Chapter 4
"A Community of Opinion and Debate": Postgraduate Students' Reactions to Compulsory Online Discussions

Elizabeth A. Beckmann
The Australian National University, Australia

ABSTRACT

Discussion-based learning is a crucial element in postgraduate professional development, particularly important in facilitating peer learning through the sharing of professional experiences. In courses with distance or blended delivery, educational technologies provide opportunities to encourage such peer learning. But do postgraduate students value asynchronous online discussions in the same way as they value the equivalent face-to-face experiences? Do educational technologies have a role to play in facilitating discussions even when students are meeting face to face? Is it helpful to make an online discussion compulsory? This chapter reports design-based research on student reactions to compulsory assessment tasks that involved a variety of asynchronous online discussion structures—from individual reflective journals to large group forums—in 14 Masters courses in development studies and museum studies at an Australian university. Using the students' own reflections on their learning experiences, this chapter considers the extent to which the use of technologies can enhance or impede the reflective and peer-responsive learning sought by the inclusion of discussions in the postgraduate education of professionals.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61350-177-1.ch004

INTRODUCTION

Skills of critical analysis and debate are a crucial focus of learning for professionals in any field. Those emerging from professionally-orientated graduate studies must be prepared to engage not only with the worldviews specific to their discipline and profession but also with the multiple perspectives of their employers, communities, governments and other stakeholders. In face-to-face settings, these higher-order skills can be modelled and stimulated effectively by discussion activities that engage students in debate, role-play, and opportunities to reflect on personal assumptions and values (Ramsden, 2003). When these kinds of student-centred activities focus on reality and thoughtful engagement, they lead to deeper approaches to learning, and hence to better educational outcomes (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999). Today's professionals, however, have little time for "sitting at the feet of greatness of a Professor" (Churchman, 2006, p. 9): although they still seek to advance their professional knowledge and competence by learning from the best in their field, commitments to study must be balanced against work, family, social and financial responsibilities. The result has been an increasing demand for postgraduate education delivered via the Internet to working professionals (Cookson, 2002), with online discussions an obvious substitute for classroom dialogue as teachers seek to recreate the "immediacy and energy" of face-to-face engagement (Meyer, 2003) in a more flexible mode. In addition, globalisation and the "digital revolution" mean that all professionals benefit from practising the communication skills that allow them to engage in high-level professional debate online.

To create genuine off-campus learning communities, as opposed to managing sets of individual distance learners, academics have to adopt different ways of managing teaching and learning, and focus on the qualitative advantages of distance technologies rather than their functional aspects. Ensuring that the experiential learning that occurs in on-campus teaching activities such as class discussions, group work, role plays and field trips is replicated through authentic and equivalent flexible/online learning experiences is thus an important goal for those who are teaching professionals through distance or blended delivery. In short, the primary aim must still be the engagement of students in meaningful learning activities (Alexander & Boud, 2001).

For those involved in professional education, therefore, an important pedagogical challenge is how to ensure that students develop the higher level skills of dialogue and critical exchange with their peers that will be useful not only when they meet face-to-face, but also when they are in different locations or time zones. Although videoconferencing approaches that involve real-time 'chat' may offer the virtual experience closest to a face-to-face meeting, these approaches are often not feasible if students and lecturers are in many different time zones, require high levels of individual flexibility, or are in areas less well served by high-speed internet connections (Beckmann & Kilby, 2010). Asynchronous interactions thus remain the more realistic options in most cases of teaching that involve distance or blended delivery.

There are many platforms and tools available for online discussions, including many commercial and independent social networking (Web 2.0) tools (Alexander, 2006). However, universities are often concerned by issues of students' privacy and intellectual property rights in the wider online environment. These, and other concerns, often constrain lecturers to use only the discussion tools within their institution's learning management system (LMS, also known as a virtual learning environment or VLE), even when those tools are less than satisfactory pedagogically (Gibbs & Gosper, 2006).

Although the online technologies themselves must obviously be robust (Volery & Lord, 2000), and preferably visually attractive and user-friendly, Kimball (2001) argues that the actual teaching strategy and style are more likely to influence the learning than the technology itself. For a lecturer to become "proficient" in the use of online discussion tools as a mean of facilitating professional learning thus depends as much on developing an