Chapter 16

Not Another Discussion Board:
One Online Instructor's Reflective Practices to Create Effective Student Engagement

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ABSTRACT

This chapter sheds light on the journey of one online instructor's self-examination and purposeful approaches to engaging and eliciting robust student interactions in online graduate asynchronous settings. Centered on Knowles' Principles of Andragogy and Vygotsky's Social Constructivism, the researcher utilized an ongoing formal reflection process to gather student responses, alter course materials, and strived to create an environment that supported growth mindset, learner autonomy and the online graduate experience.

What immediate response(s) is conjured when "discussion board" is mentioned? Is your reaction steeped with great memories of interacting and learning from peers and instructors, or are they one of potential dread and "task" based on a class you once took or are currently teaching? In an online setting, discussion boards are a standard tool to encourage students to share their knowledge and understanding and learn from others. Discussion boards support a constructivist learning approach that aligns with andragogical theory (Knowles, 1984). However, how does an instructor illicit more profound student learning through self- and peer-constructed knowledge, collaboration, and participation by utilizing discussion boards in an online asynchronous graduate course (Lyons & Evans, 2013)?

Teaching for over 20 years in online and face-to-face settings within P12, undergraduate, and graduate environments, I had high expectations and a naive mindset regarding quality written student responses. In 2013, I entered my tenure as an Assistant Professor within a College of Education with limited experience concerning online discussion boards and student engagement. I attended graduate school face-to-face and taught undergraduate technology courses in a computer lab. A portion of my new faculty workload included online course delivery in asynchronous undergraduate teacher education courses. As a newbie, it was evident that the quintessential discussion board was a mainstay in most online curricula. The mere

mention of the word "discussion board" often sent my student's eyes rolling and an occasional sigh. If I told them we could skip the discussion board if they participated in round table discussions and whole group sharing, students would become engaged and chatty as if their grades depended upon it.

After several years in primarily undergraduate teacher education courses, I applied to teach online, asynchronous graduate coursework within my college. Recentering my courses on Knowles' (1984) Principles of Andragogy and Vygotsky's Social Constructivism (1978), where I expected that a portion of student learning was based on peer interactions and learning from others, I pressed on with high hopes. Based on my presumption of graduate students, why would they not naturally jump in and discuss the content with one another and be motivated by the rich experiences that their peers were sharing? Again, the thoughts regarding a naive mindset with high expectations swirled around in my head and were the basis of change. I began to reflect on my role in student learning and better understand who my students were and what they needed as learners, especially post-pandemic.

After constantly examining and observing student discussion board interactions, which contained little depth or concertedly less effort to "dig in" and engage with one another like on-campus courses made me reflect and dig deeper into soliciting the responses I knew my students were capable of as P12 classroom teachers. I wondered if meaningful human connections, peer sharing of knowledge and experiences, and genuine engagement were possible in an online asynchronous setting. What were *they* doing wrong as learners that they responded just to respond, and at best, their discussion responses or peer feedback were surface level or Recall Level per *Webb's Depth of Knowledge* (Francis, 2017)? Meaning, why were students not sharing their own application, analysis of tools they were using in my course, and applying the tools to the context of the classroom or workplace? Based on my expectations, why did I feel my students were doing the bare minimum? Societally, we have moved into a need for a workday that we have more recently coined "Bare-minimum Mondays" as a shielding act of self-care on the job (DiDonato, 2023). Were students living out the mantra of the bare minimum in my online classes?

I began to reflect on my instructional methods and expectations and re-set my courses regarding what portion of the learning I could control as the course facilitator and the "guide on the side." Self-admittedly, the change had to begin with me and how I framed the expectations and questions, thus impacting student engagement and responses. I also began to take stock of my students' course reflections and how I had utilized the use of reflection to alter my methods, materials, and overall teaching. The Transference Reflection Cycle asks students in the first stage, or the Exploration Stage, to write their initial reactions, thoughts, feelings, and biases as they enter the course (Appendix 1: *Transference Reflection Cycle*). I began having students initiate their reflection in the first week of my courses, and it proved to be very telling concerning what my students were experiencing as learners. As adult learners in an online graduate program, most of whom are full-time P12 educators, their need for support and understanding was overwhelming. After all, I was a graduate student in their first statistics course, thinking I had landed on Mars and would never understand quantitative research methods' discussions, context, or relevance. My students needed my support, encouragement, and compassion as they began their journey as online graduate students.

The changes I began to make regarding my discussion board expectations and rubric, even before COVID-19, were incremental, and it took me several semesters to notice a change in the level of students' responses, engagement, and sharing. However, the changes became evident in my student's discussion board interactions and final reflection documents as an initial and final assignment in my courses. As previously stated, I made minor changes to the standard discussion board prompts from "Respond to two peers" to "Interact with peers and engage in organic and genuine feedback, discussion, sharing, and

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