

6-15-2019

LOWERING THE STAKES: TIPS TO ENCOURAGE STUDENT MASTERY AND DETER CHEATING

Trudian Trail-Constant
truenan.trailconstant@ucf.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/fdla-journal>

Part of the [Online and Distance Education Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Trail-Constant, Trudian (2019) "LOWERING THE STAKES: TIPS TO ENCOURAGE STUDENT MASTERY AND DETER CHEATING," *FDLA Journal*: Vol. 4 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/fdla-journal/vol4/iss1/11>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Abraham S. Fischler College of Education at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in FDLA Journal by an authorized editor of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact nsuworks@nova.edu.

COMMON ISSUES AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS FOR THE USE ASYNCHRONOUS ONLINE GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Trudian Trail-Constant
University of Central Florida
12701 Pegasus Drive Orlando, FL 32816
Trudian.TrailConstant@ucf.edu

Abstract

Online instructors worldwide often integrate online group discussions into their curriculum as studies have shown that these types of student interactions are beneficial and can have positive impacts on critical thinking, knowledge retention, and student engagement. However, the perceptions of learners towards online group discussions often fluctuate and are not always positive. This article will explore common issues learners typically encounter with online group discussions, primarily asynchronous online group discussions and provide research-based strategies to resolve them.

Introduction

Critical thinking, collaboration, and interaction are core elements of effective instruction in both traditional face-to-face and online instruction. As a result, instructors and instructional designers constantly seek out new ways to improve and enhance these skills. Based on research studies, group discussions have proven to be an ideal strategy to meet those needs. By creating opportunities for learners to connect and interact with their peers and exposing learners to alternate perceptions, group discussions create a space for deep reflection and critical thinking. (Joyner, 2012; Klemm, 2000; Cox & Cox, 2008; Hulkari & Mahlamäki-Kultanen, 2008; LaPointe & Reissetter, 2008). Furthermore, asynchronous online group discussions have grown in popularity, as they provide the same benefits of traditional group discussions along with the flexibility and convenience of a virtual environment, thereby allowing for continuous reflection and interaction to take place with no limits on time and space (Arend, 2009; Lea, 2001).

Conversely, despite the known benefits, many instructors still encounter low learner participation and engagement in asynchronous online discussions and are continuously looking for new and innovative ways to encourage students to participate out of intention instead of obligation. Past research suggests that this may be attributed to a variety of factors including low motivation, decreased self-efficacy, psychological resistance, and academic anxiety (Lee, 2013; Rahman, Yasin, Yassin, & Nordin, 2011). In this paper we will address some of these factors looking deeper into some of the issues online learners

typically encounter with online group discussion and provide research-based strategies to help resolve them.

Issue #1: Unclear Purpose

Students are more willing to participate when they understand how an activity or assignment is related to a learning experience and how it will benefit them in the future. This is no different for asynchronous online discussions. When students understand the purpose of a discussion or how it is related to a specific learning goal, they are more likely to participate (Lee, 2013; Jung, Choi, Lim, & Leem, 2002). Consequently, it is important that students are informed of the purpose and relevance of an online group discussion to a specific topic, overall course goal, and even the implications beyond the classroom.

However, before the purpose of an online group discussion can be determined, it is important that the overall learning goal of instruction also be defined. In learning, online group discussion are often used to meet one of two goals - teamwork or collaboration. Though often used interchangeably, collaboration and teamwork are not the same and have a different focus and outcome. Teamwork focuses primarily on an end goal, often with defined smaller sub-tasks that can be divided among the group members and completed to meet that goal, while, collaboration focuses primarily on the process, in which the tasks and end goal may be flexible and relies on the shared and collective input of the entire group to be defined (Brown, 2017). Though online group discussion can be useful for both teamwork and collaboration, it is important that the primary goal be clearly established as this goal affects the structure and overall impact of the online group discussion. Once this is determined, both the expectation and purpose should be communicated to the student.

Issue #2: Unclear Guidelines and Instructions

Once the learner understands the main outcome and purpose of the online group discussion the next logical step is to ensure that the learner also understands what is expected of them. Clear and concise guidelines and instructions should be provided for each online group discussion. This can be achieved with a rubric which contains details such as due dates, points associated, and rules of participation.

Expectations should also be set for student responses to ensure meaningful interactions and contributions occur (McFerrin & Christensen, 2013). For example, students can be challenged to incorporate two of the three C's listed in their response: (1) **C**omment (e.g., "I agree that... because..."; "I disagree that... because..."), (2) point of **C**onnection (e.g., "I also have read/seen/heard/thought that..."), or (3) point of **C**larification (e.g., "I wonder why/how/who/what/when/where...") (Gernsbacher, 2016). Providing clear and concise instructions and guidelines upfront allows learners to focus on their contribution to the group discussion and make connections which may inspire additional questions, thus resulting in a collaborative exchange among peers.

Issue #3: Mundane and Monotonous Discussion Questions

One of the most difficult aspects of creating online group discussions is constructing the most valuable questions or structure. The online group discussion structure is of paramount importance as it sets the foundation for the entire online group discussion and may directly influence the impact on learning. Unfortunately, the highest cognitive levels are rarely achieved and poor group discussion structure is often a contributing factor (Reyes-Foster & DeNoyelles, 2016).

Open-ended and topical discussions are among the most widely used structures for online group discussions, however, learners typically respond to these types of questions with a simple statement of agreement, which is ineffective in stimulating a collaborative group. Consequently, instructors must consider incorporating alternative methods to open-ended questions such as debates, case-based scenarios or wordclouds, which are better suited to activate higher levels of critical thinking (Darabi, Arrastia, Nelson, Cornille, & Liang, 2011; Gernsbacher, 2016; Reyes-Foster & DeNoyelles, 2016; Richardson & Ice, 2010).

Also, if a single course is comprised of multiple online group discussions, it is important that a variety of structures be employed to help break up the monotony and keep the learner interested and motivated to participate. Integrating multimedia and visual elements may also increase student interest (Joyner, 2012).

Issue # 4: Forced Participation

Perhaps the one of the most contentious topics as it relates to online group discussion or online assignments in general is forced participation. Learners are less likely to participate in certain behaviors, such as course assignments if there are no associated extrinsic motivator or incentive, such as a grade (Docan, 2006). Though the idea of graded online group discussions on its own is not a negative concept, it may have negative impacts on the way students participate and respond to them.

For example, the most popular method used to grade online group discussions is the give students credit for an initial post and one or more responses to their peers. Unfortunately, if a learner does not have a meaningful opinion to the discussion question, they are still required to respond as their grade is directly dependent upon their initial response. This may result in student responses that are simplistic and inauthentic that may compromise the overall quality of the discussion and its ability to facilitate meaningful collaboration and interaction among the group's members (Morrison, 2012). Research has shown that responses to other students are far more common than original postings (Orlando, 2017). This then begs the question, should learners be forced to provide an original post, if they do not have one?

A potential solution to this issue is to encourage participation rather than force it. For example, learners may be graded on their overall contribution to a discussion, which considers the quality of all contributions made to the discussion without requiring each student to make an "initial" post. Instructors may also consider, giving learners a choice

to select from a group of predetermined discussion topics/structures, which encourages the learner to participate in topics of interest to them to which they are more likely to participate.

Ultimately, the best way to encourage student participation will be to ask the right question, so consider the learning outcome of the discussion and pose questions that will stimulate interest in learners. Keep in mind that depending on the topic you may also want to consider allowing students to post anonymously.

Issue #5: Lack of Participation

Despite the known benefits on online group discussions, one of the most prevalent issues that instructors struggle with is a lack of student participation. In group discussions both face-to-face and online, it is commonly observed that a subset of students will dominate the conversation and others will be hesitant to participate (Orlando, 2017; Morrison, 2012). Though this small subset of students may make relevant contributions to the overall success of the group discussions, it may also hinder the other individual group members' ability to reap the benefits associated through active participation.

One way to encourage full member participation in an online group discussion is by using roles. Role assignments have been found to be beneficial in collaborative scenario-based discussions, having positive impacts on the activation of higher levels of cognition (Darabi *et al.*, 2011). Specific roles, such as that of a group leader is especially important when the goal of an online group discussion is focused on teamwork, as it ensures that proper organization is provided and that each member is held accountable for their role in the completion of the team's tasks. Table 1.1 contains a list of potential roles and a brief description about each one.

Table 1.1 Role Descriptions

Role	Description
Facilitator/Initiator	This role helps to initiate the conversation by posting the first comment, keep it going by encouraging others to participate by asking follow-up questions and ensure that the conversation stays on task.
Connector	This role helps to make connections between the discussion topic and the overall learning objective, course content and even the overall course goal. They may also help to highlight connections among student contributions to the current post.
Explorer/Innovator	The participant in this role will seek to go out and find facts and resources that are relevant to the current discussion.
Innovator	This role encourages innovative ideas and thinking. To do this they may often go out and find relevant

	resources and bring back unique ideas and perspectives to the group. This may be combined with the explorer.
Summarizer/Assembler	In this role, the participant will create a summary of the groups' thoughts and findings. They may also help to bring the conversation to a close and highlight key take ways. May be combined with the role of facilitator.
Fixer/Quality Control	This role can be twofold. 1. They can ensure harmony within the group and work to resolve any issues that may come up. (2) This participant may also remove offensive posts or ensure proper grammar is used. This role may be especially useful when a group is required to present a final product.
Current Events Contributor	This participant seeks to apply the current discussion to any relevant current event.
Devil's Advocate	In this role, the participant will help to raise counter arguments (asking "what-if questions) to get the participants to explore differing viewpoints.
Wild-card	In this role, the participant will fill in as needed

Note. Source for table adapted from "Using "roles" in your online discussions", by North, S. (2017). Retrieved from <https://cuonlineblog.ucdenver.edu/faculty/using-roles-in-your-online-discussions>

Conclusion

There are many contributing factors that may affect a learner's participation in and perceptions of online group discussions and additional research is needed to find the most successful formula to address these factors. However, existing research has already provided crucial guidelines that can be used as a starting point. The primary recommendation to instructors and instructional designers is to continue to seek out creative methods that not only encourage learners to exchange and explore ideas, but also motivate them to participate and interact with their peers. When met in tandem, motivation along with effective collaboration contributes to the creation of unique learning spaces in which crucial thinking skills are developed and nurtured that will be useful beyond the boundaries of the virtual classroom.

References

- Arend, B. (2009). Encouraging critical thinking in online threaded discussions. *Journal of Educators Online*, 6 (1), 1-23.
- Brown, E. (2017). Collaboration vs. Teamwork: What's the Difference. Retrieved from <https://www.eztalks.com/unified-communications/collaboration-vs-teamwork-what-is-the-difference.html>

- Darabi, A., Arrastia, M. C., Nelson, D. W., Cornille, T., & Liang, X. (2011). Cognitive presence in asynchronous online learning: A comparison of four discussion strategies. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 27(3), 216-227. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2729.2010.00392.x
- Docan, T. N. (2006). Positive and negative incentives in the classroom: An analysis of grading systems and student motivation. *Journal of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 6(2), 21-40. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ854925.pdf>
- Gernsbacher, M. A. (2016). Five Tips for Improving Online Discussion Boards. Retrieved from <https://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/five-tips-for-improving-online-discussion-boards>
- Joyner, F. (2012). Increasing student interaction and the development of critical thinking in asynchronous threaded discussions. *Journal of Teaching and Learning with Technology*, 1(1), 35-41. Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/jotlt/article/view/2041>
- Jung, I., Choi, S., Lim, C., & Leem, J. (2002). Effects of different types of interaction on learning achievement, satisfaction and participation in web-based instruction. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 39(2), 153-162.
- Lea, M. (2001). Computer conferencing and assessment: New ways of writing in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 26(2), 163-182.
- Lee, S. W. (2013). Investigating students' learning approaches, perceptions of online discussions, and students' online and academic performance. *Computers & Education*, 68, 345-352. doi:10.1016/j.compedu.2013.05.019
- McFerrin, K., & Christensen, P. (2013). Developing a positive asynchronous online discussion forum. In R. McBride & M. Searson (Eds.), *Proceedings of Society for Information Technology & Teacher Education International Conference 2013* (pp. 769-774). Chesapeake, VA: AACE.
- Morrison, D. (2012). *3 Reasons Students Don't Participate in Online Discussions*. Retrieved from <https://onlinelearninginsights.wordpress.com/2012/09/03/3-reasons-why-students-dont-participate-in-online-discussions/>
- North, S. (2017). Using "roles" in your online discussions. Retrieved from <https://cuonlineblog.ucdenver.edu/faculty/using-roles-in-your-online-discussions>
- Orlando, J. (2017). What Research Tells Us About Online Discussion. Retrieved from <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/online-education/research-tells-us-online-discussion/>

Rahman, S., Yasin, R. M., Yassin, S. F. M., & Nordin, N. M. (2011). Examining psychological aspects in online discussion. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 15, 3168–3172. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2011.04.266>.

Richardson, J. C., & Ice, P. (2010). Investigating students' level of critical thinking across instructional strategies in online discussions. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 13(1), 52-59. doi:10.1016/j.iheduc.2009.10.009

Reyes-Foster, B., & DeNoyelles, A. (2016). Influence of Word Clouds on Critical Thinking in Online Discussions: A Content Analysis. *Journal of Teaching and Learning With Technology*, 5(1), 16-32. <https://doi.org/10.14434/jotlt.v5n1.13805>