ONLINE FORUM DISCUSSION: FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Abstract
Online forum gains its weight in our daily life and it can serve as a tool for constructive learning. Survey on 39 students after been given an online forum discussion as assignment discovered that 95% of them never being exposed to this type of formal assignment before that. However, about 67% of them knew that they can acquire scientific knowledge through online forum discussion. Around 54% of the respondents agreed that online forum discussion had motivated them in their learning process, while 72% of them found that the discussion had inspired their creativity. About 59% of them found that the discussion had elevated the interaction between their course mates. The respondents named the most attractive point of online forum discussion was less interference from the instructor, while the least attractive, the relatedness to the syllabus. From 32 respondents, who were frequent internet users, 78% of them could accept the usage of online forum discussion as formal assignment in future, while among the non-frequent was 50%. About 41% of the frequent internet users could accept the usage of online forum discussion in replacement of formal face-to-face lecture, while there were only 14% for non-frequent users. As been found motivating, inspiring the creativity, and increase the interaction by majority students, online forum discussion is a good tool for constructive learning, especially for the frequent internet users.

Keywords: Online forum discussion, college students, constructive learning.

Introduction

Gaining the ability to learn constructively through online tools can be a merit for students. As online forums gain their popularity, the forum has become an important source of knowledge, as well as an interesting way to augment the teaching and learning process (Markel 2001). Through the forum, new knowledge can be learned through the discussion constructively, with technology as a tool.

Many educational bodies and teachers have blended the online mode of teaching into their traditional face-to-face teaching methods (Ranganathan et al. 2007). Some teachers even suggested the design of an ideal full online course (Carr-Chellman and Duchastel 2000). As the web can be a medium for delivery of instruction created with fewer boundaries from time and space, students might find the online-based-learning brings benefits to teaching process.

Online forum discussion was reported could bring benefits to the participated students, including the upscale of student community (Dawson 2006), participation and collaboration (Ruberg et al. 1996), promote critical thinking, and constructive learning (Warschauer 1997; Dehler & Parras-Hernandez 1998).

Although can be a good pedagogical tool, the forum raised some controversial as well, such as the lack of academic discussion and the control of the instructors (Markel 2001, Thomas 2002). This research focused on the responses of college students to the online forum discussion.

Design of the Forum

A total of 39 students in the programme of Bachelor in Biotechnology took part in the forum, with the discussion on the current issues associated to biotechnology. Eight of the students took part in two forums, while 31 of them (were split into two groups) took part in one forum respectively.

Inti International University facilitates in-house online forum through Inti-online, a site administrated by the university as an online intermediate between the teachers and the students within the university. The online forums created were closed forums, where only the participants could gain access to the forums. All the comments and the contributions can only be left with real names, thus can be easily tracked.

The topics for the forums were posted with notices sent to the respective participating students, and closed within one week's time. There was neither limitation set for the number of comments must be achieved, nor the minimum words for each of the comments. Teacher, who served more like a facilitator, possessed minimum interference, yet elicited the students to discuss deeper into the topics posted, with personal email sent to particular students and with open-ended comments. At the end of a forum, summary based on the contents of the discussion, were given as a wrap-up to the forum. The students joined the forum individually.

The Overall Perspective of the Students

Study was conducted in the form of questionnaire, filled by the students, after taken the forum as an individual project. From the response, 67% or 26 of the students were aware of the role of online forum discussion as a source to acquire knowledge. However, only two of them had ever taken the forum as a formal educational event. The high number of first timers might set the result of this study different from the study on those who had taken the forum as a formal educational event for many times (Thomas 2002). They might not used to the online learning mode, as well as the thrust to the peers had not been built up. So, the result of this research is more focused on the students that had just been exposed to the forum for the first time.

Other questions surveyed comprise of the motivation, inspiration of creativity, and interactive that can be promoted by online forum discussion. Figure 1 shows the overall perspective of the students towards some of the question surveyed. From the total of 39 students, 52% of them found the forum motivated their learning process, 74% of them agreed that the forum inspired them to think creatively, while 59% of them agreed that their interactive with their peers was increased through the forum.
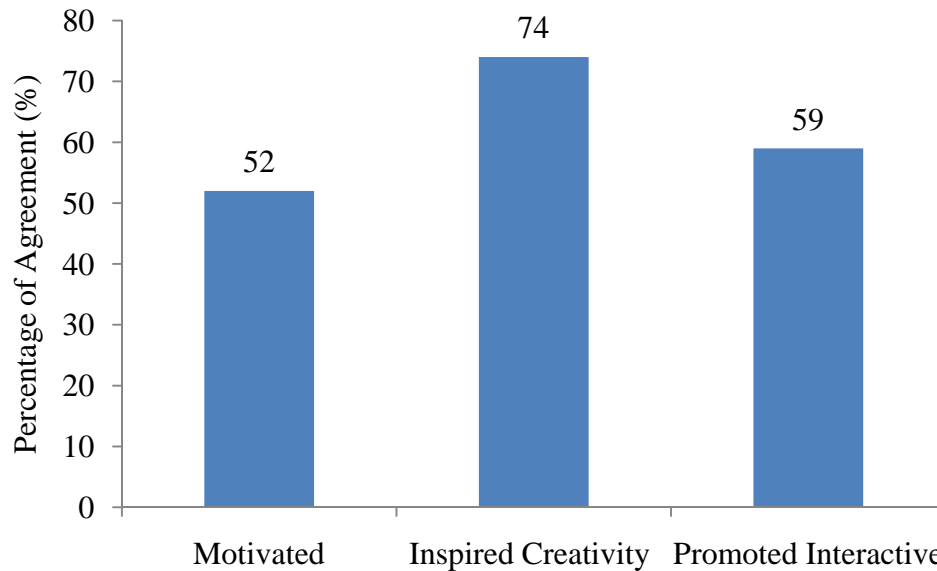
Figure 1: The percentage of agreement of students after taking part in online forum discussion.

When been asked about the opinion to replace some of the formal assignment by online forum discussion, 74% of the students agreed that the online forum based assignment somehow has the advantage and can be conducted as formal assignment. However, only 41% of them had agreed that online forum could be used as formal way of teaching.

The Opinion from the Certain Group of Students

The questionnaire required the students to indicate whether they are frequent internet users or not, as the frequent is defined by more than five times in a week. A total of 32 students from 39 or 82% were frequent internet users. Motivation, inspiration of creativity, and interactive wise, 59% of frequent internet and 57% of infrequent internet users had the opinion that the forum had at least brought two benefits out of three as stated above to them. The frequency of internet usage was not an obvious factor towards different opinion from the students.

A total of 12 students were indicated as active in class. From that active group of students, 58% of them responded as the forum had at least brought two benefits out of three (motivated, inspiration of creativity, and promoted interactive). For the group which is more passive, 55% had the same opinion. From the responses from these groups of students, no clear lines can be drawn between active and passive students in the lecture, or frequent and infrequent internet users, on the benefits that could have been brought to them through online forum discussion.

However, when been asked about their opinion to use online forum discussion as assignment, 78% from the group of frequent internet users found no problem to accept it, with the infrequent group, just 50%. In replacing some of the lectures with the forum, 41% of the frequent and 14% of the infrequent group had agreed. Statistic study also shows the students who are passive in class had higher acceptance over the usage of online forum discussion as assignment and lecture.

From the responses, it is clear that the frequency of internet usage influenced the acceptance of students towards the usage of online forum discussion as formal assignment and lecture, while the students with less participation in class favoured online forum as assignment and lecture more than the students who were active in participation. Table 1 shows the summary of the study done.

Table 1:   The percentage (%) of students agreed of using online forum as assignment and lecture from different groups.

Using Online forum as:	Internet user		Participation in class	
	Frequent	Infrequent	Active	Passive
Assignment	78	50	50	85
Lecture	41	14	33	48

Motivation towards Participation of Online Forum Discussion

Motivation is important to keep a forum moving. Six factors were stated in the questionnaire for the students to choose, to be numbered one to six, from the most motivating to the least. The six factors are namely (1) interesting topics, (2) total marks assigned, (3) accessibility of forum, (4) less interference by instructor, (5) relatedness to syllabus, and (6) more time freedom.

From the responses, less interference by instructor scored highest with 23% of the students, while the least was the relatedness to the syllabus, with 5%. The second to the fifth were namely interesting topics, accessibility of forum, marks assigned, and more time freedom. Students like to take part in the forum as freely as they could without interference by their instructor. As more and more threads generated in time, they gained more motivation to leave their comment on the forum and keep the forum moving. If the instructor possessed too much control over the forum, the students' participation might be diminished. The relatedness to the syllabus was been chosen the least motivating factor to keep the forum moving. As total marks assigned sat low in the hierarchy, students might be willing join the forum without high marks assigned for the participation.

Conclusion

The current education climate emphasizes the usage of internet as a teaching medium. Online forum discussion helps to create a platform of asynchronous virtual discussion, where verbal communication is not required. With most of the students were the first timers to this pedagogical tool, majority of them had agreed that online forum discussion had brought benefit to them, especially on the inspiring creativity of the students. Besides, the forum had increased the interactive between the students with their peers. This is in agreement with the research done by Dowson (2006) contribute towards a better community (Hargeaves et al. 1996).

The group of students of frequent internet users and the group which was not active in class tended to accept the implementation of online forum discussion as assignment and lecture more than the infrequent internet users and those who were active in class. The most motivating factors to keep the forum moving was less interference by instructor while the least, the relatedness of the forum to the syllabus.

The widespread of internet and the dominancy of technology by students might be a factor to boost the online forum discussion as a favoured channel to acquire knowledge. However, the instructor, on the other hand, has to ensure that the forum must be properly conducted to maintain its academic quality.

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