

Assessing Online Asynchronous Discussion in Online Courses: An Empirical Study

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Abstract: Online asynchronous discussion is argued to have many benefits for student learning. However, whether student participation in the asynchronous discussion should be assessed is controversial. Furthermore, how to assess their participation has been a huge challenge faced by many online instructors. While there is a growing body of literature addressing these issues, there is still a lack of empirical studies in this regard. This paper reported the results of a recent empirical study conducted at a large, public, Midwestern university. Fifty online courses offered by five different Masters' programs were examined and twenty instructors were interviewed. Major research questions included: How was the online discussion organized in the courses examined? How did the instructors grade the discussion? Why did they make certain decisions on these issues, such as what their rationales, considerations, and concerns were?

Introduction

Online asynchronous discussion is argued to have many benefits for student learning, such as helping learners negotiate higher levels of understanding, share and develop alternative viewpoints (Rovai, 2000). Based on her experience of teaching a postgraduate online unit, Maor (1998) raises three questions: Should the participation be compulsory and therefore be integral part of the assessment? How does one assess student participation and contribution? And how should the interaction be qualified?

Anderson (2004) notes that online students, who typically are adults busy with many commitments, may not participate in such activities as online discussion if the activities appear to be marginal. ANTA (2002) finds that required online participation can help keep students motivated and involved, enable student to support each other's learning, and impact on learning outcomes. In the meantime there is a concern that assessment of online discussion may hamper student participation (Ho, 2002).

According to Hawkes & Dennis (2003), establishing clear criteria for the assessment of online discussion is critical for successful use of the media. Anderson (2004) echoes and further points out that developing and implementing an explicit assessment framework can be potentially time-consuming tasks for instructors.

This paper presented a study recently conducted at a large, public, Midwestern University. The purpose of study was to examine the current practice of assessing online

asynchronous discussion in online graduate courses offered by the university. Following research questions guided this study:

- Was asynchronous discussion required and counted for students' final grades? If yes, what percentage, and why? If not, why not?
- How was the online discussion organized in the courses examined?
- How did the course instructors grade the discussion?
- Why did the instructors make certain decisions concerning the above issues? And
- What considerations, concerns, and needs did they have?

Methodology

According to Yin (1989), a case study method is appropriate to examine How and Why related questions. A university-level case study method is employed. As a large Midwestern research university, this university offers about 100 masters' programs. To ensure the sample richness and diversity, courses were chosen from five different Masters' programs the university offers: Language Education, Educational Technology, Adult Education, Business Administration, and Nursing. While all the five programs offer fully online courses, the percentage of online components in these programs varies. For instance, while the Language Education and Educational Technology programs allow their students to take all courses online, the Nursing program only offers its core courses online with a purpose of providing its students with more flexibility in taking courses.

This study employed all three qualitative data collection methods that Potters (1996) identifies: document examination, observation, and interview.

Document examination

A syllabus is like a contract between students and the instructor (Ford, 2002). It usually includes the methods that the instructor uses to assess students. In order to obtain a comprehensive view of the current state of this examined phenomenon, this study examined all the available syllabi of online courses offered by the five Masters' programs in the academic year of 2005-6. Fifty syllabi were analyzed.

Observation

The archived nature of the course manage systems used in online courses allows one to observe the virtual classroom at any time (Dennen, 2001). The virtual classrooms were observed if the researcher was provided the access to the course. Twelve courses were observed.

Interview

To get an in-depth view, this study interviewed twenty instructors teaching online courses offered by the aforementioned five Masters' programs. The instructors were interviewed on a one-on-one basis and in a semi-structured format. Among the 20 interviews, depends on the interviewee's availability, 12 were conducted face to face, six via phone, one via

MSN chat, and one was via email. Interviews conducted via phone and face and face were recorded by a digital recorder. The recorded interviews were listened multiple times, transcribed and summarized by the researcher. The transcript of the MSN chat was saved and analyzed.

Results

Student participation in online discussion counted toward their final grade in 36 of the 50 examined courses (72%). The percentage of the online participation counted in the course grade varied among the courses examined, ranging from 3% to 40%. Fifteen out of the 50 courses allotted 20% to online discussion, and the 20% of the course grade was the most frequent percentage used in the courses examined, followed by counting for 30% of the grade (used in 10 courses).

Importance of asynchronous discussion

The majority of the interviewed instructors believed online discussion was important for an online course. One instructor of the language education program used “extremely” to describe its importance and believed it should be used in all online courses. Another instructor in the language tended to concur, and provided two reasons for her rationale for allotting 40 percent of the final grade to online participation and discussion. One was the limited access to “student presence”. According to her, in a face to face course, some students might not say much, but they were able to “contribute to their own and their classmates’ learning nonverbally (such as organizing a workshop, give a demonstration, etc).” By contrast, in an online course, she would need to rely on mostly participation when assessing students’ learning and development, because she did not have “direct access to these nonverbal/non-written contributions of learners.” The other reason was her intention of “building a thought-collective learning community.” According to her, “it is my belief that we learn by doing and from interacting with others around us. It is the human interaction that contributes to our understanding of ourselves and our world.” Similarly, an instructor from nursing program believed that participation was important to create a learning community online. Another nursing instructor visualized the online discussion as students discussing issues sitting in a circle in a mortar classroom and mentioned that she used online discussion “in order for students to not see the course as a correspond course.”

Two interviewed instructors from educational technology did not require online discussion in their courses. One instructor explained that this did not mean she did not think discussion was not important. Rather, she had mixed feelings toward it. As she said, online discussion could be beneficial but could be very problematic as well. She hoped that discussion forum could be used in a natural way in that students could share, receive and provide help on whatever and whenever they need, instead of being forced to participate in a discussion. The other instructor explained that discussion was not required in his course because the course was not about talking, but developing e-learning products. As he said, “I am not grading them on their ability to talk, or to recite back what they read from the book.... I am focusing on the tasks they are doing.” Noticeably,

according to him, while discussion is voluntary, there were a remarkable number of postings from students in the forum. The postings were about tasks they were doing. He responded quickly to questions students asked. That was where the instruction occurred, not for the purpose of assessing, as he mentioned.

Organization of online discussion

Asynchronous discussion was organized in a variety of ways in the courses examined. Many courses, especially those offered by language education program, asked students to participate in the online discussion weekly. By contrast, some courses required students to participate in the discussion in some weeks. One nursing course only required students to participate in the discussion in the first unit (first two weeks). Some courses divided students in groups for the forum discussion, and designed a variety of activities. For instance, in two Adult Education courses, students were required to discuss the tasks within their teams and respond to what other teams posted. Another course offered in Adult Education asked each group to sign up for a module and be responsible for organizing activities including online discussion concerning that module. The major purpose, according to the instructor, was to make students responsible for their own learning as adult learners. A course offered in nursing program divided students in four groups and gave the groups different tasks each week. For instance, in one week, she assigned different topics to each group, asked each student to research on the topic assigned to his or her group and post their individual answers in their group space. Then the group was asked to post a group answer based on what individual member shared. The whole group served as experts and answered the questions from other teams on the topic. In another week, she put the four teams in two groups, and asked them to debate on the pros and cons of a topic addressed in the course.

Nearly half of the instructors provided discussion questions. Some of them explicitly required students to provide individual answers to the questions, while others did not and implied that students could discuss any relevant issues that interested to them. Majority of the examined courses provided clear instructions for student participation in online discussion. About 60% of the courses specified clearly the minimal number of posting for the weekly discussion. Some courses further described when students were supposed to participate in the discussion. Nearly 70% of the courses emphasized that student posting should be substantial, rather than just saying good job, I agree, etc. The degree to which instructors participate in the discussion varied. Some instructors tended to sit back. One instructor explained that she did not participate much because she wanted to get more responses from students. Other instructors took more active roles. For instance, one instructor said she would post 5-6 times if there were 50 student postings. At least two instructors provided summaries for the forum discussions at the end of each office al discussion period. The purpose of doing this, according to one instructor, was to tell students that he did read what they posted.

Grading online discussion

Nearly all instructors who required students to participate in asynchronous discussion indicated that grading online discussion was difficult. The instructors approached this challenge with a variety of strategies. Some instructors gave students full marks for participating in the discussion or a zero if they did not participate. Some instructor gave a holistic grade for student's online discussion at the end of the course. According to one instructor from language education who used the strategy, "if you are grading strictly quantitatively, it is a test. I think there should be freedom in the way people discuss, as there should have freedom in the way they think." Another language education instructor grouped students in pairs at the beginning of the course, and asked them to respond to and grade each other's posting. At the end of the course, she added up the points the students received from their partners for their grade in participation.

The majority of the instructors graded student online discussion based on both quantity and quality of their postings. For instance, one instructor graded student posting each week by using 0-2, whereby 0 was for no posting, 1 was for there are some postings but not enough, while 2 was for substantial and good posting. Another instructor from language education developed a grading sheet, in which he divided the points into three categories: (1) quantity; (2) quality; and (3) the number of the discussion questions that each student suggested and chosen by the instructor for the class weekly discussion. Assessing quality of the postings was identified as the most challenging part in assessing student participation in online discussion. One instructor repeated twice that was even impossible. Other instructors made compromise by having small variance in the grades assigned to each student for his or her participation. For example, one nursing instructor gave 10 points, the full marks, to students who did a good job in the discussion, while giving 7 or 8 points for no participation or low participation. According to the aforementioned instructor who divided the participation scores into three categories, the points he gave to the quantity of the postings could differ 7 or 8 points, while the points for the quality category only differ 3 or 4 points. Also, because the quantity of student postings seemed more objective while the quality seemed more arbitrary, he had to give more values to the quantity part for the sake of fairness.

About 40% of the instructors graded student discussion participation and provided feedback to students on a weekly basis or per module/unit. According to one instructor, she graded student discussion every module because she wanted to give student feedback and let them improve. As she said, "If I only grade them at the end of the semester, what is the point? Just telling them, you screwed up?" Some instructors provided feedback but did not do that on a weekly basis. One instructor thought there was a very fine balance concerning this. According to her, "Not everyone has to be super each week. Not everyone needs a reaction for all their action."

Noticeably, an instructor from MBA program not only provided clear and comprehensive guidelines for students to participate in online discussion, but also listed detailed grading criteria, in which he categorized student participations at six levels: outstanding contributor (93-100), strong contributor (90-92.99), modest contributor (87-89.99), fair

contributor (83-86.99), poor contributor (80-82.99), non-participant (0%). He further described his expectations at each level in his course syllabus. For instance, for the outstanding contributor level, his expectation was

Contributions suggested exceptional preparation. Ideas offered were highly substantive, reflecting major insights that strongly influenced the course of the discussion. Their comments were interesting and insightful....If they had not been involved in this discussion forum its quality would have been dramatically diminished.

Relevant concerns

Concurred with the literature (e.g., Dennen, 2001), many instructors interviewed in this study showed frustration and dissatisfaction in assessing student discussion. Many of them explicitly stated that they did not know how to go around this, and acknowledged that they did not do a good job even though they have been trying hard. Their frustrations were identified associated with the following two aspects:

Unease about grading one's comment. Some instructors felt unease to grade one's comment and were concerned that their grading might stifle student discussion. As one instructor said, "I do not know how to grade one's comment...That is a brilliant comment, you got an A. You got a C....Also people will worry about if they said something that I disagree with, it will hurt their grade. This drives me really silly."

Time consuming. Many instructors complained it was too time-consuming to grade student discussion participation. One instructor stated that this was also one of the reasons why she kept the discussion only as a small portion in student's final grade (10%). As she said,

Once more, I have 50 students. How do track each of them doing in discussion forum, and track each of the points they make? This is really really good, this is not. You know, here and there, I have not figured out a way to do that. That is too time consuming that I do not have time for anything else.

Summary and Discussion

Asynchronous discussion is beneficial for online courses. All the instructors interviewed in this study agreed, including the instructor who did not require students to participate and stated that his course was not about talking but doing.

The perceived benefits of asynchronous discussion can be summarized into two levels. First, asynchronous discussion is necessary for an online course. As some instructors pointed out, many students attend online courses because they have some difficulty to study onsite (such as their job responsibilities and family commitments). Asynchronous discussion can be comparable to classroom discussion to some extent, helping them get some flavor of interaction that occurred in a face-to-face course. It also can help instructors to better assess students' learning progress and outcomes. Furthermore, as a

couple of instructors mentioned, asynchronous discussion helps differentiate an online course from a corresponding course in which each student only mainly interacts with the instructor, or a video broadcast course in which most time the communication is one way (from the instructor to the students). Second, asynchronous discussion can be advantageous for online courses. It provides flexibility for both students and instructors in terms of when and where to participate in the discussion. It also encourages more thoughtful discussion in that both instructors and students can sit back to think and review their postings carefully before they send out. Additionally, the discussion can be archived and tracked. Other benefits include helping build a learning community, allowing online students to support each other, and helping decreasing isolation.

Not all the instructors agreed to require students to participate in the discussion. The reasons that the instructors provided for not requiring students to participate were reasonable. Certainly, no one wished to be forced to “speak” as one instructor pointed out. Similarly, there was no agreement regarding to what percentage asynchronous discussion should be counted for one’s final grade. How the discussion was organized also varied in the courses examined.

None of the interviewed instructors who required students to participate in the discussion reported it was an easy job to grade students’ participation. The majority of the instructors mentioned it was time consuming and challenging, which was also part of the reasons why one instructor wanted to keep the participation as a small portion in students’ final grade and another instructor did not want to include students’ participation as aforementioned.

While some instructors attempted to be objective and fair by using a variety of strategies, most of them sounded that they were not very confident regarding whether their strategies were effective. One strategy instructors used, as aforementioned, was to keep the variance of points small among students (e.g., 10 for highest performance, 7 for lowest performance). While quite a few instructors who used this strategy sounded relatively comfortable, it can be somewhat problematic in that it seems not very fair or might be discouraging for those who contributed tremendously in the discussion. According to the interviewees, this concern was not necessary, however. The major reason they provided was that most of the students taking online courses at graduate level are adults and full-time employees. Grades were not very important for them. Noticeably, nearly all the interviewed instructors indicated that they enjoyed working with online graduate students, because the majority of them were highly self-motivated, “they were there simply because they wanted to be there”, as one instructor pointed out.

To conclude, whether we should and how to assess student participation in the discussion has been a heated topic among educators and researchers in online education (Bonk & Dennen, 2003). While there is some literature in this regard, there is a lack of empirical studies (Ho, 2002). This study was intended to add empirical evidence to this important area. Additionally, the findings of this study are expected to help online instructors, especially those new to teaching online, to gain a better understanding of issues related to this topic, thereby helping them make more informed instructional decisions. It is also the

researcher's hope that administrators and support staff could find something helpful from the study in providing support for online instructors in this regard.

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