Chapter 3
Building Relationship Through Discussion:
Innovative Ideas to Connect and Empower

Crystal Ann Brashear

iD https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0577-1114

Colorado Christian University, USA

ABSTRACT

Distance education programs have proliferated, sometimes growing faster than instructors can innovate. A problem plaguing educators for decades is how to translate the synergism flowing naturally through in-seat discussion into an online environment. This chapter begins with an overview of the various purposes for class discussion and an exploration of best practices for facilitating transformative conversation. It examines the benefits and challenges of synchronous and asynchronous online discussion, offering practical, creative solutions for each approach. The ultimate goals are fostering generative conversation and genuine connection. Strategies to accomplish this include setting clear expectation, adopting a consistent, probing co-participant stance, and teaching students self-facilitation. Out-of-the-box ideas include social annotation and simulation activities.

Online higher education programs offer many benefits. They can be more accessible from fiscal, geographical, and temporal standpoints (Barrio Minton et al., 2018; Benshoff & Gibbons, 2011). For the instructor, online programs provide the opportunity to innovate, to generate creative solutions for forming genuine connection with students (Benshoff & Gibbons, 2011).

PURPOSES OF CLASS DISCUSSION

Class discussion is one component of the online educational experience. Meaningful discussion draws on the unique social, cultural, and environmental perspectives of each student and the instructor, exposing participants to new ways of thinking and fostering a whole that is larger than the sum of its parts. This

richer perspective can then transfer into other learning contexts, empowering more advanced critical thinking and problem solving (Murphy et al., 2009). With class discussion, learners process, analyze, synthesize, and reflect aloud, which can help reveal both what students know and (perhaps more importantly) what they don't yet know (Boettcher, 2018). Class discussion can take different stances, depending on the goal the professor hopes to help students accomplish. A *critical analytic* stance (e.g., Collaborative Reasoning and Paideia Seminar) prompts students to bring a critical eye toward a particular text or collection of texts (Murphy et al., 2009). An *efferent* stance (e.g., Shared Inquiry, Instructional Conversations, and Questioning the Author) prioritizes knowledge acquisition and retrieval, reinforcing a specific set of ideas or skills that must be mastered (Murphy et al., 2009). An *expressive* stance (e.g., Grand Conversations, Book Club, and Literature Circles) explores student's emotional response and connection to a text or collection of texts (Murphy et al., 2009).

One major purpose of class discussion is to enhance critical literacy, which involves higher order thinking reflection on course content. The goal is for students to achieve a higher level of textual comprehension, moving deeper than surface understanding (Murphy et al., 2009). Does classroom discussion help to meet these goals effectively? A meta-analysis focused on class discussion was conducted by Murphy et al. (2009). Quantitative synthesis of 42 studies found that a variety of discussion stances were highly effective in enhancing students' inferential and literal comprehension, especially *efferent* ones. However, only a few stances were effective at enhancing students' reasoning, critical thinking, and textual argumentation abilities. Additionally, most discussion stances effectively increased student talk time while decreasing instructor talk time. Unfortunately, increases in student talk did not seem to cause improvement in student comprehension. It is important to note that this meta-analysis synthesized studies on school-aged children, not higher education learners. However, this poses an important question: Is online classroom discussion in higher ed spaces working to accomplish the goals it purports to accomplish?

Another major purpose of class discussion is to transform the learner. Eschenbacher (2020) differentiates between discussion that informs and trains, versus conversation that transforms. The former assumes a deficit within the learner, while the latter expects the student to take an active role by leveraging personal experience and challenging previously accepted paradigms (Eschenbacher, 2020). Transformative conversations are best conducted within an environment of mutual respect and appreciation for others' unique ways of seeing things (Eschenbacher, 2020). These discussions open up choice for participants, who are invited to consider how they might want to live their lives (Eschenbacher, 2020). Discussants engage in *non-teleological* dialogue requiring them to risk critical self-reflection. This type of discussion, though challenging, offers potential for profound personal change. Authors Shohet and Shohet (2020, p. 18) kick off their book on transformative conversations in supervision by sharing the following story, from Anderson (2023):

Once upon a time, a very strong woodcutter asked for a job with a timber merchant. The pay was really good and so were the working conditions. For those reasons, the woodcutter was determined to do his best. His boss gave him an axe and showed him where he would work. The first day, the woodcutter felled 18 trees. 'Congratulations,' the boss said. 'Go on that way!' Motivated by the boss's words, the woodcutter tried harder the next day, but he could only bring down 15 trees. The third day he tried even harder, but he could only manage 10 trees. Day after day, he finished with fewer trees. 'I must be losing my strength,' the woodcutter thought. He went to the boss and apologised, saying that he could not understand what was going on. 'When was the last time you sharpened your axe?' the boss asked. 'Sharpen?' said the woodcutter. 'I've had no time to sharpen my axe. I've been so busy trying to cut trees.'

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