Rethinking Online Discussions: Instructional Strategies for Engaging Students

Presented at the EDUCAUSE West/Southwest Regional Conference
February 2013
Austin, TX

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Agenda

- Background on SLIM Course Format
- Motivation Behind Our Study
- Research Aim and Questions
- Conceptual Foundations
- Methods and Materials
- Discussion on Findings
- Implications of the Research
Background on SLIM Course Format

- **Two Types of Courses:**
  - Core courses: “blended” (hybrid) format
  - Elective courses: typically all-online

- **Blended Courses:**
  - Weekend Intensive (Friday evening, all day Saturday)
  - Two weekend meetings per semester (lecture, group work, presentations)
  - The rest online

- Discussion significant in all courses
Motivations behind this Study

- General dissatisfaction with discussion boards for both students and faculty.
- Students ask:
  - Why do we have to post postings every week?
  - Face-to-face classes don’t require everyone to participate in discussion, so why such a requirement in online discussion?

Reality: online discussion can’t be eliminated but they often frustrate everyone.
How Can We Improve Online Discussion?

- What makes a discussion boring and monotonous?
- What makes a discussion engaging?
- As an instructor, how can you tell whether a discussion is “successful”?
  - Quality postings
  - How engaged students are in responding to postings
How can we improve the quality of online discussions?

Possible strategies:

- Change the interface used for online discussion
- Change your instructional approaches to online discussion
- Reflection on the results of the above changes (what works, what doesn’t work)
Moore’s Theory of Transactional Distance

- Distance as a ‘pedagogical’ phenomenon rather than a geographical one.

- Three elements:
  - Dialogue
    - Learner-instructor
    - Learner-learner
    - Learner-content
    - Learner-interface
  - Structure
  - Learner Autonomy
Research Questions

- **Interface:**
  Does using a blog interface instead of discussion boards promote meaningful and engaging learner-centered online discussions?

- **Instructional Strategies:**
  Do certain instructional strategies promote meaningful and engaging learner-centered online discussions?
Method and materials

- Survey was conducted in Spring 2012 across 3 SLIM courses
- Purposive sample
- 39 students participated in the survey (Masters of Library Science students)
- An integrated approach of quantitative and qualitative methods was used to understand students’ overall learning experience.
USABILITY OF BLOGS VERSUS DISCUSSION BOARDS
Discussion Board Interface

Thread Detail

The Thread Detail Page provides a complete view of the Thread and its contents. Options for viewing and managing the thread are located here. More Help

Total Posts: 7 Unread Posts: 6

Message Actions Collect
Select: All None

Greetings! I'm way out here in Osborne, KS where I hang out with my husband, play piano at a church, and garden with the neighbor kids. I graduated from Manhattan Christian College with a BA in Worship Ministry and Bible. Hopefully someday I'll get to work in a library at either a Christian College or Seminary.

I have...
- slept in a cemetery
- participated in puppetry competitions
- driven a combine

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Blog Interface

Leadership Journey Blog

Total Points: 10
(2 points per entry; 6 entries total)
For further details, see the "LIB85XU Assignments" document.

Reading books makes good leaders

By: [Editor]
Published on 4/25/2012 at 5:32 PM CST

I read this article today:
http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/18/opinion/sunday/the-neuroscience-of-your-brain-on-fiction.html?pageMw=4

Which I LOVED. Scientific reasoning behind my favorite hobby, and my career objectives. The article discusses several scientific experiments involving fMRI scans to the minds of readers and the results of stimulated brain activity that concludes that your brain doesn't register much difference between reading a novel and liking it yourself. So you really can learn from books! Who knew?

It's much more in-depth than that, of course, but the part that I believe applies well in this setting is this: "individuals who frequently read fiction seem to be better able to understand other people, empathize with them and see the world from their perspective." (2). What makes a great leader? Oh yes, listening to others, empathy, etc., etc. So we really can learn life lessons through books that can result in our own leadership and people skills. I firmly believe this, I might be young, and I might not have really had all the experiences that will make me a good leader, teacher, mother, librarian, and so on. But I've read plenty of books that have taught me plenty of lessons on what not to do in a leadership position.

There is also a bit of discussion in this article on how movies play a similar role, but no where near the same level.

Viewed 3 times.
Blog Interface

A true leader is never off-duty

Something I've noticed at my work is that my manager is always available. Even when she's not working, I always felt it made her extraordinary, and someone's post last month mentioned a good boss always being on call, so I decided to make that the focus of this post. My manager, who really is a leader, has made sure all of us at the library have her mobile number so we can reach her if we need to. There have been times that she's been off work and I've needed to talk to her about something. I never felt awkward or uncomfortable calling or texting her to get answers, and she always answered her phone or called me back as soon as she was able. If it was something that required a process, she always wanted me to let her know afterward how it turned out. This quality, among others, sets her out as the best manager I've ever had.

Happiness is...

I watched the following TED Talk by Shawn Achor, titled The happy secret to better work. http://www.ted.com/talks/shawn_achor_the_happy_secret_to_better_work.html

The talk was very interesting and addressed the notion of what makes us happy, and how our happiness effects our productivity. The general rule of thumb in organizations, businesses, schools, etc. has been to treat the pattern that if you Working Hard -> Success -> Happiness. However, this way of thinking is self-defeating because we are always changing our goals and expectations. For example, if you work really hard to reach a new personal best in terms of sales numbers and you reach that goal, then the next time around you feel the need to increase the before numbers and the cycle being again without true happiness being reached. The ongoing sense of validation is never complete.

However, if you apply positive psychology and follow the pattern that Happiness -> Better Work -> Success than you will truly experience happiness and be more successful in how your brain operates while doing work. The presenter's main argument was that our brains are not meant to function in the first pattern, but are rather more accustomed to performing better when we are happy. He then mentioned his method of travelling to organizations and implementing programs that help to retain the brain the be happy. The five main techniques applied over 21 days are:

- List three gratitudes daily
- Journaling about one positive experience a day
- Meditation
- Exercise
- Random Acts of Kindness

I hope this idea is helpful and that you find happiness in your work.
Blog Assessment Interface:
List of All Students and Postings
The Survey

- Asked many questions to determine whether students preferred the blog interface over the discussion board interface.
- Many similar questions with the wording tweaked in order to be sure to cover all aspects of their perceptions about their preferences.
Usability of Blogs vs Discussion Boards

Are blogs more beneficial to learning? Are blogs more useful facilitating learning?

A lot of neutral responses in both cases. One reason may be that students aren’t exposed to blogs in courses as much as discussion boards. More or less 50/50 agreement and disagreement between blogs and discussion boards.

Student Comments:

“The discussion boards force me to check in more regularly and contribute more often, but the blogs offered fresher course material, elicited fewer "forced" responses from classmates, and were easier to work around my personal schedule.”

“Honestly, I’d prefer using something other than the Blackboard software, which I find clunky. However, I prefer the visual accessibility of the blog format over the discussion board.”
Usability of Blogs vs Discussion Boards

I participate more actively in blogs. I prefer blogs for posting and commenting.

Don’t seem to think blogs make them participate more actively – but could be because of different posting requirements. Slightly more students seem to prefer blogs for posting and commenting. Still a lot of neutral responses.

Student Comments:

“I see blogs as a more formal, better articulated way to present a perspective or information.”

“I felt that I wanted to participate more. While using the blog I think I opened up more than just using the discussion board. Sometimes it is hard to post something weekly to a discussion board. I definitely liked the change up to using a blog this semester.”
Usability of Blogs vs Discussion Boards


- Questions about whether blogs stimulate a greater level of interest – unclear, mixed result. They are not more interested in commenting but may be more interested in reading blogs. Still a lot of neutrals.

Student Comment:
“The blog was slightly more user-friendly in that each post is individually visible by title, and comments pertaining to that post are archived under the post, whereas with the discussion boards, threads would get buried within each other and be harder to re-reference.”
Student Comments:

“I agree only because the text of the blog post is visible along with the title, whereas discussion board threads are visible by title only, and each comment functions as a post. I like being able to scroll through snippets of each post, know what they’re about due to the visible text in the body of the post, and then open up the comments if I’m further interested. I don’t tend to return to discussion board threads and sift through them to find information.”

“On the blog I received more topics than just discussing one topic that was posted on discussion board. It was worthwhile because although I basically like the discussion board better, I saw more professional insight from links posted which broadened my perspective on the topics.”
Instructional Strategies

Student Comments:

“I think the quality had more to do with the requirement that we be discussing what we learned from independent reading or experience. This avoided most of the trivia that sometimes shows up on discussion boards.”

“Especially when capped to a reasonable word limit, blog entries were easier to digest and more interesting overall because they brought in so many different sources and perspectives rather than everybody discussing a single topic. Students had a greater opportunity to choose the topic and direction of the blog post and any subsequent comments.”

“I believe that more was put into my blog posts than all my discussion board posts. Better content included.”
**Instructional Strategies**

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**Student Comments:**

“I liked that there was no set question, and students were allowed to write about things that they were interested in. This provided a wide array of discussion topics, as well as the opportunity to gain resources that students otherwise might not have found.”

“Discussion boards are the least effective tool for learning. The brief repetitive posts responding to the same narrow prompt are just a monotonous chore with no value.”

“I find that when we all have to post on the exact same topic in the discussion board a lot of it is just repetition over and over with fewer different ideas. With the blog and being able to comment on different articles, blogs, leaders, etc. there are more venues of a topic to look at and discuss.”
Recommended Instructional Strategies for Faculty

- Take On the Role of an Observer
- Avoid Regurgitation of Known Information
- Give Students Freedom to Choose (Autonomy)
- Encourage Self-Discovery
- Spark Their Interest
- Encourage Reflective & Thoughtful Discussion
- Limit Number of Posts Required
- Limit Length of Posts
- Provide Regular Feedback
Comments about Instructional Approach

These comments reinforce some of the aforementioned instructional approaches:

- **Autonomy, Thoughtful Discussion with Peers:**
  “The leadership journey blog was a fun assignment. I liked how free we were to choose our own topics and I thought the conversations going on throughout the blog between students was great.”

- **Post length, Self reflection, Interacting with Peers**
  “I enjoyed the blog format compared to the typical discussion board requirement. It made the subject matter much more refreshing, and since the postings were (in theory) supposed to be no more than 300 words, it made the content fairly digestible. I do feel like this course prompted a great deal of self reflection and tendencies and how they influence my interactions with others.”
Provide Clarity in Discussion Assignment Description

- **State Broad Parameters for Discussions**
  - Required or optional
  - Credit or no credit
  - Role of the student vs instructor

- **Delineate Specific Requirements**
  - Number of original posts/replies to peer’s postings
  - Genre and length of posts
  - Timeframe for posting and discussion
Implications – Future Research

- Deeper investigation of optimal interface to facilitate discussion?
- Further investigation of optimal instructional strategies?
- Should the discussion type influence choice of interface (blog vs discussion board?)
- What questions would you like to see answered in future research studies?
Questions?