Threaded Discussion:
The Role It Plays in E-Learning

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the results of two studies that focus on the role that threaded discussion plays in student learning. Over a period of three and one-half years, researchers conducted a series of surveys of graduate and undergraduate students at a private, nonprofit university in Southwestern Pennsylvania to determine how students viewed the value of threaded discussions in enhancing their ability to learn course material. Students were asked which types of threaded discussions they preferred; whether they found the threaded discussion to be a better tool for learning than a written assignment; and, which learning environment they felt was more conducive to learning, classroom or online. Results from the combined studies revealed some statistically significant differences based on enrollment status and gender. Upon comparing study results, researchers found statistically significant differences with regard to a preference for classroom versus online instruction and the usefulness of threaded discussions to learning.

KEYWORDS

Critical Thinking, Enhanced Learning, Expectations, Feedback, Interaction, Online Instruction, Perception, Value

INTRODUCTION

In 2014, Jung and Gilson declared online learning an innovative approach to overcoming the constraints of distance, time, location and differing learning styles made possible by technological evolution. In their report, Allen, Seaman, Poulin, and Straut (2016) characterized the growth of online education as continuing to outpace enrollment at institutions of higher education. While many institutions of higher education in the United States are experiencing a decline in traditional student enrollment, those with online components report increases. The authors found an 11.3% increase in distance learning enrollments at private nonprofit institutions from 2013 to 2014. Leaders at institutions of higher education with online offerings continue to support the proposition that being able to offer distance education is a critical element for success. As to the question of which is more effective for learning, onground or online instruction, the authors report that 71.4% of respondents in 2015 rated learning outcomes in online education as equal to, or better than, learning outcomes from classroom instruction.

Threaded discussion is an instructional tool used to promote critical thinking and reflection (Rizopoulos & McCarthy, 2009). Threaded discussions are asynchronous conversations among participants – students and instructors - in a web-based forum. Jung and Gilson (2014) maintain that asynchronous communication is the dominant form of educational computer-mediated communication

today. Threaded discussion can create online dialogic communities, communities which Rizopoulos and McCarthy state "have become a ubiquitous tool that transforms student learning and course delivery" (p. 373).

The argument is made that a key element in successful online instruction is the effective use of threaded discussions. They are the "beating heart of nearly every online course" (Sull, 2014, p. 11) and standard features in distance education (Maurino, Federman, & Greenwald, 2007). Edelstein and Edwards (2002) suggested that a critical element of any successful online course is the incorporation of a means to facilitate ongoing student interaction. It might be said that the threaded discussion is the means, if not the lynchpin, for facilitating student-to-student and instructor-to-student interaction.

Kleinman (2005) proposed that to maximize active learning and interaction in online courses, instructors should look to improving instructional design. Kleinman maintained that a satisfied learning community is the result of an online environment that nurtures engaged learning and provides the necessary support to help students understand course expectations. Swan (2001) determined that interactivity was key to effective online course design.

It goes without saying that the development of critical thinking skills is an important outcome for any institution of higher education. For online learners, the threaded discussion is considered to be a key tool in enabling e-learners to develop such skills. Using Newman, Webb, and Cochrane's (1995) content analysis framework, Tan and Ng (2014) assessed how well postgraduate students demonstrated critical thinking skills in threaded discussions. They found that while participants could not critically evaluate their own or others' postings, their personal experience and knowledge had a bearing on critical-thinking performance.

Clarke and Kinne (2012), noting that the use of threaded discussion in creating online learning communities has been validated, also point out that there have been studies critically examining the practice. For example, Dollisso and Koundinya (2011) determined that the use of a two-stage discussion model could help keep threaded discussions on track while maintaining the interactive features of the discussion. Clarke and Kinne wanted to understand the effect that altering the discussion format would have on students' learning experience. In their study, the authors used discussion boards with one group and blogs with another for group discussion. They found that the learning community built from the group discussion in the discussion board was both more academic and more collaborative than that built using a blog.

However, as Lee, Yang, and Rim (2014) observed, not all threaded discussions are created equal. They found that how a threaded discussion was structured outweighed time constraints, the participant profile or who initiated the thread.

In this study, researchers looked at format, as well as students' perceptions of the value and usefulness of threaded discussions to learning in order to determine the role that threaded discussion plays in enhancing student learning in the online environment. The study combines the results of surveys conducted over a three and one-half year period.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. From the student's perspective, is one format preferable to another in threaded discussions?
2. From the student's perspective, do threaded discussions add to or enhance learning?
3. From the student's perspective, do threaded discussions assess learning better than written assignments?
4. From the student's perspective, are threaded discussions useful for learning course material?
5. From the student's perspective, which learning environment, online or face-to-face, is preferable?

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