

Putting Asynchronous Discussions Under the Lens

Improving Discussions Through Student Examination

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When I moved from teaching face-to-face classes to teaching online classes I tried to cling to the practices that had been successful for me when working with students in real time. One of these practices was holding class discussions. By engaging students in talk, I knew that they were active participants in the class, they were coconstructing knowledge through interactions with others, and they were visibly demonstrat-

ing their ability to think and process the topics they were learning. It seemed common sense to engage students in similar discursive opportunities in their online learning experiences. Turning to asynchronous discussions is an accepted practice in online learning. King (2002) designated essential elements of success in online learning. Among the six criteria she lists, one of the most important is facilitating effective dialogue among classmates. Carr-Chellman and Duchastel (2000) assert that asynchronous discussions should be a feature as they believe that students "learn as much from one another's experiences as they may from a textbook" (p. 236).

What I did not realize, however, when bringing this pedagogical practice into the online environment, is that asynchronous discussions would not just enrich my student's learning of the content, but give both of us the opportunity to deepen our understanding about the connection between discussions and engagement, reflection, and learning. By putting asynchronous discussions under a lens and closely examining this practice, my students and I were able to develop an awareness that is not always afforded by fast-paced real time face-to-face discussions. I had thought that I was just taking class discussions online, but realized that asynchronous discussions are not just different but also provide an opportunity for stu-



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dents to learn more about the material, more about themselves, and more about learning.

ASYNCHRONOUS DISCUSSIONS AND ONLINE LEARNING

Asynchronous discussions have been an accepted part of online learning for a variety of reasons. One of the most common explanations is they allow us to know that our students are engaged in the material. In a face-to-face class we can use more informal measures, such as eye contact, body language, and facial expressions to gauge student engagement; in an online class where these are all absent, one thing an instructor relies upon are asynchronous discussions to measure that students are actively engaged in learning. Thomas (2002) saw online discussions as the perfect forum for viewing students' engagement through their level of participation in these discussions. Rovai (2007) stated that the goal in online courses is to create a learning environment that motivates students to be active learners, participate in positive social interaction, and be engaged in the course. Using asynchronous discussions in an online course is one way we know our students are engaged and we know that when they are engaged with the material their learning will be more successful.

We also use asynchronous discussions because we believe that through these discursive interactions students are more likely to understand the material at deeper levels. It is one thing to process in the material but another thing to engage in it at higher levels. Peterson and Slotta (2009) emphasized that the development of communities through writing is a significant form of communication in an online course because the relationship between writing and active thinking can lead to more powerful learning.

Finally, the fact that asynchronous discussions are written, typically drawn out over time, and exist long after real time dis-

cussions, provides the opportunity for students to use this forum to engage in more meaningful reflection about a topic (Harsim, 2000). Peterson and Slotta (2009) maintain that writing communities are a significant form of communication and even can be seen as a pedagogical advantage as both the students and the instructor have increased accessibility to all students' thinking about the topics. By having more time and seeing all members' participation in a discussion we are also given the opportunity to reflect upon these discussions. This reflective piece is exactly what I highlighted with my class in order to achieve a deeper understanding of not just the material, but also the process of discussion as well.

ENGAGING STUDENTS IN EXAMINATION

As my experience with online teaching progressed, I learned more and more about asynchronous discussions. I revised my rubrics to establish clearer expectations for involvement. I posted exemplars of what good discussions looked like. I analyzed my questions and prompts to make sure they facilitated substantive conversations. I gave student's choices of topics and questions. I participated regularly in discussions and modeled the types of interactions I desired of my students. I gave detailed feedback about participation and quality of responses. I was working *really* hard—but I realized that *I* was doing all of the hard work to ensure successful discussions. While I am not averse to working hard, it soon became obvious to me that it was not *my* learning that I was trying to improve and if I really wanted the students to benefit from the rewards of this discursive community, I needed to find a way to get them to share in the responsibility of improving online discussions.

It was this goal that led me to create two assignments that I creatively called "Threaded Discussion Reflection One" and

"Threaded Discussion Reflection Two" (see Appendix A for both of these assignments). This assignment took place in a graduate level course for teachers getting their master's in education. The course was an 8-week literacy course called "Connecting Reading and Writing for Student Success." The course was delivered through the Blackboard 9.0 learning management system. In the syllabus I explained to the students that being part of a discourse community is part of the learning process and that the purpose of these two assignments was to reflect on how engaging in asynchronous discussions would help them become more thoughtful, more informed, and more reflective online students. The first assignment came at the end of Module 1 (a 2-week module) where students were asked to reflect on their participation in one of the four discussions and set some discursive goals. Students had been broken into grade level groups for these discussions. The group membership stayed the same throughout the course and the groups averaged between five and eight students.

The students were asked to respond to a template that prompted them to engage in an *individual analysis*, *group analysis*, and *goal setting*. For the individual analysis the students were asked to think about the *quantity* of their posts. Specifically, they were asked to tabulate how many posts they contributed to the discussion as well as the length of these posts. Students were also asked to look at the *quality* of their own contributions. First, I asked them to look at their initial post to the discussion. I asked them if this post connected to the reading, to their own experiences, and if others responded to this post. Then I asked students to look at their comments to others in the group. When looking at their contributions, I asked them to analyze if these comments were supportive, challenging, extending, and how these contributed to the group. I also asked them to

engage in a group analysis. First, I had them examine one discussion and look at the *quantity*: how long was the discussion, how many people posted, who posted the most/least and to look for overall posting patterns in the group. I also asked them to look at the *quality* of this discussion; specifically how the group's posts contributed to the student's understanding, whose posts stimulated the most thought, and with whose posts did the student connect. Finally, I asked them to set two *discussion goals* for themselves. I asked them to establish one goal for their initial posts and one goal for their contribution to the group. I wanted them to really focus on how they could improve on their initial posts and how they could stimulate more discussion through this post.

With this analysis and their personal goals to work on I then asked the students to engage in discussions again in Module 3. In this 2-week module, students again engaged in four different threaded discussions. At the end of this module, I asked them to go back to one of the threaded discussions that they participated in, reread this discussion, and engage in an individual, group, and overall analysis. The individual and group analysis in this assignment was the same from the previous task. In addition, however, students were asked to reflect upon the goals that they set for themselves in the first assignment and if they were accomplished. In addition, students were asked how this activity influenced their about this type of discursive community.

Having the students engage in this task and reflection put them in the driver's seat of improving these asynchronous discussions. They showed me that they could closely examine their own participation, set goals for themselves, and engage in meaningful reflection that made these discursive interactions more effective and more powerful.

ASSIGNMENT 1: ESTABLISHING THE WHAT/HOW/WHEN OF DISCUSSIONS

After the first round of reflections some clear themes emerged from the students. Most interestingly the students reflected on *what* made an effective post, *how* group process worked most effectively, and *when* the discussions were most productive. First, students were able to clearly articulate *what* made an effective initial post. According to students, productive initial posts made meaningful connections, offered insights, extended the conversation, and included references. Many students recognized that sometimes the initial posts seemed to focus too much on the prompt and not enough on connecting his/her initial post to the existing conversation. For example, one student noticed that often in the first hours of a discussion multiple people would post parallel responses to the question similar to multiple people talking at the same time but not listening to each other. Some students made goals for themselves to read the first few posts first, before constructing his or her initial response—that way they would be building on a conversation rather than just adding another solo voice. Many students also mentioned that including a question in his or her initial post would stimulate further discussion. They reported that often they waited for the instructor to pose the questions and neglected that they could also probe for information and push a conversation deeper through his/her own questioning of the group. Asking more questions and challenging themselves to dig deeper in these initial posts were the two most common goals established by the students. One student commented, “Ending with a question not only would provoke discussion but would also demonstrate that I am actively thinking about the material and not just trying to get the assignment done.”

The students were also able to articulate *how* groups functioned. Many students believed that their contributions were supportive and offered encouragement. When students engaged in the group analysis it became very evident who were the “big” posters and who did not post enough. This disparity in posts led to many group goals about spacing out posts by different people. Also, the group analysis enabled students to notice who connected with who and why. By mapping out these interaction patterns students were much more aware of how groups function in online discursive environments and how some members tended to carry more weight of the discussions than others. This was also seen in the goal setting, where many students responded, based on this group analysis, they needed to participate more or less depending on these interaction patterns. One student responded that her goal was to “have my shorter posts carry a bit more meaning.”

Finally, students became very aware of the *when* of discussions and how timing impacted the success of discussions. For example, some students reported that their group’s discussions happened in “spurts” and that was sometimes hard to keep up with. For example, one student noticed, “I feel like I missed a big part of the conversation after just being away for 12 hours.” Students also reported that a continual back and forth was much easier to keep up with and less overwhelming than posting and then stepping away and coming back. Every day checkers and contributors were much more effective. Also, many students set goals to post earlier in the week as students noticed that when they responded late sometimes their post did not generate a response. As one student stated, “this was discouraging to me as I prepared for question two but did not get another response for 2 days, making it difficult to get the discussion rolling.” Students picked up on the timing of the posts and also how different groups established different

norms for this timing depending on group participation. Students noticed that if they had one or two members who would get a jump start on the discussion that this impacted the rest of the members.

While I was certainly aware of the what/how/when of discussions, it was much more effective for these profiles of what made a productive discussion to come from the students. By engaging them in this examination, they took ownership for their own learning through this forum.

ASSIGNMENT 2: INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE

After the first round of reflection, the students were to engage in two more modules of asynchronous discussions (each module was 2-weeks long). This course had five sections and in between the two reflections I asked the other instructors if they noticed a difference. One instructor said that the subsequent discussions produced some of the best writing she had seen over the courses. Others noticed a difference as a result of giving the students an opportunity to stop and reflect. At the end of Module 3, I asked the students to reflect again. As a result of this reflection two different themes emerged. One was an increased awareness of the student's individual responsibility to these discussions and the other was a deeper understanding of the social construction of knowledge and how this impacted learning.

One of the most powerful takeaways came as students increased their awareness of the importance of their individual responsibility to the discussion. Students were more conscious of their own participation—they reported that this reflection caused them to “think more about my responses,” “communicate more accurately,” and “contribute more than “I agree” to the discussion.” They were able to see the connection of their posts to the overall success of the group. This account-

ability to others showed up in comments such as “my posts did not stimulate more discussion” or “my posts were supportive.” One student commented that when another classmate mentioned something she went out and looked up the resource and learned more about it on her own. Another student commented, “I didn’t receive any replies to my initial posting and since my posting didn’t receive any replies I made an effort to take an interest in other postings and added my questions and feedback.” Instead of seeing discussions as a requirement for the course, this student realized that she had responsibility to her own learning and since others didn’t respond to her she made more of an effort to reach out on her own. Through this reflection students reported having a great understanding of how their participation influenced others. One student commented: “This reflection really made me think about the discussion process and how my discussion fit with the rest of the group. I enjoy asynchronous discussion because everyone has an opportunity to be ‘heard’ unlike a traditional classroom where one person may dominate, or we run out of time for everyone to be heard.”

Unlike this face-to-face discussion, students realized that engaging in an asynchronous discussion put more emphasis on individual responsibility for participation. One student realized that this participation was beneficial regardless of others as she commented, “I feel strongly that my contributions to a discussion are at least helping me. So if no one else is reading them or responding to them, then I am still gaining something by writing down my ideas.”

While the above student realized that even if no one else listened the act of writing contributes to deeper understanding; many students reported becoming more aware of the power of the social construction of knowledge that was facilitated through these discussions. Students recognized that the group contributed new

ideas and explored different avenues. One student commented, "Left alone to read and digest knowledge we might not delve as deeply in the learning as we do when we discuss with others." Another student called her group "small but mighty," while another student recognized that the group was only as good as the members who contributed to it. Students articulated that their learning was improved as a result of engaging in this social discursive community. One student commented, "Although we all started the discussion by answering a single question, our different responses and unique experiences allowed the conversation to grow and change. In the end, we shared much more information than what was initially asked of us and it resulted in everyone learning more from each other in a meaningful way."

Working together to learn in a group was recognized by students. In the students' analysis they noticed how "everyone's comments built off one another" and how this contributed to a greater learning experience. Students also reported that as a result of the social aspect, they felt more motivated by and accountable to their group. One student mentioned, "I have to admit, it was a little overwhelming at times but I stayed a part of the conversation because I found what the members of my groups were posting to be interesting and I wanted to include my two cents!"

ENGAGEMENT, REFLECTION AND LEARNING: WHAT COMES NEXT?

By engaging students in a self-reflection of asynchronous discussions both the students and I became much more aware of how these discussions could contribute to increased engagement, reflection, and deep learning. Students reported that this experience stimulated their thinking; pondered how these discussions tied to their deepened thinking of the material, and made them realize how their individual

contributions impacted others in the group. This experience made me realize that giving students exemplars and modeling productive discursive interaction was not enough. If I really wanted asynchronous discussions to be powerful, the students need to be engaged in these discussions beyond surface level participation. Through this examination I felt that my students were more engaged in their own learning and the course material, and they were given an opportunity to reflect upon their interactions in a more concrete manner, which led to a higher level of learning. However, like any meaningful learning activity I am left with more questions and ideas about how to improve asynchronous discussions. Some lingering questions that I have are:

- Is there a connection between online and face-to-face discussion as a result of this type of student reflection?
- Do students take this increased awareness into other courses' asynchronous discussions?
- Could I measure learning effectiveness in classes that are just given models of discussions vs. classes where students engage in this type of reflection?
- How could I engage students in creating "teaching" opportunities to others on how to improve asynchronous discussions?

Putting asynchronous discussions under the lens and letting students take the reins of improving online discussions, is a powerful next step in both furthering our understanding and improving upon this effective practice. Through his activity, I have come to realize that by including asynchronous discussions in my online classes I am not just carrying over a successful face-to-face practice but creating an opportunity for an even more powerful practice.

APPENDIX

TASK

THREADED DISCUSSION REFLECTION MODULE ONE AND THREE 6 POINTS TOTAL (3 + 3)

Overview: We write to learn and also write to demonstrate understanding. We need to be purposeful about why we ask students to write to learn. In this class we use a lot of threaded discussions but do we take the time to reflect on why we do these and how we can improve on our participation in this type of discourse community? Being part of a discourse community is part of the learning process. In this class we expect that your participation in threaded discussions will not just demonstrate that you are processing this information, but also will enable you to be a productive contributor to a learning community. However, we believe that it is not good enough just to be a part of a discourse community but also to reflect on how this writing experience is helping you become a more thoughtful, more informed, and a more reflective teacher about writing and learning. In order to use writing to further our growth as learners we need to take some time to step back and reflect on how writing communities contribute to our learning process. At the end of Module 1 you will be asked to reflect on your participation in the threaded discussions and set some discursive goals. You will be asked to reflect again at the end of Module 3.

Task: After participating in a threaded discussion in each module you will be asked to complete and submit a brief reflection about how your participation in this discourse community impacted both your own personal engagement with the content and also contributed to a positive coconstructed experience for deepening understanding. After each module you will be asked to fill out the Reflection sheet and submit it to assignments.

1. Go back to one of the two threaded discussions that you participated in.
2. Reread this discussion and look for the following things:

- **Individual Analysis**

- i. Quantity

- How many posts did you contribute to the discussion?
- How long were your posts?

- ii. Quality

- Initial Post—Look at your initial post—did this post connect to the reading? Did this post connect to your own experience? Did your post stimulate discussion (did others respond to it)?
- Comments to the group—Look at your contributions to the group—were your comments supportive? Challenging? Did they extend the conversation? What did you contribute to the group?

- **Group Analysis**

- i. Quantity

- How long was your group discussion? How many people posted? Who posted the most? Who posted the least? What did you notice about overall posting patterns for your group?

- ii. Quality

- How did the group's posts contribute to your understanding? Whose posts stimulated thought for you? Whose posts did you connect with?

- **Goals—Module 1**

- i. Create a goal for your individual contribution as well as your group

contribution based on this reflection.

- **Goals—Module 3**

- i. Think about the two goals that you set for yourself in module one. Did you accomplish these goals—why or why not?
- ii. How did this activity influence your thinking around the coconstruction of knowledge in a discursive community?

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ASYNCHRONOUS DISCUSSION WOULD NOT JUST ENRICH MY STUDENT'S LEARNING OF THE CONTENT, BUT GIVE BOTH OF US THE OPPORTUNITY TO DEEPEN OUR UNDERSTANDING ABOUT THE CONNECTION BETWEEN DISCUSSIONS AND ENGAGEMENT, REFLECTION, AND LEARNING.