

Online Discussion Groups

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INTRODUCTION

An online discussion forum is an environment on the World Wide Web for holding discussions, or the Web application software used to enable these discussions. Web-based forums, which date from the mid 1990's, are also commonly referred to as Web forums, message boards, discussion boards, discussion forums, discussion groups, and bulletin boards. Similar to other elements of the early World Wide Web, online discussion groups were built around common interests, with participants self-selecting membership in a particular online community. These early discussion groups focused on technical aspects of online environments, early self-referential and technical discussions related to the nature, construction, and maintenance of the World Wide Web itself. The content of these early discussions was determined by the nature of these early adopters. As use of the Internet gradually permeated society, the use and content of online discussions evolved as well. A principal area of interest in the current use of online discussion groups is in education. While corporations and other business forms make use of online forums, the evolving and increasing integration of online discussions into educative efforts, enhanced by the proliferation of online education, makes education the area most impacted by this relatively recent development in communication. As Nonnecke and Preece (1999) have described, research in electronic discussion groups has focused on a number of areas, including the nature of online communities (Wellman, 1997), the development of friendship (Park & Floyd, 1996), the role of empathy in group discussions (Preece, 1998), and the differences between men and women (Roberts, 1998). Additional work has been done on specific kinds of online communities, for example, therapy (King, 1994), education (Hiltz, 1993), business (Sproull & Keisler, 1986), and health support (Preece & Ghazati, 1998).

SYNCHRONOUS AND ASYNCHRONOUS DISCUSSIONS

Song (2003) explained the distinction between synchronous (immediate interaction) and asynchronous (delayed interaction) discussions and noted the necessity of understanding the influence of time in the online environment. Synchronous interaction occurs in real time, as in a face-to-face meeting, while asynchronous interaction enables the participant to communicate at different times with the aid of technological mediation. In traditional classroom teaching, interaction is immediate. However, in online environments, interaction can be either immediate or delayed. This distinction between synchronous and asynchronous interaction is significant because it determines the logistics and feel of the distance-learning experience. Educational institutions employ a mixed model of synchronous and asynchronous environments for different purposes.

Asynchronous communication is a form of computer-mediated communication (CMC) that supports information exchange and group interactions through a variety of electronic communication tools such as electronic mail (e-mail), bulletin boards, class listservs, and online discussion forums (Bodzin & Park, 2000; Gilbert & Dabbagh, 2005). In a 2000 National Educational Association (NEA, 2000) survey, 62% of distance learning faculties reported using asynchronous communication tools in their courses to support student-teacher interactions and class discussions.

ONLINE DISCUSSION AND EDUCATION

Currently, university faculty members are being encouraged to develop online courses. Some 1.6 million students were enrolled in 54,470 different distance education courses in 1997-98, and that number is growing each year. Distance education programs, including online courses, increased by 72% between 1994 and

1998, with more institutions planning to add distance education courses in the coming years. The use of Internet resources as part of the syllabi in college classes increased from 15% to 40% between 1996 and 1999 (Moe & Blodgett, 2000).

Ellis and Calvo (2004) have noted that the student experience of learning through discussions is undergoing a transformation through the adoption of new communication technologies for purposes of learning. For campus-based institutions, the adoption of learning technologies for discussions and other activities often results in a blended learning experience, made up of both face-to-face and online aspects. The result of these new communication technologies is that discussions are no longer restricted to the seminar or tutorial and may start before the students meet face-to-face and continue long after the topic-related tutorial has ended.

As Blignaut and Trollip (2003) noted, a growing body of literature has emerged relating to online learning that deals with such topics as:

- The elements of effective online learning;
- The building and sustenance of connected learning communities;
- The interaction of learners in virtual communities;
- The comparison of the critical attributes of traditional and Web-based learning environments;
- The review of the various online communication formats;
- Learner satisfaction with online courses; and
- The role and effectiveness of online discussion groups.

Jonassen (2000, p. 24) summarized that learners use technologies as intellectual partners in order to:

- Articulate what they know;
- Reflect on what they have learned;
- Support the internal negotiation of meaning making;
- Construct personal meaning; and
- Support intentional, mindful thinking.

Research in online discussion forums has evolved from examining their educational advantages and the required associated technology and technical skills for effective delivery to the study of the nature and quality

of social interactions occurring in these environments. Research is beginning to develop understanding of the social, cognitive, and teaching roles of instructors in online discussions (Blignaut & Trollip, 2003). Generally, discussion groups are used in a variety of ways: as a place for *social interaction* between learners and instructors (Kamin, Glickin, Hall, Quarantillo, & Merenstein, 2001), as a platform for *cognitive discourse* (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001) between course participants relating to course content, and a mailbox for course deliverables. Strong anecdotal evidence exists that it is more difficult to create and sustain online discussions around content that has a technical or quantitative nature than it is around more humanistic and open-ended topics in business, education, or psychology. Some research also suggests that discussion questions with correct or single answers may inhibit the development of discussions (Blignaut & Trollip, 2003).

As MacDonald and Caverly (2001) described, discussion types are driven by the different purposes of instruction and also by the students' ability as they become more comfortable with discussion online. Salmon (2000) suggests students grow in their ability to discuss online through a five-step incremental model: (a) access and motivation acquisition; (b) online socialization; (c) information exchange; (d) knowledge construction; and (e) independence development allowing learners to take charge of their own learning. Salmon (2000) also points out that although significant studies have attempted to describe online environments, far less has been written on what teachers, tutors, and learners attempt to accomplish online. Putman (1991) suggests that new users seek guidelines or rules early in the learning process. Online discussions are still developing these protocols. Protocols and processes are appearing in an effort to establish what online tutoring is as well as what it is not. Many schools are establishing guidelines for both faculty and participants to maximize the educational impact of online discussion forums (MacDonald & Caverly, 2001).

ONLINE DISCUSSION BOARDS AND IMPROVED LEARNING OUTCOMES

Some researchers have found that online discussion forums did not always provide increased learning. Stu-

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