

# **Rapid Resilience: Use of Discussion Circles in the time of COVID-19**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper describes the successful use of Discussion Circles to support student learning and promote continuing student engagement when our previously hybrid delivery MLS program courses were forced to move to entirely online delivery in Spring 2020 due to COVID-19. Although Discussion Circles, or literature circles as they are sometimes called, are not a new pedagogical technique, the use to which we put them in this unique situation is worthy of note, as are the outcomes of their use. Outcomes are described and observations are shared from the perspective of faculty both experienced in and new to hybrid course delivery and the use of Discussion Circles as well as the student experience of Discussion Circles.

## **ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS**

curriculum; education; online learning; pedagogy; students

## **AUTHOR KEYWORDS**

discussion circles; literature circles; student engagement; synchronous discussion

## **INTRODUCTION**

Emporia State University's (ESU) School of Library and Information Management (SLIM) delivers its Master of Library Science (MLS) degree courses in a hybrid format to cohorts of students who move through required courses as a group. Instruction is delivered both online through the Canvas learning management system and in face-to-face class meetings, which occur twice per class per semester over a weekend in eight geographic locations. Faculty travel to the students in these locations and teach in classrooms at universities, colleges, or public

libraries. In-person, real-time class meetings provide valuable opportunities not only for face-to-face instruction but also for in-person interactions among students over the course of the two-year program. They promote the development of professional networks that span careers and have proven to be a successful pedagogical.

The COVID-19 pandemic's interruption of SLIM's weekend in-person class meetings during the Spring 2020 semester represented a big change for students used to regular face-to-face interaction with their classmates, regional directors, and SLIM faculty. Moving to fully online course delivery was accomplished by moving face-to-face real-time class meetings online using web conferencing tools. Several faculty were making use of Discussion Circles in their teaching at this time. In SLIM courses, Discussion Circles are an assignment in which small groups of 3 to 5 students are instructed to meet synchronously at a day and time of their own choosing via conferencing software such as Zoom to respond to assigned discussion prompts. By the end of the spring semester we realized that Discussion Circles were providing students with some of the real-time, synchronous learning opportunities with their classmates that they had lost when course delivery went fully online. Recognizing this, in Fall 2020 and Spring 2021, as courses continued to be delivered fully online, Discussion Circles were adopted by more faculty. In this paper we report our observations of the ways in which Discussion Circles can improve student learning, expected and unexpected, from the perspective of faculty both experienced in and new to hybrid course delivery and the use of Discussion Circles.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

The Discussion Circle format grew out of the practice of literature circles, which have long been used as a technique to encourage students to engage with literature at a deeper level and to promote a student voice (Daniels, 2002). Although originally developed for traditional face-to-face learning environments, literature circles can be effective in online environments to encourage student interaction in discussion boards and can lead to improved quality of work and the development of collaborative skills (Kilbane & Milman, 2010). Literature circles in an online environment can also provide opportunities for students to practice an array of information seeking skills and to develop and hone technology skills in the course of preparation for the discussion (Bromley et al., 2014). They may be adapted and expanded to support deeper engagement with and understanding of the material (Cloonan et al., 2019) and may also prove effective in developing socioemotional skills (Venegas, 2019).

Online and blended teaching environments differ from face-to-face environments in many ways and issues such as faculty presence and student engagement assume larger roles in student success. Gurley (2018) provides an excellent overview of the intersection of faculty preparation and teacher presence in blended and online instruction through the lens of Garrison,

Anderson, and Archer's Community of Inquiry framework, which was specifically designed to identify the essential components of asynchronous online learning in higher education. The importance of learner interaction and student presence to the quality of online learning has also been noted by several researchers who have sought to identify strategies for fostering student presence (Bolliger & Martin, 2018), student engagement (Farrell & Brunton, 2020; Galikayan & Admiraal, 2019), student interaction (Galikyan, Admiraal & Kester, 2021), and reflexive learning (Kahn et al., 2017.) The structure and management of online learning environments is also crucial to the students' connectedness to each course and Shea et al. (2006) note the importance of directed facilitation of learning as well as sound instructional design in fostering a learning community.

## **DEVELOPMENT OF DISCUSSION CIRCLES AT SLIM**

Discussion Circles is the term we use to describe small group discussions among a subset of students in a single section of a SLIM course, usually three to five students. Its use in SLIM originated in 2016 by a faculty member teaching an elective in young adult literature with the intention of encouraging students to engage with literature at a deeper level. Its successful use led to the technique being adopted in other courses and by other faculty. Since faculty experienced in teaching required courses tended to share course content as well as successful pedagogical techniques with less experienced faculty, the use of Discussion Circles expanded to at least three required courses taught by three faculty members by Spring 2020 and to six required courses taught by four faculty members by Spring 2021.

In practice, the use of Discussion Circles is intentionally similar across courses. Students are provided with instructional material describing the Discussion Circles in a variety of methods. First, there is a page that describes what the Discussion Circles are, how they factor into the students' course participation scores, and explicit instructions on how to run the Discussion Circles. These instructions include descriptions of who comprises the Discussion Circles (i.e., that these groups are tied to the same group make-up of a core assignment), recommendations to exchange contact information for arranging meeting times, and information about how to share the Discussion Circle recordings and complete the Discussion Circle Feedback Forms using the Quizzes/Surveys function in Canvas. Instructors provide detailed instructions on how to record the meetings, how to sign on to a meeting, and how to mute video and sound. Students are also provided with "Rules for Discussion Circles," which includes information about length (about 60 minutes), taking turns as facilitator, and the responsibilities of the facilitator (i.e., set up the meeting, decide the order of topics, keep the conversation going, ensure everyone has a chance to participate, etc.).

In each of the modules with a Discussion Circle, instructors include an assignment page with the topics that should be discussed in that module's Discussion Circle. This is where students can upload the recording or link to the discussion that occurred. Finally, after each Discussion Circle, students are asked to complete a Feedback Form (using Canvas' Quizzes/ Surveys function) that asks students to indicate their group membership, reflect on how they thought the discussion went, and list anything else that arose in the discussion about which they still have questions.

## **RESULTS: PROVIDING NEEDED FLEXIBILITY AND RESILIENCE DURING COVID-19**

SLIM instructors have been using Discussion Circles for about five years. Evidence of their efficacy as a learning tool is collected in the form of instructor reflections and student feedback, both solicited and unsolicited. Some of the most outstanding observations we, as instructors, have made include:

- A significant reduction in the need to intervene in potential student group disputes and conflicts, due to improved group collaboration and communication.
- Positive reports from students about their experience of group work in this context (both in Discussion Circle feedback and feedback solicited at the end of group assignments).
- Unsolicited feedback from students about positive effects on their learning, understanding of course materials, and achievement of course learning outcomes (both in Discussion Circle feedback and in end of term evaluation responses).
- When the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted the in-person delivery of SLIM courses, they provided much needed live contact among students.

As Discussion Circles are often used in place of regular, weekly discussion boards, the Discussion Circles inject a bit of energy into that week's content and are especially well suited for topics which students enjoy discussing at greater length. Because the assignment requires linking to a recording and completing a short survey, it also means instructors are able to observe students engaging at a different level in the material and not merely rely on reading and assessing yet another weekly discussion board post. Furthermore, since participation in Discussion Circles provides interactive opportunities for creating and sharing new knowledge, it helps foster in students a sense of a productive learning community, which is a notable pedagogical accomplishment in an online environment.

The increased use of Discussion Circles that occurred as SLIM courses transitioned to online only resulted in more students being exposed more often to resilience-building learning

activities. This reduced feelings of isolation created by the lockdown, increased feelings of belonging to a community of learners, and increased the sense of having made a positive contribution to a community. Assignment instructions were designed to teach students how to conduct a successful DC (e.g. staying on time, ensuring everyone has a chance to speak). Discussion prompts encourage students to solve problems collaboratively and develop inquisitive responses to challenges. Feelings of academic competence, belonging to and contributing to a community, and accomplishing collaborative problem solving are all key factors in developing resilience (Sagor, 1996).

### **Student reflections**

In the required surveys following each Discussion Circle, students reflect on the helpfulness of preparing for the sessions, their ability to participate in synchronous discussion, and lessons learned from participating. It is gratifying for instructors to hear that students take preparation for the Discussion Circles seriously. One student respondent observed:

Each member of the group was prepared and had interesting points to make for each discussion point. It was helpful to have the discussion, simply for the fact that talking things out clarifies the topic and helps to strengthen and deepen understanding.

For some students working towards these Discussion Circles can help them be intentional and targeted in their preparation: “since I knew I was going to be having the discussion, I focused on learning how to communicate the objectives and that was a great motivator in helping me learn.”

The synchronous nature of the conversations are particularly helpful for students in clarifying key points and something that the Discussion Circles uniquely offer. As one student reflected, “being able to bounce ideas and get other viewpoints on things I was a little confused about helped.” Another student spoke about how this kind of conversation was helpful preparation for the future:

I also appreciated the opportunity to contribute to a live discussion as that's an area I feel I need practice in. Sometimes I have a difficult time formulating thoughts on the spot no matter how prepared I am, so more exposure to live group discussions on a small scale is a great benefit for me.

Sharing ideas helps students clarify their understanding of course material. “We helped each other contextualize and understand the material. This week's material was difficult, so it was nice to talk through what each of us didn't understand.” Students emphasized how this time for clarifying and reflecting even helps them set goals for the rest of the semester:

I think we took some major strides and came closer to better understanding some of the materials we all struggled on -- but also realized we had many of the issues in understanding other materials, which gives us all a collective goal to work on in future discussions.

This time for self- and group reflection on how to prepare more effectively for future Discussion Circles was a common theme among students. One student in particular reflected:

I should have devoted a bit more time to trying to parse through the reading more thoroughly; ...I think I would have benefitted from taking notes and spending more time with the reading. I'm going to ensure that I'm fully prepared for the next Discussion Circle in a couple weeks, especially since I have offered to be the facilitator.

Though the majority of feedback was very positive regarding the Discussion Circles, there is the occasional example of a student who does not find it as helpful (e.g., in one class, one out of 28 students). In the words of one student:

When it is something that requires a lot of focus to learn, I do not find small group discussions helpful. I appreciate that group work duplicates what happens in the workplace. Brainstorming, delegation, and project management with groups of people are tasks everyone finds in their work on some level. I prefer to work independently to study and learn.

## **DISCUSSION**

While student feedback and observations from SLIM faculty point to a number of advantages of utilizing Discussion Circles to facilitate student learning and engagement in a predominantly online learning environment, there are several distinct challenges pertaining to group dynamics that need to be accounted for when designing and implementing instructional activities that rely on the use of Discussion Circles. The first consideration includes relatively limited opportunities for synchronous communication between the instructor and students, which is essential for clarifying the goals, objectives, and general logistics of participating in student Discussion Circles (McConnell, 2000; Smith, 2005). Second, because Discussion Circles are comprised of students with different backgrounds, communication styles, and learning preferences, some participants may feel skeptical about group work and reluctant to engage due to prior negative experiences or the presence of “difficult” group members. Ensuring active participation by all students is another concern that can, however, be at least partially addressed through instructor feedback based on their review of discussion recordings.

Additionally, other potential issues with online group work may include students' lack of skill and the “free rider and sucker effect” (Roberts & McInnerney, 2007). The latter is frequently associated with the issue of social loafing that “arises when certain team members reduce their physical, perceptual, or cognitive effort in group-based activities” (Rajaguru & Gayathri, 2020, p. 484). As is the case with any type of collaborative work, participation in Discussion Circles requires social skills and an ability to compromise in order to function well in a team environment, as well as a substantial commitment of student time and energy, along with certain technology requirements and other resources.

There can also be drawbacks for the faculty, including an increase in time taken to grade the Discussion Circle assignments. While credit is awarded for the submission of the discussion recording and the completion of the post-discussion survey, there is a temptation to do more than spot check the discussions. As each discussion recording may be an hour in length, viewing of recordings can take large amounts of time, even if viewed faster than real time. Faculty must learn to compromise on obtaining a complete picture of the students’ understanding of course material and rely on the student-generated questions in the post-discussion survey.

## CONCLUSION

Discussion Circles have proven to be an effective replacement of the face-to-face component in the SLIM curriculum and a worthwhile undertaking for coordinated, semester-long learning activities, such as core assignments of a course. Students have responded positively to the increased interaction with one another, and faculty have a better understanding of student comprehension of course material. While this instructional tool may not be as useful for shorter student interactions within individual learning modules, its use during the semester offers an effective way of promoting student engagement, fostering collaborative understanding, and increasing student learning.

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