Chapter 2

Collaborative Student Groups and Critical Thinking in an Online Basic Communication Course

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter examines discussion board postings of ten undergraduate student groups (n = 45 students) who participated in collaborative problem-solving in a fully online, introductory communication course. Postings during a full academic year—three sections offered during three consecutive 15-week trimesters—reveal that student usage of the online format did not exhibit progressive development of critical thinking. Few student posts exhibited qualities of interrogation, exploration, convergence, or application that constitute the reflective thought process. Instead, students used threaded discussions primarily as forums for personal assertions, relational maintenance, and summaries of research. The study suggests that concepts of critical thinking require adaptation to an online environment that diverges from the linear cognitive process assumed in traditional approaches to critical inquiry. The online learning environment must reconcile the strong need to establish group cohesion with the impetus toward groupthink that limits critical thinking.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the proliferation of fully online and web-augmented academic courses, many opportunities remain to expand the empirical knowledge and theoretical understanding of how students utilize online course components and how to optimize course design. These opportunities are especially intriguing within oral communication instruction in higher education. Although introductory oral communication courses (either public speaking or "comprehensive" courses that also cover interpersonal and group communication) garner large

enrollments, questions persist regarding the relationship between online peer interactions and critical thinking skills. Studies regarding online communication education express the need for more empirical research documenting "the influence of technology use on student outcomes such as cognitive, behavioral, and affective learning" (Turman & Schrodt, 2005, p. 110).

Threaded discussion boards appear ubiquitously in online course management systems, although how students actually use this learning tool deserves further documentation and analysis (Jeong, 2003). Harman and Koohang (2005) observe that discussion boards potentially improve interactivity and sharing of third-party resources (such as hyperlinked instructional materials). Threaded discussions can intensify group interactions because the transparency of the medium readily exposes lurkers and uncooperative group members (Shedletsky & Aitken, 2004; Schwartzman, 2006). These observations invite further investigation of how to optimize incorporation of threaded discussions into online courses. Studying online instruction in an undergraduate communication course also may improve the representativeness of research regarding discussion boards. A review of the literature on threaded discussions observes: "Current research is predominated by examination of education and graduate level online classes. The typical online student is not a graduate student and does not take education classes" (San Millan Maurino, 2006, p. 14).

Student discussion board posts can provide valuable data for understanding how peer interactions relate to learning in the online environment. Indeed, "the written records of threaded discussions may be a boon to researchers desiring to study the online environment for evidence that students gain the intellectual skills that higher education values" (Meyer, 2003, p. 64). Such studies gain importance given the wide availability of online course offerings in communication studies. Since the implementation of online communication education has rapidly outpaced knowledge of online instructional techniques (Schwartzman, 2007a), closer exploration of actual student behaviors in online communication courses seems warranted.

Conducting group problem-solving projects via threaded discussions presents many challenges (Schwartzman, 2006). Administering and monitoring online discussions can prove daunting when the medium does not easily capture the energy and mutual supportiveness that personal meetings can generate. To understand how threaded discussions operate, this study examines student postings in collaborative problem-solving groups within an introductory oral communication course that included public speaking, interviewing, interpersonal communication, and group dynamics. Close analysis of the patterns and contents of student discussion board posts reveals how students actually employ online discussion boards and how to improve their use. Although online instruction offers unique opportunities to reach isolated or overlooked student populations (Schwartzman, 2007c), the benefits of such instruction will be offset if the instructional tools are misused.

To understand how students use online threaded discussions, this study addresses the following research questions:

- **RQ1:** To what extent do students develop dialogues that demonstrate higher-order, critical thinking skills and encourage others to employ those skills?
- **RQ2:** What communication patterns among students in threaded discussions facilitate or inhibit collaborative problem-solving?
- **RQ3:** How can instructors utilize online threaded discussions and similar tools to increase the quality of collaborative group work?

LITERATURE REVIEW

A growing body of research specifically addresses online delivery of speech communication courses

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