How to Double or Triple Student Participation/Engagement in Threaded Class Discussions Without Being Coercive or Punitive

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How to Double or Triple Student Participation/Engagement in Threaded Class Discussions without Being Coercive or Punitive

by
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The disadvantages of asynchronous discussion are downplayed when the discussion prompts and questions are well-constructed and stimulating, the facilitating instructor has some skill in tending discussion, and there is a clear beginning and ending schedule for the asynchronous discussion, with students willing to post throughout the week rather than all jumping in during the last two days of a week. (Ko & Rossen, 2010, p.321)

Introduction

Online education has proven it is not just another educational fad as the number of fully-online courses and even degree programs keep growing every year. As more and more students, especially the adult learners, enroll in these courses due to the seemingly appealing convenience and flexibility, more and more faculty will be asked to teach online. Dixson (2010) opined that it is thus imperative for faculty to understand what engages students in order to provide effective online learning environments. Regardless of whether one is teaching live in person, fully online, or in a blended/hybrid format, there is common teacher behavior in all three instructional delivery formats. A conscientious and student-centered professor in a live traditional classroom will most likely also be a conscientious online faculty member who is student centered. It follows that if a skilled educator who has honed his or her craft can adeptly facilitate a live classroom discussion, he or she can also do so in the asynchronous, text-based format of the online environment with some simple commonsense strategies (Hill, 2010).

Two Schools of Thought

Online, threaded class discussions have great possibilities for faculty to promote reflective critical thinking skills. While the classroom discussion board ostensibly tries to
replicate the in-class instructor- and student-led conversations found on a typical college campus, it is viewed differently by some faculty. Nowadays, with the worry of microaggressions sprouting up on campus, concerns about political correctness, and the need to issue trigger warnings when discussing uncomfortable subject matter, the threaded class discussion can provide a much-needed respite from the live classroom. Moreover, instead of blurting aloud a response to a professor’s question, the need to thoughtfully compose one’s response in a written posting encourages students to utilize higher-order thinking skills.

A number of faculty may look at the online discussion board as the students’ open forum and steer clear from it due to possible fear of either stirring the conversation or conversely silencing some students’ opinions. There is concern that perhaps the views expressed might offend or contradict the professor; so typically faculty might just monitor the often-robust conversations and back and forth exchanges from the sidelines. The other school of thought is to actively participate and mix it up with the students online, playing devil’s advocate and raising points to consider and advance the conversation. Additionally, contributing publicly or replying back privately to a posting or a peer response from another student helps maintain the overall online learning community and promote civil discourse. It also lets the students know that the faculty member on the other end of the computer screen is not only reading but engaging with them.

**Instructor Presence**

Long before there was ever any online education, Astin (1993) in his seminal work expressed that frequent interaction with faculty is more strongly related to satisfaction with college than any other type of involvement. Twenty-three years later, Ko & Rossen (2010) advised that the online faculty member “must establish a presence and rapport in your
classroom that are evident to students as soon as they walk through the online classroom door” (p. 299). This presence can be initiated prior to the actual start of the semester with a simple introductory welcome letter, and then perpetuated in a number of ways by utilizing the various course tool features that are available. These include responding to students’ course messages and email inquiries in a timely fashion, posting course announcements, updating the homepage, maintaining the online course grade book, grading and returning students’ work with prompt feedback, scheduling synchronous class sessions, holding online office hours and of course through faculty participation on the discussion board.

**Specific Strategies**

In the Blackboard Learning Management System (LMS), one has the option on the discussion board under edit “forum settings” to use either “the standard view” defaulted option or to select “participants must create a thread in order to view other threads in this forum.” Choosing the second option really forces the students to “elevate their games” so to speak before they click submit. Other strategies would be to have two-week class discussions where students post one week and then reply to class peers in the following week instead of being required to do both within the very same week. The instructor can also provide a choice of discussion prompts for each threaded class discussion and consider publishing them ahead of time along with a calendar of when both the substantive posting and the minimum required peer replies are due. However, only the current discussion board should be kept open. In other words, if one sets up the weeks to start on a Monday and end on the following Sunday evening, then the practice should be to go in on Monday morning each week and either assess the students and/or lock that discussion board before opening the new one. This keeps the students focused on just the current class discussion without working ahead and allows the faculty member some degree of flexibility to add a prompt
related to a current event ripped from the headlines. It would also be a good strategy to count the initial threaded discussion for less, gradually raising the stakes a point or two over the next two discussions as the students acclimate to the format.

It is equally important to encourage the students to first compose outside of the discussion forum and then “cut and paste” the edited/proofread passages directly into the text box. Do not allow file attachments (one can easily do this via the forum settings) that students have to open in order to read. Remind the students to cite from the required course textbooks and any other outside reference sources to support their assertions, but also not to be sticklers for form and style issues. Allow the students to use personal pronouns and not rigidly adhere to APA form and style in this forum as opposed to in the more formal major written assignments as their content should be of the utmost importance in such postings. In live classroom discussions, most faculty typically do not require their students to answer questions aloud in complete sentences or with perfect subject-verb and/or pronoun-antecedent agreement. In fact, in a traditional classroom students rarely even get to read their classmates’ writing.

In an online course, students post and reply at all hours of day and night. If this course requirement is to be taken seriously, the forums should be a safe zone for the free exchange of ideas and diverse points of view. Requiring students who are practitioners from all across the nation working in different types of public and private settings, to respond to well-thought out prompts enables them to take the academic theory from the course readings and apply it to their own unique settings. That can significantly impact the students’ overall learning.

When grading the bi-weekly discussions, it is important to proffer specific academic feedback (more than “good ideas” or “great suggestion”) referencing the students’ own words rather than just assigning the quantitative score. Also, instructors should try to not always
publicly comment or reply back to the same students every week. This can be challenging when some students consistently post earlier than others. For some of the postings, instructors should consider tackling particularly probing questions themselves and posting their own responses for the students to see and read (after the students submit their own postings), and also allow/encourage them to reply back. Furthermore, they should specify their expectations regarding class participation on the discussion board in the course syllabus and then reinforce them in a course orientation held during the first week. That can be provided synchronously and recorded for those who cannot participate live. It can also be prerecorded and sent out as a video link. There should be no mystery as to what is expected from the students throughout the semester or on how the students will be evaluated.

Conclusion

If faculty make it a point during the first week or two of the semester to both model and encourage participation, it will make all the difference for the duration of the semester. Faculty commitment to engagement, specifically on the class discussion board, will have a domino effect on their students’ behavior and lead to a rewarding online course.

References


