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"Two Roads Diverged in a Wood":
Productive Digression in Asynchronous Discussion
by Joseph Ugoretz

It is a moment every classroom teacher has encountered: In the middle of a class discussion of a text, a concept, a method—some element of the course material that *must* be covered—a student raises an unrelated (or only tangentially related) point that threatens to derail the entire discussion. The new point may be fascinating or intriguing, or so appealing as a line of thought or discussion that it is difficult to ignore. In fact, this unrelated point is generally *more* fascinating than the required course material to the student who brings it up. But there are the pressures of time and scheduling, and of covering that required material. Two roads (or more—sometimes as many roads as there are students in the room) diverge, and in order to achieve our goals for the course, we have to choose one of them. The one we choose is rarely the "road less traveled by," the digression that we necessarily neglect.

This choice reflects instructor training, evaluations of instructional design, and teachers' own goals and preferences in terms of classroom management, all of which focus on controlling or limiting digression. This framework is often essential in the face-to-face classroom. If instructors followed every conversational thread or pursued every digression, any class session, whether a 50-minute meeting or a five-hour workshop, could be consumed with irrelevancies.

The online classroom that includes asynchronous discussion is not subject to the same kind of time constraints. Nonetheless, most guides to conducting asynchronous discussion still treat digression as a distraction, a problem that interferes with communication and diminishes comprehension of the course material. Cantor (1992) has found that learners expect instructors to ensure that discussions adhere to a specific topic and direction. Romiszowski (1995) considers asynchronous discussion especially susceptible to digression and calls for instructors to exercise careful structure and control. Beaudin ([1999]) moves from these requirements directly to an examination of specific methods for keeping discussions focused on specific topics in order to avoid digression. Albion and Ertmer discuss the instructor's "key role in *managing* the discussion: keeping the conversation focused while also moving it forward. Instructors must constantly be on guard for topic drift" ([2004], under "Sustaining online discussions"). Even in promoting a "guide on the side" role for instructors in asynchronous discussion, Collison et al. discuss the "central responsibility as moderator to maintain clarity of the discussion's direction and continually sharpen its focus" (2000, 129).

Since 2001, I have researched the value of asynchronous discussion for student learning, with the support of the [Visible Knowledge Project]. Many of my observations about the value of asynchronous discussion were previously documented by other researchers. I have found, for example, that asynchronous discussion can involve more students, more completely and actively, than traditional face-to-face discussions. I have found that the persistent textual record left by asynchronous discussion affords new opportunities for students to reflect and reevaluate their opinions and ideas and those of their classmates. I have found that this same textual record is an invaluable tool for the scholarship of teaching and learning. But beyond these advantages, I have also found that the different structuring of time in asynchronous discussions can alter the way that digression functions, transforming supposedly problematic diversions into engaging and productive learning tools.

Positive Effects of Digression

Rather than working as a distraction or a waste of time, digression in asynchronous discussion can be a productive process, with positive effects for student satisfaction and higher-order learning. A unique benefit of

asynchronous discussion is that students have the opportunity to wander from the topic without consuming all of the available minutes of a class session. Without the pressures inherent to a traditional class period, instructors can permit this wandering digression to occur instead of bringing the focus back to the original goal of "answering the question."

For example, in one discussion board thread from my online Science Fiction class, I asked students to discuss the definition of a "person" (Exhibit 1). They began with this prompt and made connections to their reading, their experiences in other classes, and their lives outside school. The discussion moved to questions involving the differences between animals and humans, the existence of the soul, and a totally new topic: the influence of the environment on behavior and character. Similarly, another discussion board thread, beginning with a question about what kinds of books children should read, took a new path into a discussion of the benefits of television (Exhibit 2), and a third thread about the importance of computers in society moved into musical instruments, music, and gender relations (Exhibit 3).

By allowing or even encouraging digression—by permitting students to take the "road not taken"—instructors facilitate a process whereby students may make new and original connections arising from their own thinking and discovery processes. These connections can be particularly valid for students, who are able to make deeper, more personal connections to the course material through exploring their own pathways. Openness to digression can also promote more enthusiastic interaction, especially student-student interaction.

This process allows students to engage with the subject to a significant and long-lasting degree in their lives outside the classroom, as my students have confirmed in survey responses (Exhibit 4). In answer to the questions, "What was the best part of this class? What made it so good? What could have made it better?" one student responded, "The best part of this class was the openness with which you could discuss and add your view of topics. There was a huge sense of acceptance and understanding, of others trying to understand your views and working to explain their own. Through such openness, new views, ideas and even facts were shared, helping to lend a greater understanding not only to SF [science fiction] but also to life in general."

On an end-of-semester anonymous survey administered in my online Science Fiction class (Exhibit 5), students further reported that their learning in asynchronous discussions permeated their conversations with friends and family and influenced their research and ideas in other classes (Exhibit 6). In response to the questions, "When you read your classmates' posts on the Discussion Boards, what did you gain? When you responded to them, and they responded to you, did you think about those responses when you were not online?" one student commented, "I definitely did think about the responses on the board when I was not on line. There were times when certain things happened and I would find myself saying 'oh, this is what such and such was talking about.'" Another student noted, "The Discussion Board made me think more about the subject, and oftentimes I brought it up around the dinner table, or discussed it with my friends or my sixteen-year-old son."

Discussion of this kind is uniquely suited to learning that "advances through collaborative social interaction and the social construction of knowledge" (Brown, Collins, and Duguid 1989). Digressions allow students, as a community of learners, to take ownership of their learning process. They gain the peer approval and movement toward intellectual consensus that allow them actively to practice and emulate, rather than just passively observe, the techniques of expert learners (Donovan, Bransford, and Pellegrino 1999).

Challenges of Digression as Active Learning

It is also important to recognize that many students, especially adult learners with busy professional lives, may experience some initial frustration with the multitude of directions asynchronous discussion can take. Students whose purpose is to assimilate rapidly and efficiently the information required for a certain grade may become uncomfortable and resistant to discussions that are open to digression. Often, this resistance is actually a measure of the extent to which digressions push students to become involved in their learning as active participants, rather than passive receptors. This type of learning is by its nature less efficient and more

challenging, and students need time and support to adjust to this difference.

When discussion is asynchronous, however, students can take that time, reading and responding to different threads and themes as they occur and spark student interest. In response to the survey question about the discussion board, one student responded, "Yes, ironically enough, the discussion board was the best and the most frustrating part of the class. I definitely enjoyed reading other people's opinions and looked forward to them responding to mine. The variety of opinions was amazing. It really teaches people how important respect and tolerance are." While frustrating, the exchange of ideas involved in the discussion's digression was important for this student's learning. Some degree of frustration, some discomfort with a new and more challenging learning style, is inevitable. However, if the frustration increases to a point where it hinders participation, instructors will need to step in.

In advocating more freedom for digression in asynchronous discussion, I am not advocating a formless chaos. Netiquette and civil discourse are still necessary, along with some limitation on the social aspect of communication. However, since students feel ownership and authority over their community in asynchronous discussion, these necessary limits are likely to be enforced by students themselves. Furthermore, because nonproductive threads in the asynchronous environment do not entail a sacrifice of classroom time, they can be ignored very successfully. There is, therefore, a process of natural selection in asynchronous discussion in which students disregard uninteresting or unchallenging threads, while threads that "survive" become correspondingly stronger.

For example, in a forum about time travel to the past, a thread about seeing Queen Elizabeth elicited only one (factual and biographical) response. Two other threads in the same forum, however—one about traveling to the time of Jesus, and one about seeing the building of the pyramids—generated extensive, wide-ranging discussions. In the first of these threads, the discussion evolved into speculation and argument about the appropriate place of religion in the study and writing of history. In the thread that began with the pyramids, students moved the discussion to issues of Afrocentrism and the African diaspora. The digressions, not the starting places, made certain threads stronger, and this particular group of students directed their energies to the threads that were particularly relevant to their own learning and interests.

Encouraging Productive Digression

Some practical considerations are necessary in order to create discussion environments that encourage productive digression. These considerations include decisions about the overall goals of discussion, the design of discussion prompts to encourage those goals, structured rewards for participation that meets those goals, and a "restrained presence" (Vandergrift 2002) on the part of instructors.

The first step is for instructors to be clear about, and to make clear to students, the intended goals of each discussion. In many online courses, the discussion board is used as a place for the instructor to communicate content—as a secondary or slightly less formal lecture area. In other courses, the discussion board is a place for students to demonstrate their mastery of content—to submit assignments, answers, and brief (or not so brief) essays. These are acceptable uses for the discussion board, and in some courses they may be completely desirable. But when the discussion board is used for either of these purposes, digression not only will be less likely to appear, it also will be of less value when it does. Productive digression can have positive effects for students only when the discussion board is an element in a constructivist learning environment in which students are encouraged to interrogate material, interact with one another, and form and critique hypotheses (Brooks and Brooks 1993).

If the goal of using discussion is to encourage constructivist learning, and that goal is clear to both the instructor and students, then the next step is to design discussion board prompts or questions to reflect that goal. Questions for which the instructor already has an answer that students should seek to provide, while requiring a certain command of course material, inhibit opportunities for students to make new connections. Questions that are challenging and open-ended, that directly ask students to make and evaluate connections,

and that provide room for multiple answers, on the other hand, stimulate productive digression (Bender 2003).

In addition to setting the preliminary circumstances for productive digression, instructors need to develop policies to reward, not punish, this type of participation. Grade points or credit for discussion postings must acknowledge a variety of acceptable responses. Instructors must provide any rubric for awarding these points to students at the beginning of the course, and instructors should give equal weight to all acceptable types of response ([Exhibit 7](#)). In addition, they should inform students clearly that quantity as well as quality is important (although my experience has shown that it is best to avoid quantifying a specific number of required posts—such a requirement often limits posts to that number and no more).

Finally, once the goals are defined, the environment designed, and the rewards enumerated, instructors have to carefully limit their own teaching presence in discussions in order to allow productive digressions to occur. The most appropriate role for an instructor in a discussion designed to encourage productive and useful digression is "restrained presence" (Vandergrift [2002](#))—to always think twice before stepping in. An excess of teaching presence will limit student-student interaction and impose a predetermined framework that digression can allow students to escape. Of course, this is not to suggest that instructors should be absent from the course. The teaching presence in content and evaluation areas, as well as in discussion boards reserved for teacher-student question-and-answer sessions, is still vital. However, it is important for instructors to be aware that these instructor-led areas are separate from the discussion board as a whole and operate with separate goals.

Conclusion

My own research has focused mainly on online courses that meet completely asynchronously. But my findings on digression also have implications for face-to-face classes. When asynchronous discussion is used as an adjunct to the face-to-face class, the limitations of time imposed by the class schedule can be avoided at least partially. Discussion boards used in conjunction with face-to-face meetings, either as an addition to them or as a replacement in a hybrid or blended environment, can allow some of the same benefits of digression as it evolves in a fully online class.

These benefits, when discussion boards permit them and when instructors encourage them, can be quite powerful for student learning. When teachers and students, like Frost's narrator in "The Road Not Taken," encounter two roads that diverge, asynchronous discussion allows them to avoid being "sorry that I could not travel both / and be one traveler." In asynchronous discussion, it is possible to diverge, to digress, and to acknowledge all the different kinds of "traveling" that are involved in learning.

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