Chapter 9

Developing Asynchronous Online Discussion Boards to Increase Student Engagement and Learning

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ABSTRACT

The asynchronous online discussion board is a vital means of engaging learners and providing high quality instruction for students. In the past, these discussion boards have been primarily text-based, but online faculty are increasingly implementing discussion formats to increase student engagement and learning. Evidence-based online discussions include (1) both whole-class and small group discussions, (2) debates, (3) sharing products, (4) video-based discussions, (5) word cloud-based discussions, (6) jigsaw discussions, and (7) student choice in response format. In this chapter, the authors provide an overview of the literature regarding asynchronous discussions, as well as personal experience and recommendations based on their combined eight years of online instruction.

INTRODUCTION

With the increase in availability of online courses, it is imperative that instructors are designing high quality, rigorous courses to engage their students. One way to accomplish this is through the use of evidence-based discussion boards that use various formats. While many online courses utilize a text-based discussion board, there are other evidence-based discussion board activities (Clark, Strudler, & Grove,

2015) to support both student learning and engagement in the online classroom. This chapter provides an overview of evidence-based asynchronous discussion formats, as well as practical examples of how the chapter authors have used these methods successfully in their own online courses.

BACKGROUND

Asynchronous online learning is becoming an increasingly popular method for students to receive a university education. According to the United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2018), almost 30% of college students take at least some coursework online and over 14% take all of their courses via a web-based format. The majority of fully online students work full time (Clinefelter & Aslanian, 2017), which may indicate a need for flexibility in education options. In addition to its popularity among nontraditional students, the use of online instruction allows students in rural areas to access college instruction (Fish & Gill, 2009).

Online courses may involve either synchronous or asynchronous activities, or a combination of the two. Previous research indicates that students perceive their learning to be enhanced through synchronous instruction and interactions (Ward, Peters, & Shelley, 2010). However, for many nontraditional and rural students, the use of synchronous instruction can pose a challenge; for these students, learning outcomes may be achieved through the use of asynchronous online learning. In addition, these online discussion boards may help to increase students' sense of community (Saade & Huang, 2009).

For courses that do not include a real-time, synchronous component, the course discussion board is a vital means of engaging learners and providing high quality instruction for students. Asynchronous online discussion boards provide a means for a mediated discussion between students and faculty, but that discussion includes a time delay between responses (Fear & Erikson-Brown, 2014). Online discussion boards provide students the opportunity to learn from one another, as well as to receive timely instruction and feedback from the course instructor (Cho & Tobias, 2016). Well-designed online discussion boards aid in creating a sense of community among students (Rovai, 2007) and increase student motivation and engagement (Al Jeraisy, Mohammad, & Fayyoumi, 2015). While increased activity on the course discussion board does not impact student achievement in the course, there is a correlation between failing the course and inactivity in course discussions (Davies & Graff, 2005).

The literature indicates that high quality discussion boards impact student retention, grades, and interactions (Brown, 2012; Fear & Erikson-Brown, 2014; Fetzner, 2013).

Effective online coursework includes high quality course design, interaction between students, and instructor involvement and planning (Crawford-Ferre & Fiest, 2012). Online students often cite effective and frequent communication from, and interactions with, faculty as a critical factor in both their satisfaction and success in online coursework (Bailie, 2015). In the asynchronous online learning environment, the course discussion board provides the ideal opportunity for student-faculty interactions and communication. The literature indicates that the use of discussion boards in online courses may increase social interactions among students, thereby creating a sense of community (Andresen, 2009; Cho & Tobias, 2016; Swan & Shih, 2005).

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