# Chapter 1
# Student-to-Student Communication in Online Graduate-Level Education Courses

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## ABSTRACT

*In 2014, nearly one million graduate students were enrolled in online courses (Allen & Seaman, 2016), with many of the courses requiring discussions that contributed to students' overall course grades. In this chapter, the author discusses student-to-student communication in online graduate level education courses. Specifically, the author reviews literature salient to online discussions and utilizes original research from three courses in the Spring 2015 term taught by the author to discuss effective practices to increase student-to-student communication. These techniques include creating social presence, establishing discussion criteria, establishing the number of posts, utilizing self-assessment to assist students in creating posts, and student facilitation of discourse.*

## INTRODUCTION

Asynchronous online courses often consist of people who are separated both temporally and geographically (Simonson, Smaldino, & Zvacek, 2015). Individuals choose to enroll in asynchronous online learning because of convenience, flexibility, and the ability to work anytime and anywhere. Asynchronous online course enrollments become more prevalent as students enroll in graduate programs, especially in graduate education programs, since many of the students work full time and attend graduate school part time.

In 2014, almost one million graduate students enrolled in online courses (Allen & Seaman, 2016), with the majority of courses being asynchronous. In their analysis of more than 200 syllabi from both undergraduate and graduate courses, Cummings, Bonk, and Jacobs (2002) found that approximately 65% of the examined course syllabi indicated use of online discussions, which represented the majority

of student-to-student communication. All of the graduate courses taught by the author utilize discussion forums, with discussions being worth 20-30% of students' final grades, depending on the course. Therefore, it stands to reason that a majority of the graduate students in online courses encounter, at some point in time in their online courses, graded discussions. With the reported 20-30% accounting for a part of student grades, online graduate discussions are no small matter. To do well in an online course utilizing discussions, students need to be cognizant of performing well in these discussions.

## BACKGROUND

This chapter is the result of years of practical trial and error in graduate-level courses and research into elements that make student-to-student communication more worthwhile for participants and communication that results in higher levels of critical inquiry. The author has taught online graduate education courses at a major university in the Northeast for approximately eight years and has conducted extensive research in online teaching best practices. When first beginning teaching, the author wanted to have graduate students construct knowledge through conversation in discussion forums. The first semester teaching an online graduate course, the author had few expectations for post quantity and quality. The author struggled this first semester in assessing student contributions to the discussion boards. Natural questions that arose included "How often should a student post?" and "What does a 'good' post look like?" As a result of these questions, the author spent the next few years researching best practices and developing a discussion rubric (see Appendix) to assist graduate students produce high-quality posts and facilitate the assessing of student discussions.

Years passed, with the instructor assessing student communication based on the discussion rubric. This process was not only time-intensive, but the author began to question whether students were benefitting from the instructor discussion feedback and improving their communication in discussions. Informal questions to students revealed that some students only looked at the grade the author assigned and did not review the feedback the author provided for how to improve participation in the discussions. If students were not reviewing instructor feedback on their communication habits, how could they improve their discussions? In response to this, the author researched alternative methods of assessment and ultimately began using student self-assessments of discussion posts.

One of the approaches the author made was to experiment with, and adjust, the self-assessment process for two years and eventually conduct formal qualitative research in three courses the author taught during Spring 2015. Course 1 was an introduction to using technology across the curriculum and consisted of 21 students. Course 2 dealt with issues and innovations of multimedia and consisted of 17 students. Course 3 was an introduction to distance education and consisted of 17 students. A total of 40 graduate students participated in the research. At the end of the courses, students were administered a survey on their perceptions of the self-assessment and rubric. Data were analyzed for common themes and categories at the sentence level using QSR's NVivo 10. The results of the survey will be shared below. In addition to the survey, the author analyzed the content of student self-assessments, student reflections and journals, and student discussions looking for items that referred to either the self-assessment or the rubric.

The latest endeavor by the author to improve and increase student-to-student communication is through the use of social presence. Later in this chapter, the author will discuss social presence and its impact on communication. The author subscribes to the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework, which is also described in detail later in this chapter. Social presence is one component of the CoI framework and is

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