To help learners achieve a higher order of learning	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	To measure how much the learners acquire a specific body of knowledge	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Feedback type	Formative and summative	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Summative	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



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