Article:

Investigating the inclusion of online discussions to enhance students' learning in general education undergraduate classes

Abstract

Discussion of class material has many educational benefits. In today's modern computerized society, these discussions no longer need to be confined to the classroom setting. This paper discusses students' reactions to the inclusion of online discussions at the undergraduate level. In addition, the author illustrates how the students' comments and concerns have been incorporated over three semesters to improve the assignment for future students.

Keywords: online discussions, learner autonomy, reflective practice, blended learning

1. Introduction

The learning opportunities that classroom discussions provide at all educational levels are numerous. As Yu notes, studies such as the one conducted by Meyer (2006) "support the idea that classroom discussion, when done correctly, is a valuable pedagogical activity" (2009, p. 7). Whether in a large group or in a small group setting, discussion allows the students to learn from each other and helps the teacher to assess the students' understanding of the material being presented to them. Asking for the students' input encourages them to get more involved in the learning process and pushes them toward a more active approach to learning. The success of a classroom discussion, however, depends on a number of factors, for example, how well thought out the discussion topic is, how involved and motivated the students are and whether the discussion is teacher led or student led. The success of a classroom discussion can also be influenced by large classes, a few domineering students who monopolize the conversation and shy students who may be interested and motivated but have difficulty vocalizing their opinions in front of others.

At the graduate and undergraduate level, in most universities and colleges, the amount of class time given to each course can have an impact on classroom discussion. Specifically, at the American University of Sharjah in The United Arab Emirates, in a typical graduate or undergraduate class, professors and students meet either once, twice or three times a week for a total of 150 minutes per week, for 15 weeks. It has been my experience that more often than not, classroom discussion must be curtailed in order to cover the course material. In addition to the limited class time, the undergraduate classes usually consist of 30 – 35 students and although some of the students live in the dorms, most of them have long commutes each day to and from university. Some of these problems can be overcome with modern technology.

Singh noted in 2003 that"The future of learning is moving toward the notion of blended learning, where two or more delivery mechanisms may be involved in a given learning program. A blended learning program may include computer/web-based self-paced learning modules, live e-learning events, asynchronous discussion forums, and online tests and references" (2003b, p. 127). His prediction is now a reality in many institutions. Blended learning is also known as hybrid courses. Dolan states that "for many faculty members, the move by universities toward greater reliance on online and hybrid courses [blended learning] raises questions of course content and quality" (Dolan, 2008, p. 387). Gillespie acknowledges that, "digital technology has flowed into the mainstream of teaching and learning in Higher Education, although not in an unproblematic way" (2008, p. 121). However, Bender found that "some educators consider the hybrid to be the best of both worlds, as it facilitates the learning process and enhances both student-student and faculty-student communication. It provides the convenience and flexibility of the asynchronous online method of learning, with the real time face-to-face contact" (2003, p. xvi-xvii). Online activities can be synchronous, i.e., all participants are online at the same

time and usually receive an instant response, for example in a chat room or virtual classroom, or asynchronous, i.e., responses are delayed, for example, email or discussion boards. Shroff, Vogel & Coombes state that "technology-supported learning environments are considered especially critical to the effectiveness of student learning and performance because these learning environments provide students with more opportunities to interact with instructors and peers than traditional face-to-face learning environments" (2008, p. 112).

Bender states that a hybrid class accommodates a variety of learning styles. As she says, "some students might be shy or reluctant to speak in front of a group on campus, yet open up more freely when in front of their computer screen, and the reverse might be true for other students" (2003, p. xvii). Another advantage Bender discusses is that a hybrid class acknowledges and allows for the fact that "different phases of learning can occur in different environments" (xvii). She refers to Kolb's (1984) learning cycle: experience, reflection, conceptualization, and planning, and notes that "the campus class might be the most suitable environment for gaining an experience … and possibly might also be the best place for planning, whereas sandwiched in between, the online class, due to its asynchronous environment, might be the most appropriate forum for reflection and conceptualization" (p. xvii). This is supported by Singh who points out that, "the concept of blended learning is rooted in the idea that learning is not just a one-time event, *learning is a continuous process*" (Singh, 2003a, p. 53). Gillespie does not dispute the many advantages of technology use in the classroom but questions, "how can we, in a multimedia age, integrate their benefits into teaching and learning?" (2009, p. 121). One way to do this may be through the inclusion of online discussions.

2. Online discussions

An online discussion board, which is "quite flexible and can be used for a variety of purposes" (Israelite and Dunn, 2003, p. 267) is one of many e-tools available to teachers to help their students enhance their learning opportunities outside the walls of the classroom. A discussion board "is primarily text based. It is also asynchronous in nature, meaning that all online participants can log on and participate in discussions at a time convenient to them" (Bender , 2003, p. xvi). McLoughlin and Mynard note that online discussions are student centered with the teacher keeping his/her involvement to a minimum, thus they "can provide a non-intimidating environment where learners feel able to give opinions, offer suggestions and ask questions …and do not have to wait for their turn or for the teacher to invite them to contribute" (2009, p. 148).

Some of the disadvantages of online discussions are that they "can be time consuming, are easily open to misinterpretation in the absence of physical cues and are not attractive to those who have limited reading and writing skills" (Williams, 2003, pp. 176 – 177). In addition, Israelite and Dunn caution that, in spite of all the advantages of including online discussions, "It is a mistake to assume that people will be active participants simply because discussion boards are available" (2003, p. 268). Likewise, Chen, Wang and Hung found that, "although online discussions allowed students to interact with each other outside the classroom, many students still chose not to participate" (2009, p. 158). Like classroom discussions, varying participation and student involvement occurs in online discussion as well.

There are also other problems such as technical issues and students' access to the internet that need to be taken into consideration. However, in a pilot study conducted with two graduate classes in Summer and Fall, 2007 semesters (see Gunn, 2009) the participants indicated that they found the inclusion of online discussions to be beneficial and that the benefits of including online discussions outweighed the drawbacks. The students noted that as well as extending class time to allow for more fruitful discussions of the class material, the use of online discussions allowed shyer students more opportunities to participate. Thus, the reasonable success of my first attempt encouraged me to include asynchronous online discussions as a requirement of both my graduate and undergraduate courses to increase students' opportunities for discussion of the class material to enhance their learning. I wanted to know if my undergraduate students shared my same enthusiasm

for online discussions so, starting in Spring 2008, I began collecting data to answer the following three research questions:

- What benefits, if any, do students believe they get from the inclusion of online discussions?
- What drawbacks, if any, do students see with the inclusion of online discussions?
- What suggestions, if any, do students have to improve the online discussion assignment?

3. Context

The American University of Sharjah (AUS) was founded in 1997. It is a private, coeducational institution with approximately 5,000 students representing over 75 nationalities. The language of instruction is English but for most of the student population, English is their second or third language. Students are not required to buy laptops unless they are majoring in Business. However, AUS has numerous free computer labs for the students in all the buildings and wireless access is provided throughout the campus free of charge. Most of the professors at AUS use the course management system, Ilearn, with their classes. All faculty are given training in how to use Ilearn effectively and ongoing support is available. Thus, the introduction of online discussions into my classes was not hindered by lack of resources.

4. Participants

Three undergraduate classes were involved in this research, with a total of 97 students. More information about the classes can be found in Appendix A. AUS currently has a minor in Education but does not have a major in Education, thus, for all but three students who had declared a minor in Education, the participating students in the EDU courses were taking the courses as free electives or to meet a Humanity requirement.

5. Data Collection

The data was collected in three phases, at the end of Spring 2008, the end of Fall 2008 and at the end of Spring 2009. Brock points out that "before we can design e-learning that raises the level of involvement and participation, we first ought to understand the learning situation and perceive the experience from the learner's frame of reference" (Brock, 2003, p. 103). Thus in all three semesters, when the online discussion assignment was introduced at the beginning of the semester I asked the students if they had used online discussions before in any of their classes. These were informal discussions and no formal record was kept of the students' answers but in each class of 32 – 33 students, no more than three or four students said they had used online discussions in their classes. The assignment was then explained, discussion guidelines were given, a demonstration of the discussion board feature of Ilearn was given and the students were told that the assignment was worth 10% of their overall grade. The assignment description available on the syllabus can be found in Appendix B.

At the end of the semester, an anonymous questionnaire was sent to the students using SurveyMonkey at the end of the course. The questionnaire contained four open-ended questions:

- In your opinion, what were the advantages of the on-line discussions?
- In your opinion, what were the disadvantages of the on-line discussions?
- Do you have any suggestions for improving the online discussion assignment? If yes, please list them.
- Do you have any other comments?

6. Findings

After each semester, I read the results of the surveys and made some minor adaptations to the online discussion assignment based on the students' suggestions. Out of the 97 students involved in the study, 85 of them responded to the survey.

7. Benefits as noted by the students

The main ideas that emerged from the data were: raised comfort level, time to think and respond, learning from others, extension of class time and freedom to choose when to participate. Some of the comments below illustrate these categories:

- "I was very comfortable participating. I enjoyed the exchange of thoughts and liked that the online discussion wasn't time restricted like in a classroom."
- "I learned a lot from others. I asked questions that I didn't ask in class because there was no time. There is always time on the discussion board."
- "If I didn't read the assigned readings I can catch up while reading the discussions."

Another benefit was the increased opportunities for shyer students to participate. However, as the comments below show, many students commented on this in relation to learning from students who they otherwise would not have had input from. For example,

- "Online discussions helped in discussing topics that were not discussed in class. This brings in new input from students, often from the ones who do not speak in class. I learned a lot from this."
- "They helped us reinforce what we learned during the week. I got to hear other people's opinions that I didn't hear in class.".
- "I liked the fact that we can go online anytime that suits us to discuss. The students who weren't very verbal in class got a chance to voice their opinion."
- "The advantage is that they opened up various discussions. I believe that for many students in this society or culture interaction is not encouraged but by using online discussions I believe many students interacted more – I know I did."

8. Drawbacks

Although there were many positive comments about the assignment, the students also noted that some of the drawbacks of this assignment were their lack of time to participate and the amount of time it took to read and respond to others' posts, their lack of interest in the assignment and their lack of something to say. Some comments to illustrate these concerns are below:

- "I did the assignment just for the grade."
- "It was boring to do every week but I had to write something."
- "Sometimes I just didn't have anything to write about."
- "I had no time for this. I do not like to read other students' drivel. I rarely participated."

9. Suggestions for improvement

Some of the suggestions given in Spring 2008, were incorporated into the assignment starting from Fall 2008. Some of the suggestions from Fall 2008 were then incorporated into the assignment starting from Spring 2009. Some of the suggestions were not incorporated at all.

In Spring 2008, the two main suggestions were that we have more free discussions and that I should teach some of the students to be more polite. Both of these suggestions were taken on board. When I was explaining the assignment I also gave a short talk on "netiquette". This issue did not come up again in the Fall 2008 or Spring 2009 feedback. I had more free discussions and as a result in Fall 2008, I received the suggestion that I should have more directed discussions. We now have what I hope is a happy medium with a mix of directed and free discussion topics.

In Fall 2008, several students suggested that I participate in the discussion. Up till now I have not acted on that suggestion. I monitor the discussions and refer to some of the points made, if appropriate, in class, but I believe that by keeping out of the discussion I give the students more freedom to take control over their learning and guide each other instead of getting guidance from me.

Another suggestion was to reduce the number of discussion. Instead of being expected to participate in all 10 discussions, some students suggested that they should have the flexibility to participate in five of them while others suggested they should participate in eight of them. Up till now, I have kept the requirement at 10.

A suggestion from Spring 2009 that I have incorporated into the assignment is to have discussion leaders each week. At the beginning of the Fall 2009 semester I explained this suggestion to the students and asked them if they would like to try the discussions this way. These new students had nothing to compare to as many of them said they had not used online discussions in any of their classes but were willing to nominate leaders.

Another suggestion from Spring 2009 was to keep the small discussion groups but change the groups throughout the semester. I believe that by changing the groups this will not allow for the "build up relationships over time" quote from Williams. Thus, I have decided not to change the groups at this time; however, I may try this suggestion in the future.

10. Conclusion

For the undergraduate students at the American University of Sharjah who participated in this study, the benefits of the online discussion assignment outweighed the drawbacks. Not every student found the assignment to be worthwhile, but many students did and as one student noted, "This was the first course I used online discussions and I found it truly effective and interesting! I would encourage all teachers to use such a technique." Several students made sound suggestions on how to improve the assignment for future students. As Chen, Wang and Hung note, "the success of an online discussion does not just happen. Its success largely depends on a carefully constructed design plan" (2009, p. 158). As such, I will continue to ask my students for feedback on how to improve the assignment to meet their needs and give them another opportunity to enhance the learning experience for themselves and others.

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Appendix A: Participants by class

Semester	Class	Course description
Spring, 2008	EDU220: Introduction to Teaching 33 students	Introduces students to the basic issues important to the teaching profession. Topics covered include effective teaching practices such as planning, classroom organization, behavior management and use of technology in the classroom. Other issues in teaching including motivation, leadership and multicultural and international education will also be explored.
Fall, 2008	EDU 220: Introduction to Teaching 32 students	As above.
Spring, 2009	EDU 210: Philosophy of Education 32 students	Focuses on the aims and purposes of education and traces the development of education and the concept of schooling from Confucius to contemporary educational thinkers. Gives special attention to issues of current educational concern, including gender matters and values in education.

Appendix B: Online discussion Information on Students' syllabus

The online discussions will be open each week on Monday after class. There will be four online discussion groups of seven or eight students each. You will stay in the same discussion group for the whole semester. You are free to read and participate in other groups if you wish to. You will have until Sunday at 11 am the following week to participate. To get full credit for each discussion you must have a combined word count of over 100 words. Thus, you may only participate once, but if you do, that participation must be meaningful and reasonably lengthy. For your information, "I totally agree" written 25 times in one week will not count for full participation.

Cindy Gunn
The American University of Sharjah (UAE)