Chapter VI

Best Practices in the Assessment of Online Discussions

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Abstract

This chapter develops the rationale for several best practices in the assessment of online discussions. It provides instructors with an introduction to the differences between face-to-face and online discussions, how to evaluate online discussions, how to perform these assessments, and how to use assessment information to improve future online discussions. These best practices are intended to be an initial guide to the novice online instructor. The increasing use of online discussions in both traditional and distance classes will likely generate new forms of assessment, new rubrics, and new insights, and the instructor will need to stay informed of these developments.

Introduction

The enormous growth in use of the Web to enhance campus-based courses or to deliver entire courses has required that instructors adapt assessment methods...
to new learning activities or existing activities that occur in new ways, such as online discussions. With the advent of course management systems such as WebCT and Blackboard, an instructor can use three different methods for holding an online discussion. E-mail can be used to conduct a conversation, although its major drawbacks are its public nature and its occasional unreliability. A chat allows students to discuss course content in a synchronous mode (at the same time) and in a way that allows the conversation to unfold visibly in nearly real time. And a threaded discussion or discussion board allows students to contribute to a discussion asynchronously, or whenever they can log into the course, read others’ contributions, and formulate their own thoughts or ideas to contribute to the group’s discussion.

In every case, these discussions leave a written or printable record, and although students and faculty have been communicating as part of the teaching and learning enterprise for centuries, this is the first time that a fleeting and temporary communication can be frozen in text, removed from the immediate demands of a face-to-face encounter, and evaluated as many times as necessary to learn what occurred and determine what to do differently. Other than videotaping and transcribing classroom activities, there has never been an opportunity to see and evaluate what occurs in these communications between and among students and instructors. Though various forms of discussion are not entirely new to academe, the form of online discussion is finally open to careful evaluation.

Online discussions represent several new opportunities and challenges for instructors. Instructors need to learn how to design effective online discussions and continually improve discussion assignments for students to encourage greater and deeper learning. They need to evaluate students’ contributions to the discussion for assessment purposes and use these results to determine students’ grades, help students learn and evaluate their own role in the discussion, and learn how best to guide a discussion without stifling students’ willingness to participate. In each of these cases, the instructor faces several challenges related to assessment. First, instructors need to understand how online discussions compare to the more familiar face-to-face or classroom discussions. Second, they need to decide how online discussions should be evaluated and what criteria might be used. Third, they must learn how to use traditional or computer-based methods to conduct these assessments. Fourth, they need to practice using assessments of online discussions to improve the design and conduct of future online discussions. Finally, instructors need to keep informed of the best practices for the assessment of online discussions.
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