

Chapter 1

Does Online Discussion Produce Increased Interaction and Critical Thinking[†]?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter explores the question: Does online discussion increase critical thinking and interaction? It presents a selective review of the literature concerned with critical thinking and/or interaction during online discussion. It reports a program of 5 studies of the effects of instructional media and instructional methods on critical thinking and interaction. Study 1 tests the influence on critical thinking of online vs. face-to-face discussion, individual vs. group consensus in summarizing discussion, and discussion of examples of concepts vs. discussion of more abstract analysis. Study 2 examines the relationship between the level of critical thinking in discussion and the quality of papers later written by discussants. Study 3 explores the question: Can a teaching assistant (TA) help to facilitate student-to-student interaction and critical thinking? Study 4 asks: Does personal relevance of discussion topic influence student participation and level of critical thinking in discussion online? Study 5 asks: Does the use of rubrics influence the level of student interaction and/or the level of critical thinking in online discussion? The evidence suggests that it is easier to influence students to interact than to think critically. The chapter offers some suggestions on how to increase student-to-student interaction and critical thinking.

BACKGROUND

Whether labeled “discussion,” “dialogue” or “conversation,” the liveliest interactions are critical. When participants take a critical stance, they are committed to questioning and exploring even the

most widely accepted ideas and beliefs. Conversing critically implies an openness to rethinking cherished assumptions and to subjecting those assumptions to a continuous round of questioning, argument, and counterargument. One of the defining characteristics of critical discussion is that participants are willing to enter the conversation with open minds. This requires people to be flexible enough

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to adjust their views in the light of persuasive, well-supported arguments and confident enough to retain their original opinions when rebuttals fall short. Although agreement may sometimes be desirable, it is by no means a necessity (Brookfield and Preskill, p. 7).

After more than 30 years of teaching in the classroom, it was teaching online that really got this teacher to look closely at the nature of discussion. Much of what is called discussion in my online classes has been disappointing. Come to find out, many teachers share that disappointment. That makes me wonder why I didn't notice this let down more in my classroom discussions. Is it because the classroom is a place of highly engaged discussion, the give and take of ideas among equals? In a little book on learning from experience, Edward Cell writes:

Sometimes we learn a lot from our experience of ourselves and our transactions with our world. Friends share their hopes and fears, we test ourselves in difficult times, power reveals itself in unsuspected places. At other times we seem to learn little or nothing at all. We follow routine, talk with echoes of ourselves, cling to comfortable beliefs. As my colleague Bob Zeller put it, "Sometimes someone will say they've had twenty-five years of experience at something when the truth is they've had one year of experience repeated twenty-four times" (Cell, 1984, p. 3).

I am guessing that what I have done in the classroom is pretty much take what I can get, that is, enjoy the give and take with those who will give and take. I have accepted the head nodding onlookers as participants; I have forgiven the reticent students as struggling with speaking up; and I suppose I have been stumped by those who I just can't seem to reach, though I am so busy with the others that maybe I have failed to recognize the real nature of the quality of discussion in the classroom. That is all pure speculation

from one teacher trying to think out loud. But you cannot go very far these days in the teaching world before you bump into the question of online teaching versus classroom teaching as a tug of war between the cold and the warm, the inhuman and human, the asocial and social, the not real and the real. People seem to hold strong views on the value of teaching and learning online versus in the classroom and much of their views are tied to their beliefs about the quality of discussion in those two environments. What is the truth about online discussion?

There are so many questions related to this debate about interaction in an educational course. What do we mean when we speak about participation in a course? What is discussion, conversation, interaction? How important is discussion to learning? Or, how does learning work? What is a good discussion or a good conversation? Does a good discussion aid learning or is it good for other reasons than simply its effects on learning? Do good discussions result in better student papers? Is there more interaction and human connection in the classroom than online? How does human connection relate to learning? What do we mean by more interaction or more human connection? How is the process of meaning-making affected by discussion? Can online discussion be improved by managing the discussion? Are discussions in contexts outside of the classroom influenced by the same factors as educational discussions?

Having asked all these questions about discussion in education, one wonders about other contexts. How does online discussion compare to face-to-face discussion in business, support groups, political discussion, and other contexts?

Not only do people hold positions on many of the questions listed above, they often maintain strongly held views on these questions. Faculty encounter the paradoxical set of views that hold, on the one hand, that online teaching and learning is progressive and innovative, part of the flow of keeping up with the times. But they also encounter the strongly held view, on the other hand, that

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