Chapter XXVI
Rubric to Determine a Quality Online Discussion Posting

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ABSTRACT

When teachers integrate online discussions into courses, they are faced with the challenge of deciding how to evaluate the postings. This chapter discusses a study that used a discussion board rubric to evaluate online discussions. The study tested the reliability of the instrument (rubric) to assess the quality of the content of Web-based discourse. To obtain the rubric interrater reliability, researchers used the rubric to evaluate the discussion postings of preservice teachers' enrolled in six different sections of an English language arts methods course. Six hundred sixty two (662) postings from 165 preservice teachers were analyzed using the rubric. The study utilized the scorings from six judges. When measured with Cronbach's alpha intraclass coefficient, the findings indicated substantial agreement between judges in two of the four rubric criteria: evocative (.8742) and reference-resource (.8209). The other rubric criteria rumination (.7256) and storytelling (.5984) scored at the moderate and fair levels respectfully.

INTRODUCTION

When universities began to provide access to various e-learning tools such as Blackboard, WebCT, and E-College, these electronic collaboration tools were used in online courses as well as in traditional face to face courses. Specifically, teachers could use the asynchronous discussion board, which is available in several different forms, to extend or enhance the traditional classroom discussion. In a typical face-to-face discussion, the teacher moderates while the entire class discusses a topic or problem. There are many variations of this whole group face-to-face discussion. For example, a pair of students or a small group might share first and then each group shares with the whole group. This type of discussion occurs in real time and the students may or may not have extra class time to prepare their response. In the asynchronous discussion board, the teacher may or may not moderate the discussion and the students usually have a specified number of days to post their response to a prompt and respond to their classmates' posts. Whatever form it takes, the discussion board offers students the opportunity to work collaboratively to solve problems or discuss various topics. The students' participation in the discussion board is usually part of the students' grade in the course.

Teachers are not limited to pure textual messages when posting prompts to the discussion board. They can post pictures, graphics, sounds, video, and many combinations of multimedia. In our version of the discussion board called, Online Video Case Studies (OVCS), we posted 3–5 minute video clips of "real classroom footage" accompanied by one or more open-ended discussion prompts for the student to discuss. This discussion provides the students an opportunity for critical reflection which is an essential component of student growth and development. Discussion boards should create a collaborative environment where the students actively engage in group discussions, read the comments of their peers, and converse with other students and the instructor.

As the researchers began to integrate more discussion board assignments into their classes, they wanted to find out if learning was occurring when students composed these discussion posts. Thus, the purpose of this study was to test the reliability of an instrument (rubric) to assess the quality of the content of Web-based discourse to attempt to discern if learning was facilitated by OVCS, and to asses the quality of the online discussions. Even if the reader chooses not to use the OVCS model, the rubric can be used to evaluate any online posting.

BACKGROUND

Case studies have been found to be a powerful pedagogical tool for teacher education (Moore & Kearsley, 1996; Risko & Kinzer, 1997). Discussions about cases fostered thoughtful engagement (Dawson, Mason, & Molebash, 2000; Silverman & Welty, 1996). Specifically, video case studies provided a realistic, yet controlled, context that considerably enhanced textbook readings by bringing descriptions of actual classroom settings to life (Shulman, 1992). Further, Computer-mediated discussions increased time for reflection in formulating thoughtful dialog (Daiute, 2000).

In a pilot study of OVCS, we (Larson, Boyd-Batstone, & Cox, 2004–2005) reported on the nature of online discourse according to who was the discourse audience and what were the discourse functions utilized by a group of 98 preservice teachers in a university language arts methods course. The rubrics used (Flynn & Polin, 2003) provided useful categories for content analysis. But the researchers found that content analysis was limited in determining the function of the dialog. A persistent question was raised about the nature of a quality dialog online. In other words, how can one determine whether learning was taking place and knowledge was being constructed?

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