

Chapter 30

Humanizing the Online Experience Through Effective Use and Analysis of Discussion Forums

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ABSTRACT

Discussion forums are one of the main avenues for communication, interaction and engagement in the online learning environment, yet are often under-utilized or do not have the desired effect of promoting a sense of belonging and deep learning and collaborative learning for students. Limited use of discussion forums and/or lack of guidelines in how to engage, can leave students feeling isolated. Conversely, extensive use can result in students feeling overwhelmed. This chapter considers some key theories and frameworks for using discussion forums, and presents strategies that an academic can implement to promote effective use of their forums. It is through this effective use that students become part of a Community of Inquiry and valued as a person. Through consideration of hypothetical case studies, this chapter also offers practical ways in which staff can sift through the available data to evaluate and improve their teaching practice and the learning experience of students.

INTRODUCTION

The experience of starting an online course, defined as a single unit of study, can, for some students, be similar to trying to get into a locked room, only to find that when they eventually find a way in, the room is empty and dark with no sign of anyone else around – a very lonely and uninviting place. This chapter provides academics (teaching staff or facilitators responsible for courses) with a range of strategies that will help them to provide a much more welcoming and lively environment for their students, in which learning will be collaborative, constructive and personalized. Whilst most of the research and literature discussed in this chapter concerns undergraduate university students, the strategies and ideas

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-2584-4.ch030

are generally relevant for all levels of education from high school through to post-graduate level, as well as workplace learning and professional development courses. The overall objective of the chapter is to enthuse academics to incorporate online discussion forums that are welcoming and engaging, and provide opportunities for all students to learn in a collaborative and constructive environment. To this end, the chapter discusses evidence from the current literature of the benefits associated with such discussion forums, and provides practical strategies for conducting effective discussion forums. Findings from applied research and two well-known frameworks for such strategies will be presented. Methods of evaluating the effectiveness of online discussion forums are also discussed from the perspective of learning analytics, utilizing three hypothetical cases studies.

BACKGROUND

Discussion forums are widely used tools that provide an asynchronous opportunity for students and staff to communicate with each other online through written posts. For distance or online learning, discussion forums are generally the main tool for communication and interaction between students and their teachers as well as between each other, whilst in blended learning, discussion forums are used to supplement face-to-face learning. There is a wealth of literature that discusses the benefits of effective online discussions for students, teachers and institutions (MacFadyen & Dawson, 2012; Romero, Lopez, Luna & Ventura, 2013). One of the main benefits for students discussed in the literature relates to correlation between levels of student engagement and student outcomes, and includes the concepts of improved student learning outcomes and grades related to levels of staff engagement (Beer, Clark & Jones, 2014; Jiang & Ting, 2000), and positive links between quality and quantity of posts and student outcomes (Romero et al., 2013). These benefits can be easily measured using quantitative analysis of log data, which probably contributes to the large number of articles that report on these types of measures. Benefits for students that are not as easily measurable, yet may be even more important, include:

- Providing opportunities for students to reflect on their own and other's contributions (Swan, 2001);
- Higher levels of satisfaction with the learning experience for students who had regular interaction with staff and peers (Swan, 2001);
- Sense of community (Dawson, 2006);
- Development of critical thinking (Yang, Newby, & Bill, 2005); and
- Higher-order thinking (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000).

In regards to making the online learning experience more personal, there are many practical benefits for students compared to synchronous face-to-face tutorials including: having time to think before responding; opportunities to engage more with the content before responding; and longer timeframes to allow discussion to continue, sometimes over a period of weeks, rather than a two hour tutorial (Garrison et al., 2000; Glenn & Berry, 2006). There are also opportunities to learn from others; help others with their learning; and build learning communities and networks, all of which help to reduce the sense of isolation and can lead to improved student satisfaction and outcomes.

For academics, there is a wealth of data that can be extracted from online discussion forums and posts regarding student participation, teacher presence and curriculum design, and these aspects will be discussed in greater detail throughout this chapter. In higher education institutions and schools, most

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