

Chapter 102

Private Interactions in Online Discussions: Instructor Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Private discussion entries (called “notes” in this chapter) provide opportunities for instructors to engage with students for social and cognitive support in discussion-based online learning environments. Situated within discussion threads, embedded private communication allows for personalized engagement with students to support learning through in-place feedback, redirection, and encouragement. Nine themes of the affordances of private notes were identified through the collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data gathered from four instructors and the activities of 278 students in 11 online graduate education courses. The benefits of private, in-place interactions identified by the instructors include encouraging authentic participation, building trust and social presence, redirecting conversation, providing advice about learning online, and more. A discussion of the importance of in-place private communications in online learning for providing feedback, reassurance, and guidance is supported by examples and followed by suggestions for future research.

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INTRODUCTION

The role played by private discourse in discussion-based online learning is not well understood. While almost all studies of interaction in online learning discussions have focused on entries* (called “notes” in this chapter) that are visibly shared in discussion boards, there may be many subtle or hidden exchanges that are significant for learning but are not expressed in textual exchanges in public spaces. Online participation in a learning community has been defined broadly in online learning research by Hrastinski (2009), as “a complex process of taking part and maintaining relations with others” (p. 80). Maintaining relations with others in an online learning discussion typically involves public discourse. A hidden exchange may occur when a student composes a note to add to a discussion but asks the instructor privately for clarification before making the note public to the whole group. Such “backchannel” exchanges contribute to the learning process, often in important ways (Kearns & Frey, 2010). Since most analyses of online interactions are concerned with discussion threads, collaboration, and public student-teacher exchanges, we believe it is important to address the gap in the literature related to private interactions within an online learning context. The interactions taking place between instructors and students within the online learning discussion space that are not visible to others plays a critical (but far less examined) role in online learning.

As the number and variety of online course offerings proliferate within college, university, K-12 and corporate training environments, including the advent of entire online diploma and degree programs, there continues to be significant development of Learning Management Systems (LMSs) to meet contemporary educational needs. For instance, a quick glance at the documentation or roadmap of many modern LMSs reveals enhanced/new features such as dashboard navigation, collaborative tools and activities, analytical tools for tracking progress and completion, gamification, and privacy instruments, among others. Online courses that involve discussion in asynchronous conferences usually offer public artifacts of conversations, which we refer to as notes, and a different set of tools or spaces for communication that is private. There are many tools available to students outside of course LMS discussions for private student-to-student communication, such as text, email, and many easily accessible apps. Students can also interact with instructors outside of course LMS discussions using LMS email or external email and apps. Tools used for interaction outside of the LMS discussion facilitate a physical and psychological separation between the public, in-course discourse and their private communications. On the other hand, private instructor / student communication that takes place within the LMS discussion remains in the context of the learning course. According to a current analysis of trends shaping education (OECD, 2019), teaching approaches must continue to transform and support individuals’ personal and social development and, as such, need to reflect a “reorganisation of formal and informal learning environments, [by] reimagining education content and delivery” (p. 13). Such instructional shifts prompt the questioning of social and cognitive assumptions. For instance, within an online learning environment, how does communication typically occur between an instructor and students in the context of a course? What are the affordances of instructors interacting with their students in an online public discussion forum versus private forms of communication? What implications might such instructor-student interactions have for the establishment of social relationships and a sense of belonging within an online course?

To address these questions, we use the social constructivist view (Vygotsky, 1978), where knowledge construction is understood as being supported through interactions with others, and the community of inquiry (CoI) perspective as guiding frameworks. The CoI perspective is described in the literature as a social constructivist model of learning processes that emphasizes the importance of building knowledge

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