

Designing Asynchronous Online Discussions for Quality Interaction in Asynchronous Online Courses

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Often I am asked by prospective students, “how do instructors interact with students in asynchronous online courses?” This is an excellent question. Simply put, “interaction is commonly understood as actions among individuals” (Abrami, Bernard, Bures, Borokhovski, & Tamim, 2011, p. 86). In online courses, interaction occurs in three primary ways: student-student, student-instructor, and/or student-content (Abrami et al., 2011; Bernard et al., 2009; Moore, 1989). In asynchronous courses, asynchronous online discussions (AODs), which are sometimes referred to as asynchronous online conferences or forums, play an important role in fostering interaction. Although some view online discussions or forums as “primitive,” as Pendry and Salvatore (2015) noted: “Dwarfed in recent years by more prominent social media giants such as Facebook and Twitter, [online discussions] appear anecdotally to have assumed an unfashionable status in many organizations’ eyes, being viewed as a primitive form of communication whose time has passed” (p. 218), AODs remain a significant medium where interaction happens, particularly in asynchronous online courses.

Cultivating interaction in online courses is very important—and not only because students want it. Bernard et al. (2009) found that interaction positively affects student learning. However, they cautioned that instructors should not focus on increasing the *quantity* of interactions, but rather on increasing the *quality* of interactions. So, how can instructors increase the quality of interactions in asynchronous online courses through AODs? Below are some suggestions.

PROVIDE STRUCTURE

Gilbert and Dabbagh (2005) conducted a study examining how the established protocols for participating in and grading of AODs promoted meaningful learning. They found “three elements of structuring online discussions that significantly impacted meaningful discourse ... [which] were, (a) facilitator guidelines, (b) evaluation rubrics; (c) posting protocol items” (p. 16). Similarly, Salter and Conneely (2015) discovered that structured forums were more engaging than nonstructured ones in a study of undergraduate students that compared participation in and student perceptions of structured and unstruc-

tured AODs. Therefore, it is important for instructors to be clear about the expectations for students' and instructors' own participation in AODs, as well to describe how students will be graded. Additionally, instructors should learn about how to craft good questions (Milman, 2009), as well as a variety of ways to structure discussions so they go beyond simple Q&A. For example, instructors can incorporate compare/contrast, debate, and cases, just to name a few different types of strategies instructors might use.

REFLECT ON TYPES AND QUALITY OF POSTS

Clarke and Bartholomew (2015) conducted a study using an analytical tool to investigate participation in AODs by instructors. Instructor interactions in the AODs involved postings that were categorized as "cognitive," "teaching," and/or "social" (p. 6). In cognitive posts, instructors asked questions that required students to delve deeper into the topic. On the other hand, teaching posts involved instructor elaboration and clarification about the course content/topic studied in the AOD. In social posts, instructors shared their personal experiences and provided encouragement. Yet, it is important to emphasize that quality was more important than quantity of posts. For example, "instructors who posted less frequently but with more purpose had a higher level of critical thinking in their discussions" (p. 18). Therefore, instructors should think thoughtfully about the quality, as well as the type of posts (i.e., cognitive, teaching, or social) they make to promote interaction.

ENCOURAGE CONVERSATIONAL STYLE

Fear and Erickson-Brown (2014) conducted a literature review of AODs. In addition to substantiating the suggestions above, they also recommended using a conversational style in the AODs, which "means writing

in conversational form and style; using personal anecdotes and affective verbal immediacy; the expression of appropriate emotion through the use of capitals, bold, italics; emoticons; and so on" (p. 25). This recommendation is in line with Clark and Mayer's (2016) personalization and embodiment principles that suggests that "people learn better when e-learning environments use a conversational style of writing or speaking ... polite wording for feedback and advice, and a friendly human voice" (p. 179).

INCORPORATE STUDENT FACILITATION OF DISCUSSIONS

Several researchers have touted the benefits of student-facilitated AODs (Milman, 2009; Milman, Hillarious, & Walker, 2012; Schindler & Burkholder, 2014). Student-facilitation of AODs involves students serving in the facilitator role for the discussion. It is important to ensure that student-facilitators are informed of the expectations and grading criteria, but also that they are set up for success by being provided content and discussion questions ahead of time. Also, it is critical for student-facilitators to know who to contact for support (even if to ask for advice about how to respond to a peer's post).

AODs can be a positive medium for cultivating the three main types of interaction in online courses. Structure, type and quality of posts, as well as the style and roles that instructors and students take all play roles in the success of AOD in asynchronous online education.

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