Chapter 94
Student–Led Online Discussions:
A Feminist Praxis to Mitigate Digital Gender Inequality

Alice Lai

Empire State College, State University of New York, USA

ABSTRACT

Digital gender inequality is well alive in online classrooms in U.S. higher education. The present study aimed to investigate this persistent issue and proposed a feminist pedagogy-inspired, student-led online discussion activity as a means to mitigate digital gender inequality. Specifically, the purpose of this chapter is threefold: (1) to expose and unravel the issue of digital gender disparity and inequality with a particular focus on its relevance to the online discussions, (2) to contextualize the feminist pedagogy within the postmodern technoculture and analyze its potential to sustain gender-equitable and empowered online education, and (3) to exemplify the feminist pedagogy through a student-led discussion activity implemented in an online undergraduate art history course. Reflecting on qualitative and learning survey data, this chapter is concluded with a diagnosis of the students' perceptions of the positive, challenging, and transformative aspects of the student-led discussion.

INTRODUCTION

Whether it existed in the past or not, such a technoscience—committed to projects of human equality; modesty, universal material abundance, self-critical knowledge projects; and multispecies flourishing—must exist now and in the future. —Dana Haraway, Modest_witness@second_millennium

Contrary to a common impression that the patriarchal, sage-on-the-stage style of lecturing is the primary model for delivering knowledge in art history classrooms, or most likely in the lecture halls, discussion as a teaching method has been employed by egalitarian professors in the Arts and Humanities disciplines

since the time of the ancient Greeks. Well-recognized paradigms ranging from the Socratic method (Trepanier, 2017), studio critiques of art, John Dewey's (Jenlink, 2009) classroom democracy, to bell hooks' (2000) feminist-consciousness raising in the late 20th Century have emerged throughout the history of Western education. Time and time again, they reaffirmed the crucial role of discussion in knowledge construction, transmission, and deconstruction. In the 21st Century digital era, the advancement of online education technologies has motivated American colleges and universities to migrate their faculty, students, and classes to virtual environments resulting in increasingly temporal and spatial separations between professor and students as well as among students. In turn, this development has yielded a wealth of literature and research studies, as cited throughout this chapter, devoted to examining ways to sustain discussion-based education in disembodied, asynchronous, and text-based educational realms. It can be expected that discussion will continue to be a core learning activity in higher education. As Howard (2015) concluded from his research, online discussion indeed has become a common pedagogical strategy for increasing student participation in online classes and improving learning performance.

The 21st Century technologies have made numerous forms of online classes and online group communication possible. It is then, necessary to offer a preview of the conditions of online classrooms and distinguish the kind of "discussion" investigated in the present study from other kinds of discussion-like activities. Bender's (2012) description is useful in this regards and sheds an optimistic light toward the discussion-based online learning model:

Discussion-based online education is primarily text based. It is also asynchronous in nature, meaning that all online participants can log on and participate in discussions at a time convenient to them. This can present new intellectual challenges, but it can also make education accessible in innovative and exciting ways. Online discussion can reach beyond the temporal and spatial constrains of the campus class, and as a result can often add a richer and deeper perspective as students respond when they are informed and inspired. (p. 2)

The term "discussion" in this study denotes a different type of cognitive process, teacher-student relationship, teacher-student and student-student interaction, and whole-class communicative activities from other commonly utilized types of group talk in the educational setting such as recitation, conversation, and dialogue. Recitation, as the name indicates, can be used to help students recall and explain the content in the assigned learning materials. Although it is a form of discussion between teacher and students, Wilkinson (2009) asserted that in recitation, "the teacher controls the talk and has complete interpretive authority" (p. 331). Here an instructor-led online discussion expecting the students to enumerate and articulate the information taken from the art history textbooks serves as an example of recitation. Brookfield and Preskill's (1999) survey of various modes of classroom talk indicated that dialogue tends to focus on purposeful exploration or inquiry of an issue or topic and at times is employed in the classroom for transformative learning, while conversation is a loosely structured, informal, and at times aimless talk intended for the participants to exchange thoughts and feelings. Conrad and Donaldosn (2011) observed that some effective group conversations tend to be more social than cognitive-oriented; for example, online icebreakers encourage students to introduce themselves and provide preliminary thoughts about the course themes and periodic reflective discussions prompt students to share their perceptions of the learning experience.

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