Chapter XVIII
Facilitating Scholarly Discussion Boards for Human Resource Education

Davison M. Mupinga
Kent State University, USA

James E. Bartlett II
North Carolina State University, USA

Michelle E. Bartlett
HRD Leader, USA

ABSTRACT

Distance education is continuing to grow in popularity in postsecondary education. Over 75 percent of community colleges are offering some form of distance career and technical education (Johnson, Benson, Duncan, Shinkareva, Taylor, & Treat, 2004). While there are a variety of ways to deliver distance education instruction, the Internet has become the most widely used communication channel. There is an array of educational technology tools that allow instructors and students to communicate synchronously and asynchronously. Discussion boards, an asynchronous tool, are being used widely in a variety of courses. This chapter addresses how to facilitate scholarly discussion boards for human resource education.

INTRODUCTION

The number of distance education programs and courses has increased in higher education over the past decade. Specifically, a recent national study of community colleges found that 76.3% are offering distance career and technical education (CTE) courses online (Johnson, Benson, Duncan, Shinkareva, Taylor, & Treat, 2004). Within distance education the Internet has become a

communication channel that is widely used to deliver instruction. This communication channel supports many different tools to enhance learning. In the national study of distance education in CTE, it was stated that discussion boards were used in some part by 92% (n=162) of the respondents (Johnson, Benson, Duncan, Shinkareva, Taylor, & Treat, 2004). In addition to email and a course management system, discussion boards are the most widely used technology. The wide adoption of discussion boards in distance education shows how sizeable the potential impact of effectively using discussion boards could be in the learning process.

In the online learning environment, electronic or web-based discussions have become an integral component. The online environment provides innovative technology enhanced opportunities for communication and interaction between students and instructors and among students. Asynchronous online discussions (e.g., list-serves and discussion boards), do not require students to be on the computer at the same time. Synchronous forums (e.g., chats) do require the student and faculty to be on the computer at the same time and at the same virtual location. Both synchronous and asynchronous online discussions are common approaches that enhance communication among students and instructors in web-based learning environments; and these technologies elicit many cognitive indicators (Vess, 2005).

Biesenbach-Lucas (2003) stated that asynchronous discussions are a technique to create scholarly dialogue. Electronic discussions also provide tactics instructors may not be able to control in face-to-face classes, such as varying the amount of time individual students have for reflection, and responding or providing opportunities for students to participate in ongoing discussions irrespective of the location of the student (Beeghly, 2005). By grouping students into smaller virtual groups, electronic discussions create learning environments that elicit quality student discussions in classes with large enrollments (Bryant, 2005). However, despite these notable advantages, many instructors are reluctant to use the instructional technologies while others misuse the instructional technology, rendering online discussions ineffective (Kay, 2006).

A number of online students misuse valuable time participating in poorly structured online discussions, and in the end, get frustrated with the online discussion exercises. Poor course design of discussion activities then negatively impact the attitudes of students toward other online learning situations. This provides even further confirmation there is a high level of importance for developing effective online discussions. Based on an extensive review of literature, personal experiences, and feedback from CTE instructors/students in the online environment, this chapter describes effective techniques used in developing and moderating scholarly online discussions; strategies to engage students in online discussions; and effective methods of evaluating online discussions. Also this chapter includes instructors' resources for enhancing participation in online discussions.

BACKGROUND

To engage students actively with course material and apply concept discussions are one method that can be effectively integrate into a course (Penn State Schreyer Institute for Teaching Excellence, 2008), thereby increasing retention of information. The success of discussions, and specifically, online discussions depends on how well the discussions are designed, the role played by the facilitator (Wozniak & Silveira, 2004), and the manner in which the discussions are evaluated (Frey, Sass, & Alman, 2006). For instance, well designed online discussions, "allow students to talk about, question, restate, and interact with course content and the perspectives of others students. This dialogue complements and builds on the lecture and textbook content" (Teaching