

Chapter XVIII

Assessing Online Discussion Forum Participation

Matthew Shaul
Kennesaw State University, USA

ABSTRACT

As a socially constructive learning tool, discussion forums remain central to online education. They have continued to evolve in functionality, acquiring ever-increasing usability features. However, development has lagged in providing instructors the means to assess student work in forums. The author submits an overview of his software program that provides instructors with the means to evaluate forum work quickly, easily, and repeatedly. The software accomplishes this by accessing the forums' underlying database, searching for manifest and latent data, and calculating data associated with an array of metrics. This is a Web-based tool built on Open Source and standards-based languages, providing opportunities to port the program to numerous Learning Management Systems. It is the intention of this author to provide this tool, when completed, for such use as a free, Open Source tool. Interested parties may e-mail the author for progress updates. Currently, however, further work on the project must await the completion of another project, the author's dissertation.

INTRODUCTION

Learning management systems (LMS) continue receiving expanded toolsets and quickly assimilating new Web-technologies to provide users an increasingly interactive, richer experience. Chat, streaming media, “blogs,” “video-casting,” and

“podcasting” found their way into online educational settings soon after being generally accepted on the Internet. Yet, discussion forums, an old (in Internet time) technology, seemingly remain the core from which many instructors build online classes. These technological descendants from long-ago bulletin boards and listservs, one of the

earliest tools integrated into online education, remain central to the design and success of many distance education courses.

More so than the newer technologies, discussion forums approximate a replacement for the give-and-take of the brick-and-mortar experience, mimicking many-to-many discussions found in traditional classrooms. In addition, the recognizable conversational structure reflected visually in the tree-like output, simplicity and flexibility of the tool likely contribute to its continued success and acceptance, granting users an immediate sense of familiarity. The importance of such comforting effects cannot be discounted, especially in a field still relatively new.

Discussion Questions

However, despite the history and wide, though not full, acceptance of the importance and use of forums, lack of awareness on how best to use them persists. Note that this unawareness does not pertain to the implementation of forums, or designing them to encourage adoption. In fact, Markel (2001) notes that forums have developed beyond simple, plain text message boxes, incorporating emoticons, HTML formatting, images, and hyperlinks to provide a more enticing tool to draw students into their use. Yet, while these features encourage participation, there is no clear way for instructors trying to devise effective forum evaluation schemes.

This article, therefore, examines forum technology assessment. Given the importance of assessment in learning, it is apparent that such a widely used distance leaning tool must provide instructors with sound options for evaluating student work. Moreover, effective assessment options, with associated feedback, provide the added benefit of encouraging an increase in student postings, thus adding to the forums' potency. Yeh (2005) notes that student participation increases as instructors place an importance on posting by assigning grades to forum use. This is unsurprising,

as one would expect graded assignments to garner more attention from students than non-graded activities. Swan (2001) finds this true as students calculate reward versus effort when determining whether to participate in forums. Forums with a larger percentage of influence on grades receive more use. However, while most LMS do provide instructors some means of forum assessment, current tools remain either overly limited or too time consuming to use.

Forum Types

Note, different forum types exist, and not all contain posts needing assessment. The first might be termed "social" forums. These forums furnish students with an informal area to discuss class- or non-class-related matters. Often, instructors state they will not view these forums' contents, thus creating a space in which students are free to speak openly, criticizing or praising the instructor, course, curriculum, or school without concern the comments will influence grading. Instructors often refer to these forums as "water coolers" or "student lounges." While these forums may provide students social benefit, instructors almost never assess them (Nelson et al., 2005).

A second type of forum might be labeled "general discussion." Like the social forums, these tend toward a free flowing, less structured style. However, unlike the social forums, these pertain to the course material and are less informal. Instructors may select broad topics or simply ask students to post any course related questions or material. Whereas social forums resemble hallway discussions among students, general discussion forums mimic an open question discussion in the classroom. Like their classroom counterparts, online general discussion students might receive grades based upon participation, insight, argument, initiative, and other factors.

The last forum type considered here is the "topic driven" forum. These forums are the most structured in terms of content and correspond to

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