A Cross-Country Comparison of Virtual Discussion Board Use in United States and Costa Rican Education Settings

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the current study was to compare the use of virtual discussion boards in various educational settings in the United States and Costa Rica. Participants included professors of education, in-service and pre-service teachers in the United States and Costa Rica where a survey was used that included demographic, knowledge, attitude, and behavioral questions regarding the use of virtual discussion boards. Results indicated that sixty-two percent of the participants used discussion boards in an educational setting. Instructors reported creating discussion board prompts that were constructivist in nature, and responses were frequently assessed for reflection, application, or collaboration. Findings show implications for educators in Costa Rica the United States due to the extensive rural landscape that perpetuates a need for alternative forms of communication and distance learning as well as to provide a comparison to how this technology is used in United States educational settings.

Keywords: Asynchronous Communication, Costa Rica, Cross-country Comparison, Distance Education, Educational Technology, Teacher Education, Virtual Discussion Board

INTRODUCTION

Teachers in the United States (US) and Costa Rica encounter an array of impediments to face-to-face contact with their students. These include student absenteeism, shallow or few responses from the shy or timid students, and time limitations; these and other constraints frustrate the learning process (Tondeur et al., 2011). Virtual discussion boards offer a remedy to some of these impediments. They afford cooperative learning, student-led experiences centered on common content where the interaction takes place through e-mail, social networking sites or an institution-based courseware site such as Blackboard; ideally, these affordances would
resolve some of the face-to-face constraints (Klages, Pate & Conforti Jr., 2007). Generally, the interaction is asynchronous, allowing students flexibility in time and place (Koh & Frick, 2009). Since a virtual discussion board is typically asynchronous, it allows for broader topics of discussion pertaining to class content or a general theme.

Other benefits of virtual discussion boards include easier discussions over controversial topics and using student responses for assessing student learning as well as planning mini-lessons (Campbell, 2011). Another advantage to virtual discussion boards is the affordance for absent students and timid students to have a voice in the conversation when otherwise they would not (Thomas & Hofmeiser, 2002). Virtual discussion boards offer increased opportunity for distance learners to collaborate and learn in the midst of varied perspectives (Klages et al., 2007).

According to Berry (2011) as technology continues to be integrated in society, professional educators will need the skills necessary to build digital bridges for learning. These bridges connect content and instruction, classroom and families, and members of the learning community. As such, technology in the educational setting is not just for the pupil but also for the in-service teacher. Berry (2011) calls for teachers to lead the way in their own professional development, requiring teachers to communicate and collaborate. According to Berry (2011) some of the premier ways of facilitating collaborative professional development is through the use of blogs, discussion boards, and other social media forums, allowing for asynchronous discussion and the spread of information without the costly and time consuming face-to-face professional development we have seen in the past. While the “X and I” generations have extensive social media experience it is not readily transferred into the professional environment (Koh & Frick, 2009). Therefore, teacher preparation programs are encouraged to include experience in using technology to collaborate and communicate with peers in and out of cyberspace. Current literature has shown that virtual discussions are ways to present current or future teachers with these skills (Tondeur et al., 2011). Asynchronous communication was prevalent in all levels of education when studied by Berry (2011), therefore, it is important for teachers and teacher educators to develop an understanding of how discussion boards are incorporated in different settings (Vess, 2005; Schneiderman, Borkowski, Alavi & Norman, 1998).

The study of educational practices and tools being fueled by technological innovation is crossing traditional national boundaries. In an effort to teach educational coaching, for example, one university in the US has increased its cooperation with multiple Central American universities in multiple countries to offer courses via the Internet (Wise, Benavides & Destarac, 2013). How technology is being used to deliver content, both to pre-service and in-service teachers in the US and in other countries is a relevant part of this discussion.

The purposes of comparing US and foreign educational practices are many. Improving understanding of practices across countries provides additional perspectives on research conducted domestically. As Bradbum and Gilford state (1990), “International comparisons expand the range of comparison beyond the parochial limits of the U.S. National experience” (p. 2). Cross-country research promotes understanding of observed differences in practice and performances, enhances research, and records diversity of practices (Bradbum & Gilford, 1990). Bradbum and Gilford (1990) also suggest that comparative research be done among similar models and practices in order to discern and develop theories of best practice.

The current research focused on developing a deeper understanding of how virtual discussion boards and asynchronous communication is incorporated into teacher education in the US and in Costa Rica. Specifically, we conducted research on how technology is used in educational settings across national and cultural boundaries. In addition, this research studied the perceptions of information and communication technologies used by teacher educators, teachers and students. This was accomplished through a
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