The Effectiveness and Development of Online Discussions

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Abstract

Both synchronous and asynchronous online discussions are an important component of effective distance education. They allow for the students to interact with each other without being in a classroom. In online discussion environments, students are able to build strong ties and relationships with each other. Online discussions can be presented in different ways and serve students for different purposes. In order for them to be effective, instructors must make their expectations clear, provide feedback, and lead the class down the correct path. This article deals with the importance of the effective design of online discussions and discusses ways that instructors can help students have effective discussions.

Keywords: online discussions, effective discussions, purposes of discussions, creating discussions

Introduction

When people hear about distance education, they sometimes fear that students will be missing a great deal of interaction, communication, and participation. This is a misconception that needs to be addressed so that people will begin to appreciate the advantages of distance education and what it has to offer. Students can communicate and interact in distance education, just as they do in traditional face-to-face classes. At times, there is more interaction that takes place in online discussions than in traditional classrooms (Maurino, 2006). What is more interesting is the fact that online discussions do not only have a place in distance education, but some classes that meet regularly in traditional classrooms are now incorporating online discussions to allow for their conversations to continue beyond the classroom (T. Zhang, Gao, & W. Zhang, 2007). The purpose of this paper is to focus on the effectiveness of online discussions and to explain some of the key factors in developing online discussions.

Types of Discussions and Their Benefits

It is important to understand the various types of online discussions. There are two types of discussions that can take place in an online environment: asynchronous discussions and synchronous discussions. Asynchronous discussions are discussions that students can take part in at any time, whereas synchronous discussions require that the participants of the discussion all meet at the same time to talk about the issue at hand (Benson, 2003). Depending on which type of discussion is taking place, students will have diverse experiences and benefit in different ways.

When instructors decide to use synchronous discussions, they are choosing an environment that is more similar to face-to-face discussions because the students and instructors are meeting at the same time. In synchronous environments, students are able to work collaboratively and receive instant feedback. When an instructor uses a type of communication strategy that is more similar to face-to-face discussions, some people may be more inclined to open up to the possibility of having online discussions.

Alternatively, asynchronous discussions have a number of benefits. To begin with, asynchronous discussions give the students more time to think about the topic being studied and to research more about it if they need to do so. They can respond to posts made on the forum after they have had time to think about the topic and read what others have already contributed to the discussion. Students are able to log into their classes to view the questions and remarks made by other students and the instructor before making their own contribution. Another advantage to having asynchronous discussions is the fact that the discussions give the students more information and have a more meaningful analysis (Meyer, 2007). It is easy for students to turn to outside resources to get more information about the topic being discussed and to be able to support their argument with scholarly work. Research has found that students did the extra research before making a comment because they did not want to sound unintelligent in front of their colleagues, and they felt that they did not have enough background knowledge in the subject matter (Du, Zhang, Olinzock, & Adams, 2008).

All of these things lead to a development of critical thinking on discussion topics (Black, 2005). Finally, online discussions provide students with an equal opportunity in participation and a chance for all voices to be heard (Vonderwall, Liang, & Alderman, 2007). In traditional face-to-face classes, when an instructor asks the class about something, not everyone has an opportunity to give a response (Benson, 2003). In online discussions, all students can give an answer, even if it is merely agreeing with one of their colleague's opinions. Hrastinski (2008) reports that when students agree with their colleagues, they form social ties, and these are important for collaborative learning. There are some students who are very shy and do not like to speak in front of their peers and by communicating through online discussions, they are able to give themselves a voice.

Both forms of discussion can be easily archived and students can return to the dialogues to re-examine issues or to remind themselves of the discussion that took place. At the end of a course, a student may look at the posts that he/she had made at the beginning of the semester and see if their thoughts are still the same or whether the course has encouraged him/her to look at the subject from a different point of view.

Regardless of which type of discussion is being used in distance education courses, online discussions allow for the students to "build a sense of community" (Appana, 2008, p.10) Although students may be living in different parts of the world and may never meet in person, the discussions that they have online permits them to form social ties as if they were in a traditional classroom.

Concerns about Online Interactions

An area of possible concern in online discussions is the subject matter being discussed. Some opinions are that certain subjects cannot provide students a chance for interaction. For example, in one study, two different classes were examined to see how much student interaction there was in online discussions. The first class observed was Technology, Teaching and Learning across the Curriculum and the second course examined in the study was Learning Mathematics with Technology. In both classes, students interacted with each other, and it was found that

The students themselves have the final say in what happens in the discussions. What they bring to the table, what they want to accomplish, how they respond to each other, and how they time their responses all contribute to the nature and substance of the discussion (McCrory, et al., 2008, p.177).

Clearly, the student's participation and interaction in the online discussions will determine whether the discussion will flourish. The students have a big responsibility in making sure that a discussion is successful.

Another concern facing online discussions is the fact that certain non-verbal cues that students would normally receive in face-to-face classes is missing. For example, one cannot hear the tone of voice used in communication in online environments and there is no way to see facial expressions or hand gestures. However, there are other ways to make sure that students "engage meaningfully with subject matter" (McCrory, Putnam, & Jansen, 2008, p.162) and ways for "teachers… [to] monitor and guide learners' thinking….for successful online learning environments"(McCrory et al., 2008, p. 162).

In some instances, students are aware that the reader does not have any body language to refer to while reading the comment and/or question. Some student report being very careful in choosing their words so

that they are not misunderstood and so that no one in the class is offended (Du, et al., 2008). Another example of being cautious in discussions is choosing to write using capital letters. If a student uses all capitals, it can be interpreted as yelling, and this may cause problems if he/she is responding to another student or instructor.

In another study, Stapa (2007) analyzed the interaction and communication that took place between the students and instructor in order to find out what the functions of the discussions were. It was found that there were three main reasons to participate in discussions: "1. Asking for information 2. Asking for clarification [and] 3. Sharing information" (Stapa, 2007, p.141). In distance education classes where the instructor is separated from the student either by time and/or space, it is essential for the instructor is able to make sure that the students have a clear understanding of the material, and if they do not, the instructor has the opportunity to step in and guide the students towards the correct path (Vonderwall, et al., 2007). Equally important is to meet the students' need in asking for additional help and/or clarification (Vonderwall et al., 2007). This is something that should be available to all students, regardless of which type of discussion is being held and how it is being held.

Factors for Successful Online Discussions

Online discussions have different formats and can be effective in various ways. Now the paper will focus on some issues essential in developing successful online discussions. When instructors begin to plan their online discussions, research suggests a number of matters that must be taken into consideration in order for the discussion to be effective and successful.

Clear Directions

One thing that an instructor must make sure to do is provide the students with directions for online discussions that are simple, to the point, and do not cause any confusion among the learners (Rose & Smith, 2007). It should be made clear whether the discussion will be synchronous or asynchronous. If it is a synchronous discussion, the students will need to know where and when to meet, and if it is asynchronous, the students need to know if they must meet a deadline for responding to the questions posted.

Instructor Feedback

Not only are clear directions necessary, but also needed is feedback from instructors (Rose, et al., 2007). It is not enough for an instructor to give an assignment. The students need to know whether or not they are addressing the issue in enough depth, if their understanding of the issue is correct, or if students need clarification about something, an instructor needs to be able to shed light on the subject.

Promoting Motivation

Students should be motivated to contribute to the discussions (Rose, et al., 2007). There are different ways that this can be accomplished. To start with, at the very beginning of a course, an instructor can find out what interests the students, and if possible, tie in their interests to the discussion and issue being presented. The instructor also needs to address how students will be assessed on their participation in discussions. If an instructor does not include this as part of the final grade, it may be very difficult to motivate students to partake in the discussion. Some students may not participate at all and other students may participate but give shallow and short responses instead of providing in depth reflective responses that bring together their experiences with the material. It is not enough to inform students that they will be graded on their participation in the discussions, but the students must know how they will be graded. There should be specific guidelines and rubrics that explain all of the assessment techniques that the instructor will use (Black, 2005). Table 1 shows an example of what a rubric may look like, and there may be other criteria that an instructor wants to include when assessing a student. The criteria listed in Table 1 may be broken down into further categories, but ultimately, it is up to the instructor to decide how to assess the discussion.

Table 1. *Sample Rubric*

Criteria:	Excellent (5)	Acceptable (3)	Poor (1)	Total
Meeting the deadline	The student made the required posts by the deadline set.	The student made some of the required posts by the deadline set.	The student did not post by the required deadline set.	
Quality of work	The student has clearly thought about the material and has raised interesting solutions and/or problems.	The student has written about the material, but has not offered information that was not already given in the text.	The student has not reflected on the material, or the post made is irrelevant to the topic.	
Mechanics	The post made does not contain grammatical or spelling errors.	The post made contains very few grammatical and/or spelling errors.	The post made contains several grammatical and/or spelling errors and is difficult to understand.	

Expectations

In addition to these factors, setting the students with the correct expectations is essential. Roper (2007) explains that "Instructors who establish clear expectations as to how threaded discussions are used or who ask specific questions in response to student postings can expect to encourage richer online dialogue" (p.64). The students need to be aware of what is appropriate for them to post. Some questions that may come up include: Will it be acceptable to make comments that encourage others, or should that be left to the instructor? Are students encouraged to disagree with their colleagues on a certain issue, and if so, how does this have to be handled?

Organization

The way that the discussion is organized plays an important role in the development process. One suggestion is to keep threaded discussions similar to an outline, "with each topic…given its own thread, separate from other conversations" (Rose, et al., 2007, p.147). This helps students find the information that they are searching for, and when students need to return to the thread, they will know where to search for what they are looking for. It is much easier for students to retrieve this information, and it may also be wise to have students create different subjects for their posts for the same reason. This will help students create summaries of their discussions and help them remember the content better.

Question Type

Finally, the type of question that is posted in an online discussion will to a great extent, help determine whether or not there will be student participation. There should be a variety of questions asked (Akin & Neil, 2007). Some questions may ask for students to give their opinion or to relate their experiences with the issue being discussed (Akin, et al., 2007). Other questions may have students evaluate their own work or the work of others (Akin, et al., 2007). Students may be asked to take a side on the issue being discussed and explain their reason for their decision while trying to convince others to see their point of view (Akin, et al., 2007). Another take on this would be to have the students write the questions and have their colleagues respond to them (Akin, et al., 2007). This should be done with the guidance of the instructor to make sure that the students have correctly understood the material and that the objectives of the lesson are being met.

In conclusion, it is imperative to include online discussions in distance education courses, and they can also be incorporated into traditional classrooms. They provide students with several advantages and allow for students to communicate and interact. With the proper development of online discussions students can enjoy having a positive learning experience.

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