Chapter 21
Andragogy and Online Discussions:
The Design and Facilitation of Effective Online Discussion for Adult Learners

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ABSTRACT

This chapter considers the functions of online discussion and concludes that discussion alone does not guarantee deep and lasting learning. Discussion should be rooted in a sound andragogical design practice to promote meaningful learning. Online discussion requires effective instructional design to enable adult learners to be engaged and to achieve learning outcome. The chapter explores discussion board design linked with adult learning traits and preferences as well as practical strategies to assist instructors and moderators as they facilitate instruction.

INTRODUCTION

Online discussion is commonly used as a means to promote student understanding of a topic and to facilitate social engagement among students or between students and instructor. Group discussion activities have long served as a standard learning strategy for online instruction. Research indicates the discussion activity to be a valuable approach to promote student and faculty engagement (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000; Sher, 2009; Lai & Savage, 2013; Selhorst, Bao, Williams, & Klein, 2017).

Many researchers support the idea that discussion in online learning enhances student learning and facilitates social engagement (An, Shin, & Lim, 2009; Hew & Cheung, 2013; Hrastinski, 2008). Synchronous discussions are convenient for students, particularly adult learners with professional and family commitments. Online discussion has the potential to enhance student collaboration (Hew & Cheung, 2013) and help students meet learning outcomes (Palmer, Holt, & Bray, 2008). The asynchronous online discussion environment offers students a flexible option to participate in online learning regardless of

geographical location (Hew & Cheung, 2013). Most relevant to the online adult student, online discussion offers the potential for collaborative knowledge-building process learning where each student becomes reflective, thinks critically, and understands concepts better than if she or he were studying alone (Hew & Cheung, 2013). Contrasted with informal online synchronous "chat" sessions, an asynchronous discussion board provides a written transcript of the conversation by which the discussion potentially becomes an additional text in the course (Hlinak, 2014).

However, the effects of online group discussion on student learning have rarely been investigated. Very little empirical research has been done through experimental design (Oh & Kim, 2016). The literature regarding asynchronous online discussion also indicates common pitfalls, including learners' limited participation in online discussions (Hew, Cheung, & Ng, 2010; Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006) and lack of depth in thinking and reflection (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005). While online discussion activities can serve as a strategy for reinforcing cognitive material and promoting a deeper understanding of course content, discussion boards have the potential to lack rich and dynamic dialogue and instead "serve as a field of obligatory discourse, hasty postings, and repetitive content" (Mooney, Southard, & Burton, 2014). Factors such as group dynamics (Mabrito, 2006), content (McLoughlin & Mynard, 2009), and instructor skill (Bliss & Lawrence, 2009) have the potential to positively or negatively influence student attitudes and overall success in discussion board activities.

While some debate exists about the overall effectiveness of discussion boards as pedagogical tools (Pao-Nan, 2012), threaded discussions have been a ubiquitous strategy for asynchronous online student social interaction (Mandernach, Gonzales, & Garrett, 2006; Pao-Nan, 2012). The use of online discussion alone does not guarantee deep and lasting learning (Darabi & Jin, 2013). Significant learning online requires effective and appropriate design for students to be cognitively engaged and reach the learning outcomes. Rotgans and Schmidt (2011) describe cognitive engagement as the extent to which students are willing and able to take on the learning task at hand. Adult learners' cognitive engagement is important for success in online learning (Oh & Kim, 2016). Lai and Savage (2013) found that the greatest level of student engagement took place when faculty used the learning management tool as a means to share their interests. In their best form, discussions provide a venue for teaching in an online setting that can be engaging, educational, and inclusive of all students (Selhorst et al., 2017).

In this chapter I explore the history of online discussion as part of the evolution of online learning. I also explore what has been found in the literature regarding the types of student interaction; adult learner motivation; the potential role of online discussion in adult learning; the Community of Inquiry framework; specific andragogical approaches for quality online discussions online media-based discussions; rationale for utilizing critical reflection; adult learner autonomy; and best practices for online discussion facilitation. A critical approach to the current theories and relevant examples of sound pedagogical practices are included.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND BACKGROUND

The Evolution of Online Discussion

Many instructional theories place an emphasis on the learning itself (Kiely, Sandman, & Truluck, 2004). No single learning theory or instructional model provides the complete blueprint for designing the most effective instruction for adult learners or establishing informative learning context and learner

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