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Discussion Groups and Online Learning

Abstract. This article investigates the components of online discussion groups in terms of their cognitive, social and teaching impact for online learning. Discussion groups serve an essential role and will be defined and their impact addressed as an active learning strategy with multilayered effects. Connecting learners in an online teaching environment is essential and integration of well-designed discussions will facilitate student learning. In the online classroom, critical thinking skills and actively engaged learners are tantamount to student success. The development of asynchronous discussions to enhance learning and critical thinking will be discussed along with reflection and activities to increase student engagement and learning.

Keywords: discussion groups, online learning, teaching impact

Introduction

Online discussions serve a significant role and there are numerous benefits to the incorporation of well-designed discussions in online teaching and learning that lead to acquisition of knowledge and skills. Through online learning, the incorporation of communication and cognitive skills can readily occur across nations and continents as education is transformed for 21st century learners with high expectations for interactive instruction.

Utilization of discussion groups to strengthen the interaction of cognitive, social and teaching skills focusing on a spectrum of significant themes strengthens academic achievement. Discussion groups serve an

essential role and are defined and their impact addressed as an active learning strategy with multilayered effects. This article utilizes examples and student samples from actual university online coursework at the graduate level. It provides an overview of the value and implications of discussion groups in learning, and explores essential tools used in the content and outcome of the utilization of online discussions.

Academic discussions are dominated not only by subject matter content or the need for language learning but provide innovative teaching and learning opportunities. The application and impact of Information Communication Technology (ICT) significantly contributes to curriculum development changes at public schools and universities as they reassess their goals and reinvigorate the curriculum related to content knowledge and language learning, however discussion groups have the power to engage learners and encourage thought processes that go beyond the standard expectations of the course curriculum. The incorporation of discussion groups requires expert preparation, planning and oversight and must relate to course learning modules in order to encourage students to acquire knowledge and make connections through a common theme. Depending upon the online education platform being utilized for the online learning environment, the course management system can offer links to "Help" sites and technology expertise. Often by drawing from real world experiences and pursuing knowledge associated with course content while sharing this knowledge with fellow students and responding to questions, additional learning is achieved that goes beyond the course objectives and established student learning outcomes. By integrating content and engaging students simultaneously in discussion groups, students are able to explore and expand their content knowledge and language learning through creative resources and peer engagement. Learning is achieved along with conceptual understanding as students engage in dialog, questioning and discussion. Unit and lesson design as well as pedagogical input accompanying the learning activities is strengthened through meaningful student and teacher discussions as well as integrated language learning. Comprehensible input is expanded and students acquire discipline specific language and interaction skills as they collaborate with peers.

Review of the Literature

The complex and diverse needs of students engaged in virtual learning require educators to have the technology and expertise to engage students and incorporate online methodologies and best practices that provide high levels of student achievement. Educators must develop multi-dimensional technologies and methodology such as the incorporation of discussion groups to address the specific needs of students. The pedagogical potential to enhance teaching and learning for online students is central to goals and objectives of online course design and implementation. University educators are working to develop new online, asynchronous courses as well as convert face-to-face traditional courses to online and hybrid platforms. For example, in the Department of Literacy, Language and Culture at Boise State University, Bilingual and English as a New Language (ENL) endorsement courses are moving to a fully online platform in order to serve educators from across the state, particularly in rural settings. The majority of these courses incorporate discussion opportunities as a key learning tool for the virtual learning environment.

Brookfield and Preskill point out that discussions are crucial for exploring complex ideas as well as entertaining multiple perspectives on a given topic (Brookfield, Preskill, 2005). Stavredes suggests that collaboration among learners contributes to higher order thinking skills that can be developed including critical thinking, creative thinking, as well as problem solving (Stavredes, 2011). There are numerous ways to use discussion groups for online teaching, particularly for communicative teaching. Critical authentic discussion, written and verbal communication allow us to express what we know, as well as evaluate our learning (Stavredes, 2011). Discussion group experiences can be addressed when learning online and will stimulate learning and actively engage students in the process. Through online discourse and facilitation of discussion, students are able to interact and communicate information and opinions. According to Palloff and Pratt, "Skillful facilitation allows students to interact with one another and the instructor at a higher level" (Palloff, Pratt, 2007). Discussion groups constitute a core concept in defining a community of inquiry (Garrison, Anderson, Archer, 2001) and are essential when developing online courses for students. Quality Matters

is an international, inter-institutional program with quality assurance processes that are designed to certify educators in online course design and allow them to collaborate with peers (Quality Matters., 2016). This program was utilized to develop asynchronous online multicultural education courses for preservice and graduate level teachers at Boise State University. Collaborative internet partnerships have been founded across the globe through computer mediated connections representing an interdisciplinary mix of communication, technology, education, and journalism (Quality Matters., 2016).

Value of Discussion Groups

Online and blended coursework continues to be at the forefront of trends in education. The economic impact of online education is significant and dramatically contributes to institutions of higher education. Discussion and active learning are valuable assets in preparing students for careers and the workplace. Numerous hybrid programs and online opportunities support the use of discussion groups in teaching and reinforcing self-directed learning strategies. Although discussion groups can successfully take place in organized groups connected through cameras, chat rooms and dialog connecting groups of students simultaneously, this paper addresses the role and value of discussion in an asynchronous course setting.

In the virtual learning environment, the key focus for online learning is the achievement of course goals and objectives, and mastery of materials. In order to accomplish essential cognitive learning and engage students through effective teaching, cognitive online presence is tantamount to success. This can be accomplished by the use of discussion groups and facilitating interaction and overt instructional practice. Online communication that emphasizes teaching and learning through the incorporation of discussion groups has been shown by educators and researchers to positively impact learning and strengthen cognitive achievement (Lamy, Hampel, 2007).

A wide variety of resources exist to provide strategies and support for educators and students throughout the use of discussion groups. Integrated learning and opportunities for intellectual exchange accompany the curriculum and available materials. Among the materials available are collections of discussion questions and resources designed to intro-

duce students to the topics of the course. By engaging a community of learners in discussions related to teaching and learning, students are motivated and challenged to high ideals and positive outcomes. There are numerous formats and ways to incorporate discussion groups in order to meet course objectives and engage students in discourse. Each post should be concise, relevant, informational and on time. For example, in an asynchronous online Language, Literacy, and Culture course designed for graduate inservice educators seeking an endorsement in Bilingual Education and English as a New Language, principal components designed to transform and strengthen learning include online discourse, discussion opportunities, reflection papers, journaling and responses to readings and video clips. A rubric and assessment framework accompanies each activity including requirements for timely feedback and grading.

Initial Posts

Discussion groups and collaboration provide avenues for student learning in a virtual environment. Student interaction including pedagogy in the content area, as well as on culturally relevant teaching encourages students on their academic journey and plays a critical role connecting students and the curriculum. Discussion and collaboration also support the creation of a strong learning community (*Discussion post...*, 2018). The Quality Matters program and Boise State University Blackboard Course Guidelines (*Discussion post...*, 2018) provide essential aspects focused on ways to ensure that directions for initial student posts are clear and well developed. Finally, instructor monitoring, engagement and interaction is an integral part of online learning and has strong implications for creating linkages and allowing students to navigate the facets of communication and learning.

Guidelines for initial student posts direct students to fully participate in the discussion board activity. Students are asked to ensure that their postings fully address the instructions in the discussion board activity and make effective use of evidence, reason and logical thought to produce a convincing argument. They should treat colleagues respectfully, provide an appropriate subject title for each post and use concise subject lines to distinguish their main post from a reply to another's post. Should students be responding to a particular person, it is essential to include a salutation

specifying to whom they are writing. Students are also required to add their name at the bottom of each post (*Discussion post...*, 2018).

Once students make an initial post in accordance with the designated due date, they are instructed to read the posts that have been submitted by their classmates. At this point, the instructor has the option of designating the number of reply posts that students are expected to compose and submit. Usually, replies are required that include comments on two or more classmates' initial posts. Guidelines are provided for selecting which posts are considered for replies, include making note of those students who have not been included in the discussion with previous replies. Students are also encouraged to post their initial response on time so that they can contribute to the conversation in a timely manner and make a significant contribution to the discussion board activity.

Finally, students are asked to conduct a self-evaluation regarding their participation in the discussion board activity. In this self-evaluation, they are required to address the following questions (*Discussion post...*, 2018):

1. I posted my initial response to the discussion board in a timely manner (by the due date).
2. I followed the appropriate conventions of professional writing within the discipline. I used correct syntax, grammar, and punctuation, as well as an appropriate tone and level of formality.
3. I observed all etiquette expectations for polite and constructive online discussions, as outlined in the course syllabus.
4. I invested sufficient time and mental effort to ensure that I would write a high-quality discussion post. Note: In this course, a high-quality Discussion Board posts is one in which you:
 - (a) clearly identify and describe the topic or problem
 - (b) demonstrate a working knowledge of the readings, discussions, and issues
 - (c) provide thoughtful feedback to other students through participation in the discussion
5. I replied to the comments of my classmates. My replies were thoughtful and added to the discussion in a meaningful way. (I didn't just say "I agree" or "Good point" and leave it at that.)

6. I contributed to the success of the class by doing one or more of the following tasks:
 - (a) Contributed at least two comments to posts made by at least two other class members.
 - (b) Built on suggested ideas or explained the merits of different ideas.
 - (c) Noticed when someone is not participating and invited them to engage.
 - (d) Treated class members respectfully by being polite and constructive in communication.
 - (e) Conveyed a positive attitude about the course and the assigned work.

Readings

Another essential opportunity for discussion is the use of open ended questions to focus on assigned readings. The course instructor usually selects key readings from the texts and these are designated as part of the weekly assignment. Instructions are provided for ways that students will discuss key ideas from the readings with their classmates. Often the readings are incorporated along with personal experiences. For example, in the case of multicultural education courses, students are asked to relate the readings to their experiences with English Language Learners and the teacher's knowledge of cultural diversity. It is the intention that students will gain a deeper knowledge of the readings by participating in discussions with their peers. When they are actively engaged in conversations with colleagues regarding the readings, content of the text is better understood as well as its relationship to their studies.

Following an assigned reading, students are required to draft a response to the following questions:

- In what ways does the author distinguish between English Literacy and Literacy?
- In your view, what counts as Literacy?
- How would you describe the relationship between language and culture?

Students are asked to cite their references, as well as the references to the readings and the module. When they complete this post, there is

a link for them to submit the initial post to the forum. They are instructed to copy and paste their initial post to the forum into a new thread in the discussion board and add a descriptive title. For this initial post, students will create their own discussion thread without first reading the other students' posts. Later students are given the opportunity to discuss and question each other's ideas.

At this time, they will use the discussion link in the main menu to return to the discussion board where they left their initial post. They are required to read at least five initial posts from fellow students and take note of any students who have not yet received at least two replies. They will be asked to respond to at least two other students during the discussion and comment on their post regarding the assigned readings. These replies must be more than one sentence and provide a thoughtful response that will promote a conversation among students.

It is critical that students post their initial discussion thread in accordance with the timelines so that other students will have the opportunity to respond in a timely manner and all students and be included in the activity. The assessment criteria for this activity are clearly spelled out with a rubric and the number of points that students are able to earn for the assignment. There is a link for students to view the rubric before beginning the assignment. The key objectives of this assignment are as follows:

1. Demonstrate a working knowledge of the readings, discussions, and issues.
2. Contribute to the collaborative learning process of the class through the discussion.
3. Meet requirements for timeliness and citations outlined in the rubric.
4. Give an appropriate subject title for each post. Use concise subject lines to distinguish your main post from a reply to another's post.
5. Your postings should fully address the instructions in the discussion prompt for both initial and reply posts.
6. Make effective use of evidence, reason, and logical thought to produce a convincing argument. (*Discussion post...*, 2018)

Responses to Colleagues

These responses include the ability to establish and maintain informal communication among the students and professor, the impact of spoken verbal components, and the differences in assessment levels. Although we can monitor discussions, it is important for students to show respect to fellow students and utilize the discussion post for the purpose of course information and learning. While controversial ideas may be presented along with supporting documentation, it is crucial that students remain on topic and focus on best practices to promote high levels of achievement and understanding.

Students are reminded to observe etiquette expectations for polite and constructive online discussions. These expectations are outlined in the course syllabus. Care must be taken so that discussion forums do not evolve to complaint sessions regarding the course or opportunities to vent about a situation outside of the class itself. For example, a component of the graduate level Culturally Diverse Learners course requires students to do a Child and Community Context Study where they are expected to select two students to follow and interview, visit their neighborhood and make a home visit. The objectives of this course include recognizing the interrelatedness of language, culture and literacy learning. To accomplish this, students will discuss and provide examples about the preconditions for equitable and democratic language practices in classrooms and communities and examine and evaluate educational policies and practices (including their own) in relation to language, culture and literacy learning. Students in the courses come from varied political and religious backgrounds and may not always agree about several issues, however the discussion forum must be a place for constructive feedback and presentation of opinions.

Reflection Discussions

Reflection journals are utilized to stimulate thinking about the course experiences, deepen students' understanding of the assigned reading material, and apply course concepts to the classroom situation. They provide students with the opportunity to communicate their own thoughts

as they relate *to their* classroom and professional experience. Students will complete a reflection for each module or week of the course. They will compose a one page, typed reflection paper describing some of the 1) Connections, 2) Insights and 3) Classroom Implications that they have come up with. Students will copy and paste the text of the reflection paper in the journal entry for each module. If they are doing thoughtful reading from the textbooks and material provided, and have developed notes using the questions provided within the reading strategies, then they will be successful.

In order to conclude with a discussion, students are initially asked to compose a written reflection containing a short review of the assigned reading. They are to type the reflection in a document on the computer (one page), then copy and paste the text of the reflection in their journal entry. The following suggestions are provided to encourage them to do a thorough job.

Describe the relationship, if any, of the reading to your life or the lives of students (Connections), Insights you gained, and the Classroom Implications. Refer to the learning objectives for more context, if needed. Support your points with examples or reference to the readings and your professional classroom experience.

Consider the following questions as you write your reflection:

- How do the situations or problems described in the readings relate to my own life, ideas and experiences or those of students?
- Are the situations in the text similar to ones I have encountered before? How are they different?
- What insights did I acquire from the reading related to teaching and supporting students from diverse backgrounds?
- What did I learn about the necessity or difficulty of change?
- What are the consequences and classroom implications of the solutions posed in the reading?
- What strategies can I use in my own teaching? (*Discussion post...*, 2018)

Once students have posted reflections, other students will be able to respond, post clarifying questions and engage in a lively discussion regarding the forum and key points made. These thoughtful discussions have the potential to serve as important components of any online course. Critical

thinking and reflection play an important role in learning and discussion forums will strengthen this accomplishment.

Future Implications and Conclusions

In the educational virtual environment, the key focus for online learning is the achievement of course goals and objectives, and mastery of materials. This is further illuminated by the ubiquitous character that digital technology has assumed in our modern society (Bratland, 2016). Discussion groups in a variety of settings and modalities have the potential to support and strengthen online learning. In order to accomplish essential cognitive learning and engage students through effective teaching, discussion forums and feedback are tantamount to success. This can be accomplished by facilitating interaction and overt instructional practice. Discussion forums focusing on content knowledge and inquiry are essential to reaching our goals and achieving course objectives. Online communication and discussion that emphasizes content knowledge and teaching are essential to positively impact and strengthen learning.

The use of discussion groups in online learning continues to expand in significance and the design and implementation of successful discussion forums requires extra effort on the part of the educator. Online discussions are an important component of every course, particularly those taught asynchronously, and serve as a venue for students to teach and learn with each other. Online learning is positively impacted through discussion groups, and students are able to strengthen their knowledge and skills through virtual online classrooms. The learning modules that educators design containing specific learning goals and objectives can be tailored to the individual needs and expertise of learners, who are able to expand their knowledge through discussion groups and interaction with their peers. By establishing strong discussion group guidelines, the online educator is able to facilitate a sense of community, strengthen relationships, and encourage communication and student engagement leading to acquisition of knowledge and skills. Although students may be working independently and in an asynchronous, online environment, their learning becomes connected and interactive.

Thoughtful discussions stimulate reflective thinking, allow students to navigate the facets of deeper learning and a productive exchange

of ideas. Although students may be working independently and in an asynchronous, online environment, their learning becomes connected and interactive through discussion forums. Because traditional face-to-face classroom learning has been the norm for numerous years, creative and innovative steps must be taken to strengthen learning and promote engagement in an online virtual environment. The complex and diverse needs of our students require educators to engage students and develop online best practices that provide high levels of student achievement. It is crucial to leverage exemplary pedagogy, capturing and sharing cutting-edge experiences that lead to quality courses and student success. The incorporation of active, organized discussion groups, well-designed curriculum with weekly modules emphasizing active and energized discussion is key to this success and achievement when successfully establishing a community of inquiry in online learning.

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