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Chapter 8

Making Asynchronous Online Discussions Meaningful: An Introduction to The Pioneer Method with Robust Scaffolding

Matthew D. LaPlante

The students in my graduate cohort were motivated. Most were teachers with years of experience. Some had won national awards. Several were experts on working with at-risk learners. These were people who knew how to learn. Yet we were all struggling with our online classes.

We were not reluctant online learners. We had all been drawn to California State University East Bay's Online Teaching and Learning program precisely because of our interest in this emerging modality. Our instructors were experts in their disciplines. The assignments were well related to the readings. We were following the assignment instructions, dutifully checking off each of the boxes labeled "mastery" on our instructors' rubrics. And it was not at all an issue that my fellow students and I were spread out across the United States. In phone calls, chat groups, and the occasional grainy video calls (this was in 2009, a decade before the "Zoom Boom" of video conferencing), we built intellectual connections and lifelong friendships, even though many of us would not meet in person until graduation day.

So, what was the problem? Every class was largely centered around a set of questions that were to be answered and debated on an online discussion board. But the responses to these prompts never seemed to come close to mirroring the breadth and depth of conversations that happen in brick-and-mortar classrooms. They did not feel like a true academic discussion. There are endless ways to characterize an effective discussion. In this chapter, I adhere to the definition for "true academic discussion" built upon prior research in traditional classrooms (Alvermann et al., 1987; Guzzetti, et al., 1993) in which student voices dominate, students interact with one another, students contemplatively communicate, and students are expected to provide evidence to support what they are discussing. I will further suggest that a true academic discussion is the heart of a pedagogy that prioritizes voice, co-creation, social construction, and self-discovery through the employment of the learning dispositions known as the Habits of Mind (Kallick & Zmuda, 2017). In particular, the Habits of listening with understanding and empathy, questioning and posing problems, thinking and communicating with clarity and precision, striving for accuracy, and thinking interdependently are key in discussions that promote depth and meaning.

Alas, it did not feel like these things were happening in the discussions in our classes. These discussions were most active on the first and last days of the period, with little activity happening in between. The asynchrony made it hard to track and follow any single theme. There was a lot of cheerleading ("Good point, Deb!") and not a lot of contemplative debate, let alone the reflective, evidence-based kind of discourse that helps challenge rigid views and stoke new ideas (Oros, 2007). When our instructors engaged, any threads that were active at that point ended as we re-centered our efforts to address the professor.

For me, the promise of online learning—that well-designed virtual environments could become every bit as meaningful as brick-and-mortar classrooms while fulfilling the promise of expanding equity (Warschauer & Matuchniak, 2010)—seemed to be losing its luster.

The Best Practices

Early into my studies, I mentioned my concerns to one of my instructors. “It really does fail to live up to the promise,” she lamented, “but I don’t think anyone has figured out how to actually make it work.”

That was disheartening. This was an expert in online learning, admitting that a central element of her class was a bust—and shrugging it off because it was no more of a failure than the discussions happening in other online classes. Impudently, I challenged her. “Surely someone has stumbled upon some best practices, right?” I asked. “Yes,” she said, “and what we’re doing in this class are supposedly the best practices.”

As evidence, she directed me to what remains one of the most cited, and presumably emulated, examples of what a quality online discussion should look like, a model built on a case study at a large U.S. university from 1999 to 2001 (Gilbert & Dabbagh, 2004). The study population was similar in many ways to my cohort; the classes studied were iterations of a graduate course on instructional technology and learning theory. That seemed to be a promising start. But the classes evaluated in the study were not, in fact, fully online—the students and professor met face-to-face each week. As such, any successes of the Gilbert and Dabbagh model could not be separated from the hybrid nature of the classes in which they were taught. That did not mean these methods could not work in a fully asynchronous course, only that the case study did not offer any evidence that it would. Yet this was the structure my professor, and many others at our university at that time, had adopted. Each of these instructors had closely adhered to a protocol that included:

- Required participation.
- Web-based reading resources that explained the role of online teachers and learners.
- Student facilitators drawn assigned to lead discussions and an instructor-provided rubric of expectations for how to carry out that duty.
- A list of tips for successful online discourse for students.
- Guidelines about the frequency of posts.

These seemed like good guidelines. But, at least from my perspective, this structure did not create true academic discussions. When professors were involved, it was their voices that dominated, and when they were not, it was their proxy, the student facilitators, who directed the flow of the conversation. It was often unclear who students were interacting with, or if they were truly interacting or merely posting, as if on a physical bulletin board (a place where one leaves things for others to find, but not where one sticks around to interact with others). If students were indeed being contemplative, it seemed they were contemplating how to fit all rubric requirements into the shortest post possible. And lacking much, if any, guidance on how the assertions in a post should be backed, most students simply used their own personal experiences.

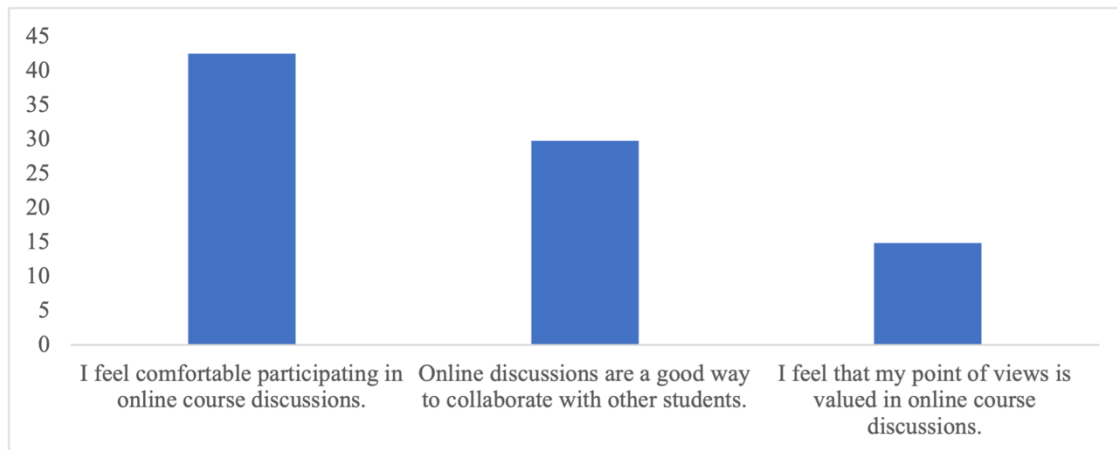
When I re-scrutinized the data from the Gilbert and Dabbagh paper, it was clear the model used did not do much to improve the quality of discussions in the classes that were part of the original case study. As that model was developed, the quantity of posts with a reference to the assigned readings doubled from 9% to 18%, but there was no significant improvement in the following: students’ personal interpretation of the content; the building of connections to prior knowledge or outside resources; the use of personal experience or application of knowledge in a “real world” context; the use of analogies, metaphors or philosophical interpretations; and the making of inferences that ascend the information that was provided. The model that my cohort’s

instructors were using as “best practices” had not even been established, or claimed, to be successful practices by that study’s authors!

In 2010, in fulfillment of an assignment in a class on learning culture, four members of my cohort surveyed 47 other learners in five classes at our university. The survey was specifically designed to assess perspectives on online learning communities, but results from three specific questions felt indicative of the struggles I had experienced. While 42.6% of participants expressed strong agreement with the statement “I feel comfortable participating in course discussions,” only 29.8% indicated a similar level of belief that “online discussions are a good way to collaborate with fellow students.” An even smaller number, 14.9%, strongly agreed that “my point of view is valued in online course discussions” (Casey et al., 2010).

Figure 8.1

Percent of Students Indicating Strong Agreement



The survey revealed some degree of skepticism of the efficacy of online discussions as collaborative environments, a long-held central tenet of constructivist learning (Edelson et al., 1995). Only a small number of students were strongly confident that their contributions were valued by other learners, an essential element of a productive discussion and an indication that, if other students were indeed listening with understanding and empathy, those qualities were not well perceived by others. This, of course, was among learners who had self-selected into a program that was focused on online teaching and learning. I could not see how anyone could build new knowledge upon their own experiences if they did not strongly believe in the adequacy of the associated social discourse or if they were unsure that their contributions were valued.

A Selfish Pioneer

I feel tempted to say that I decided to change things for the better for *everyone*. Alas, I did not have that sort of moment of resolve. What I did have was a sense that I could at least make things better for *myself*—to create some structure for my own contributions that might help me get more from the discussions.

At the time, my biggest annoyance was the challenge I had tracking a theme across threads. Sometimes, for example, I would start working on a response to a post only to find that, by the time it was ready to be published, I was now responding to something that was three or

four posts higher in the queue. Other times, I would read another student’s post and, for what were likely similar reasons, be unable to understand what part of the earlier discussion they were referencing. I suspected this was interfering with the rhythm of reciprocity that is characteristic of productive discussions. In response, I began directly quoting the relevant part of the post to which I was replying. That way, even if other learners did not see it sequentially, they would be able to easily understand the context. This was a self-serving rather than example-setting act. I craved the sorts of discussions I remembered having in my in-person undergraduate experience and wanted to lower the barriers that kept fellow students from choosing to respond to my posts. The easier I could make it for them to understand the point I was making, the more responses I would get.

Another of my concerns was that there were many posts in which participants would simply parrot other students’ answers, which did little to move the discussion forward, let alone reflect the sorts of questioning and interdependent formation of ideas essential to co-creation and social construction. Other times, they would make an assertion without citing evidence or, when they did offer evidence, it would be with the barest of indications of where it came from, a poor habit if clarity, precision, and accuracy are valued. While formal citations might have helped, they seemed awfully “clunky” as part of a discussion post. Fortunately, the binding of digital object identifiers to URLs had been in place for about a decade at that point (Liu, 2021) and was being widely adopted, such that hyperlinking to academic studies had become easy. So, I decided to only publish posts that included a hyperlink to some form of credible evidence.

Finally, to make sure there was always an easy way to move the discussion forward from my post, I ended my comment with an open-ended question related to whatever assertion I had made.

Altogether, these practices meant my posts began to look like this (fictionalized) example:

Matthew LaPlante | Jan 14, 2010 at 1:34am
Deb wrote: “What we’re facing isn’t just a shift in educational technology; it’s a shift in educational culture.”
Indeed—and it’s a wild one. About six years ago, [Gene Maeroff observed](#) that even trying to write about this transition is like trying to capture “a snapshot of a cyclone.” So, your guess is as good as mine as to where this is all going, but one thing is clear: We’re unlikely to ever again live in a world in which there are fewer people learning online this year than last year. Already, one in five higher education students is taking at least one class online and, over the past four years, colleges and universities have averaged a [22% annual growth rate](#) in online enrollments.
I wonder whether online modalities will ever become the primary way learning happens. Can you envision a world in which online learning is the primary modality? What would that look like?

Admittedly, this was weird. For the first time since I was much younger, I was genuinely worried about what other students thought of me. And maybe some of them did think I was strange, but then something surprising happened: Several colleagues began adopting this method of posting. An educator from the Oakland School for the Arts, J. D. Cogmon, was the first person I can recall mirroring this tactic. A few others joined us before that class ended. By the time I graduated, many of the students in my cohort were using what I had started calling “The Pioneer Method,” a reference to Easy Bay’s mascot and to the fact that I was beginning to feel a little like a trailblazer in the Wild West of Online Discussions.

It seemed like this method was creating better discussions, but I could not know with any level of confidence whether that was truly the case. For one thing, I wanted it to work, so there

was plenty of confirmation bias at play. For another, not everyone in the class used the Pioneer Method, and it was not clear whether students who did not intrinsically see its value would have improved their contributions to the discussion if they did adopt it.

The Pioneer Method Gets a Test

I envisioned the Pioneer Method as a model for discussions in purely online settings. So, when I got my first chance to teach, as an adjunct instructor for an in-person undergraduate writing class at Utah Valley University in the fall of 2010, I did not think I would have much use for it. After all, I developed this method to help make online discussions feel less inferior to in-person class conversations, which I had always considered to be inherently superior. But when I tried to foment an in-person class conversation, I was often met by blank stares. When a discussion would get going, it was often dominated by one or two voices. And although the class included students of color and a nearly even balance of genders, it seemed like two or three confident, young, white males were always the ones doing the talking. What is more, nearly every person who did talk would express an opinion devoid of evidence, and when asked to present evidence, they would often say something to the effect of “Well, that’s just my opinion.” In those first few weeks, something that should have been obvious to me all along became clear: The reason I was so enamored with the power of great in-person classroom discussions is that, during my career as a student, I had always been one of those very confident, young, white males. I had always been at the table, and I had not noticed who was not.

Among students, teachers, and researchers, it is no secret that the “everyday inequities” of pedagogical culture has long included the domination of male participants in classroom conversations (Hall & Sandler, 1982). Nearly 40 years after this “chilly classroom climate” was first described, it was revisited by researchers at Dartmouth College, who conducted nearly 100 hours of classroom observations and found that, on average, male students “occupy classroom sonic space” 1.6 times as often as women. “Men also speak out without raising hands, interrupt, and engage in prolonged conversations during class more than women students,” the researchers wrote. Other scholars have similarly studied how classroom discussion participation is impacted by age and race. In 1996 researchers from Purdue University reported on an apparent “consolidation of responsibility” for older students, who spoke more than younger ones (Howard et al., 1996). A decade later, scholars from the same institution reported on evidence that white students participated in classroom conversations at a higher rate than students of other races, who were primarily African American in the participating student group (Howard et al., 2006).

These are not the only factors impacting in-person discussion participation. Other reasons include introversion, shyness, language proficiency, cultural differences, bad experiences, peer pressure, knowledge, interest, and fear of failure (Zakrajsek, 2017). While it has long been recognized that neurodiversity also impacts in-person discussion participation, accommodation strategies have been unevenly applied (Burgstahler et al., 2015). Speech disorders can also be a profound barrier to in-person discussion participation; students with these disabilities are often confronted with implicit and even explicit evidence that their “excessive use of air time” is unwelcome (Daniels et al., 2011).

Participatory equity was certainly one of the reasons I implemented online discussions in the first in-person class I taught, and this continues to drive my enthusiasm for the community-building power of supplementary asynchronous conversations (Covelli, 2017). Admittedly, though, I was also pining for an opportunity to take the Pioneer Method “out for a spin.” So, in the second week of class, I introduced my students to the “quote, reflect with evidence, question” method I had experimented with in my own graduate studies.

It would not be long, however, before I realized that introducing students to the model would not suffice. Motivated learners picked it up quickly, followed it with fidelity, and certainly seemed to elevate their contributions as a result, but others struggled to adopt this additional learning framework, and I feared I might soon be doing as much “grading of rules” as I was grading of knowledge.

Challenges to Adoption

When I introduced my first college class to the Pioneer Method in 2010, about half of the students had previously participated in online academic discussions. Today, more than a decade later, it is uncommon to find a student without substantial experience in online discussions. Perhaps counterintuitively, this can be a significant challenge to adoption of the Pioneer Method because many students have well-developed habits around this part of their learning experience. They are often unpracticed at listening with understanding, questioning, communicating with clarity, striving for accuracy, and thinking interdependently.

I have come to recognize that, in no small part, the lack of these habits in online discussions stems from a tendency for students to only participate at the start or end of a discussion period, a result of students who are used to being held accountable to a quantity of posts, but not to a frequency of posts.

Another well-ingrained challenge comes from students who are used to online discussions being a place to share opinions, but not familiar with the process of connecting their beliefs or experiences to other forms of evidence. Whether in-person or online, though, good academic discussions are those that begin with study—and invoke the products of study—as they continue to evolve, and a well-balanced constructivism is one in which we honor the knowledge that students have before they even sign up for a class, but also celebrate—and hold them accountable for—the knowledge they offer as a product of their study during the class.

The strategies I use to support the Pioneer Method did not come to me all at once. Over the first decade of my teaching career, I taught more than 50 in-person class sections and more than 20 sections of fully online classes that have used this asynchronous discussion model, adjusting along the way. What follows represents my current practices.

Scaffolding for Success

Because I am asking students to build new habits around discussions, I always make sure to explain why. For instance, this is the way I set up the introduction to the Pioneer Method:

If you haven't taken a class from me before, the way I'm asking you to participate will, at first, feel a little strange. However, when learning communities buy into this method, the resulting discussions are rich, diverse and informative — and the most important outcome is that these are discussions you'll actually want to be a part of, rather than discussions you're participating in to check a box for a grade.

Next, I explain the rules. This is where I introduce the idea of “metering,” in which students are expected to post not a certain number of times but rather at a certain pace—in this case, “no less than every other day”:

- Exercising brevity, scholarship and thoughtfulness, answer the question I've posed above. (Today is the first day of the semester, but please strive to have this answer posted within 24 hours.)
- Thoughtfully and meaningfully respond to other students' posts, demonstrating interest, insight and engagement through the entire discussion period. (Every day or two at the most. You should never go more than 48 hours without contributing to this discussion. Your voice is valuable to our community.) It's helpful to think about this part of our course as "going to class." If you wouldn't skip an in-person class, you shouldn't go more than 48 hours without participating in these discussions.
- Write in complete sentences, using proper spelling, punctuation and grammar — the way you would write if you were sending a letter to an esteemed colleague. (Because the people in this class are your esteemed colleagues.)
- Offer informed opinions and pose relevant questions.
- Back your assertions with original sources and, whenever possible, hyperlink those sources. You may also reference class lectures, past assigned readings, and past discussions.
- Avoid statements such as "I think" and "I believe." State what you know and explain how you know it.
- Do not parrot other students' answers. (i.e., "I agree with Deborah...") Rather, meaningfully build upon what another student has offered. (i.e., "To elaborate on Deborah's point..." or "In contrast to what Deborah has written...")
- While the discussion may go in many different directions, reflect periodically on the initial question and the assigned reading. Where it makes sense to do so, bring these ideas back into the discussion.
- Use The Pioneer Method ("quote, reflect with evidence, and question") for responding to other students' posts, engaging others and furthering a scholarly discussion.

Finally, I whimsically model the format. Here, for instance, is an example that uses characters from Star Wars:

Start by quoting from the relevant sections of another person's post, in italics:

Anakin said: "Attachment is forbidden. Possession is forbidden. Compassion, which I would define as unconditional love, is essential to a Jedi's life. So, you might say that we are encouraged to love."

Respond meaningfully to the assertions made, exercising your best powers of brevity, and backing your assertions with hyperlinked evidence from credible sources:

I understand where Anakin is coming from, but a far more experienced Jedi master, Yoda, noted that "attachment leads to jealousy" and called attachment "the shadow of greed." This is reflected in The Jedi Code, which clearly states that Jedi may not engage in marriage — one of the ultimate expressions of love.

Finally, offer a question or assertion to help spark further discussion:

Do you think the benefits of these rules outweigh the drawbacks?

In sum, your post would look like this:

Anakin said: "Attachment is forbidden. Possession is forbidden. Compassion, which I would define as unconditional love, is essential to a Jedi's life. So, you might say that we are encouraged to love."

I understand where Anakin is coming from, but a far more experienced Jedi master, Yoda, noted that "attachment leads to jealousy" and called attachment "the shadow of greed." This is reflected in our textbook, The Jedi Code, which clearly states that Jedi may not marry — one of the ultimate expressions of love.

Do you think the benefits of these rules outweigh the drawbacks?

And a response to that post might look like this:

Obi-Wan wrote: "The Jedi Code... clearly states that Jedi may not marry — one of the ultimate expressions of love."

That is correct, of course. It's been a part of the code for a long time. But perhaps we can also agree that the Jedi Order is a religion — and a very old one — and psychologist Matt Rossano has noted that religions evolve to promote human cooperation.

And, really, what is more conducive to cooperation than brotherly and sisterly love?

Shouldn't The Jedi Code evolve on this issue?

This is a lot to take in, and I do not expect my students to be immediately perfect at using this structure. So, I employ multiple interventions.

On the first day, I strive to respond “in thread” to posts that do not follow the format. This allows the entire class to benefit from soft public correction.

On the second day, I send an all-class reminder about the discussion. Usually, most students have at least attempted a post at this point, and I accentuate this fact, leveraging the power of positively directed “herding.”

Hi all,

The discussion format in this class and my expectations for your participation are likely quite a bit different from what you're used to, so I was excited to see many of you hop onto the discussion board immediately, follow The Pioneer Method (as described in the discussion instructions,) and offer some good starting points for our ongoing conversations. Now, the task is to keep that conversation active. If you haven't contributed yet, you have until the end of today to make your first contribution. After that, you are encouraged to participate daily and required to do so no less than once every 48 hours.

-mdl

That evening, I check to see who has not yet posted, and I send them a direct message via the learning-management system.

About 3 days into the first discussion, I engage the power of social proof (de Bont, 2018), using a tactic often employed by K–12 teachers: redirection via public praise of positive examples. I also reemphasize the requirement to continue participating at a prescribed pace.

WANT TO GET A GOOD GRADE ON THE DISCUSSIONS? FOLLOW THESE STUDENTS' LEAD

Brad and Kelly have offered excellent examples of how to participate in this class. To wit:

- They engaged at least once (both twice, actually) in the first 48 hours of the discussion period and presumably will continue to contribute no less than once every two days.
- They follow The Pioneer Method (quote, respond, reference, question.)
- They reference the assigned reading.
- To support their contributions, they link to meaningful sources of additional information.

This is how you earn an A grade on these discussions. More importantly, it's a structure that promotes diverse exploration—a requisite building knowledge. Follow their lead, and these discussions will be rich, varied, interesting, and informative.

My final tactic for encouraging good participation habits before it impacts a student's grade is a text message or call to learners who have not participated, not adhered to the prescribed pace, and/or are continuing to neglect the prescribed format. (In the introductory syllabus quiz at the start of the semester, I ask students permission to contact them in this way with “reminders, feedback, questions, and words of encouragement.”)

The next line of intervention comes from comprehensive feedback once the first discussion has been completed—and a grade that, for those who are still struggling, makes clear the consequences of nonparticipation.

It is not just struggling students who receive detailed feedback. Any student who does not receive full points gets an explanation as to what they could do to improve, which elevates the next discussion by giving top-performing students additional opportunities to demonstrate exceptional participation, leading the process of co-creation within the discussions.

This is a great deal of work, but I try to remember the history I am up against. We have thousands of years of experience with teachers physically standing before students at a set time each day and just a few decades of experience in an asynchronous online setting. Even given the meteoric rise in online learning, most students “learned to learn” in a traditional classroom setting. They need time to “learn to learn” in an online setting, too.

Once everyone buys into this method, though, a rhythm of participation takes over. In some semesters, I do not have to send any reminders after the second discussion assignment.

Writing the Prompt

Because a true academic discussion is student-centered—prioritizing self-discovery, co-creation, and social construction—I intervene only when I see a lack of civility or students appear to be confused about some aspect of the objectives. However, since my evaluations indicate that students appreciate the broad professional experience I bring to my teaching, I also seek to “send them off” on each new journey of discussion with a prompt that reflects on my own experiences as a writer. In these prompts, I try to model the sorts of things I want to see from my students, including personal vulnerability, a social-emotional demonstration of trust (Blaine, 2014). Each prompt includes the required reading and concludes with the question that each student will answer to begin their discussions, as evidenced in the following example:

DISCUSSION 3: WHAT MAKES A STORY COMPELLING?

I started focusing some of my reporting on Utah's animal parks right around the time my daughter was born. The timing was not coincidental.

I was a stay-at-home dad, back then, and I was hoping to find things to cover that would permit me to take my daughter along for the ride. The zoo seemed a pretty good bet for stories like that.

There was another reason, though: After years of covering death, despair and desolation, I needed something happier to write about. But oh, how the joke was on me, for just about a year later, I was reporting one of the saddest stories I'd ever write. It began like this:

She was born 27 years ago in the wilds of Africa.

By the time she was a year old, she had been ripped from her family. Penned, chained and shipped to a noisy new world, her California keepers allowed her to roam only a few paces this way and a few paces that. She was bullied and dominated. She lost a baby. She was poked, prodded, cut and left in pain.

Misha the elephant died Tuesday on the concrete floor of a cinderblock building in a lot behind her most recent home at Utah's Hogle Zoo, some 10,000 miles from where she was born. No one is certain yet what caused her death, at what could be described as "middle age" for an elephant. But one of Misha's former trainers has a strong suspicion: "She lost her will."

We're only a few weeks into this class, but by now you've already recognized something about features:

They're quite often sad stories.

You can chalk this up to journalism's insatiable thirst for "if it bleeds" sorts of tales. You wouldn't be wrong. But I'd like you to consider that there's something more at play, here:

One of our most important jobs, as journalists, is to create empathy. And tribulation is the raw material from which empathy is built.

There's another factor, though, that I'd like you to discuss this week, and you can blame journalists for this, if you'd like, but the simple truth is that readers "vote with clicks" — and in doing so they tell us, again and again, that they want to read stories about people going through hard times. (And, I suppose, elephants, too.)

Is tragedy requisite in feature writing? Hell no. Features can be gloriously funny. They can be clever. They can be inspirational. And they can be the kinds of tales that simply make us go "what did I just read!?"

But they have to give us something like that. For it does no good to write stories that are important if these stories are not also interesting.

ASSIGNED READING

- My friend, Mister Rogers by Tom Junod
- What Joe Biden can't bring himself to say by John Hendrickson
- The Complicated Legacy Of A Panda Who Was Really Good At Sex by Maggie Koerth-Baker
- Is this cop stopping prostitution or entrapping lonely men? by Aubrey Weber and Jessica Miller

OK, so we've got a story about a beloved children's television host, a life-long presidential candidate, a horny panda, and an obsessed small-town detective. So, what's the theme that brings these stories together? Well, if you ask me, they're all the sorts of stories that are pretty hard to put down.

You'll have to judge for yourself, of course, but whether you can't take your eyes off the pages or you struggle to get through these pieces, you should come away from these stories with a few thoughts on what made them (or didn't make them) compelling — and what makes any story the sort of piece that people are truly compelled to read.

To begin this discussion, answer this question: "What makes a story compelling?"

And Away They Go

The discussion sparked by the above prompt included all 17 students who were enrolled in the class and spanned 81 total posts over 10 days.

In the Canvas learning-management system, instructors may select “users must post before seeing replies.” I prefer this limitation, as it appears to prevent “parroting” and it creates as many threads as there are students.

Each thread takes on its own personality and goes in sometimes unpredictable directions. A few die off after the first post; others keep going for the duration. Perhaps not surprisingly, I have found threads that begin with a weaker initial answer (one that does not offer contemplation backed with ample evidence) are often abandoned early in the discussion period. This does not prevent the original poster from having an impact on the discussion, because they can easily jump into any other thread.

In the following thread, which began on the first required day of posting and continued for 8 days, the students made frequent use of the “shared currency” of the assigned readings as well as referencing other sources of meaningful information, their personal histories, earlier discussions, lectures, individual meetings with me, tools they are learning to use, skills they are building upon, and experiences they are having as they work on their course projects. While new posts usually build on the immediately preceding contribution, sometimes the students began their post with a reference to a comment made a few posts earlier in the queue. This often happens because students are working on answers at the same time in the asynchronous setting. But, because each post begins with a reference to the part of the discussion they are responding to, other students could immediately identify the context.

Darlene Richmond | Sep 20 at 1:43am

Professor LaPlante asked, "What makes a story compelling?"

A story is compelling when it makes us think about something differently or changes our perspective. A topic that is widely written on isn't usually compelling unless it has something new to offer.

The readings for this discussion are great examples of taking a topic and finding a unique way to explore it. Ever since I was a third-grader obsessed with pandas, I've known they were nearly extinct. Even with that previous knowledge, Pan Pan's story was compelling, and not just because it was funny. It made me think about conservation efforts differently by explaining the side effects of bringing animals back from extinction and telling this story through one unique panda.

Additionally, journalists write stories about Joe Biden everyday, but John Hendrickson's feature is compelling because it offers something different. Hendrickson dives into the story of Biden's stutter, comparing it to his own life growing up with one. This story is compelling because it offers a new side to Biden and encourages readers to change their perspective on stutters.

The way Hendrickson approached this story made me feel empathetic towards both him and Biden. Do you think empathy is necessary in creating a compelling story?

Raley Edinburgh | Sep 20 at 8:11am

Darlene asked, Do you think empathy is necessary in creating a compelling story?

Empathy is a key part of the human experience. Without empathy, we mere humans would not get a lot done. Empathy drives us to do better--it drives us to create positive change and it's one of our biggest sources of connectivity and understanding.

In [this piece on Joe Biden](#), he discusses his stutter, saying that it's hard for him to recall any specifics but he does "remember the feeling." To most people, Biden isn't a human being. His status as president places him on a pedestal of unlimited critique and cruelty, and even his supporters see him as a president first, human second. Like you said, this feature allows us to see him in a new, very human, light. I felt for him as the two discussed his childhood struggles and how they are still affecting him today.

Key word---FELT! It's important that we write stuff that allows our readers to feel. That is, to me, the main thing that keeps me reading.

So yes, empathy is huge to feature writing.

Much like Professor LaPlante said, "one of our most important jobs, as journalists, is to create empathy."

How do we make our "characters" empathetic without exploiting their weaknesses?

Michelle Cleveland | Sep 21 at 5:34pm

Raley asked: How do we make our "characters" empathetic without exploiting their weaknesses?

There's a fine line between empathy and sympathy. Sympathy is pity for someone's circumstances. When we have empathy, we feel someone's feelings along with them and we can relate to them. In order for our readers to feel empathy for our characters, there needs to be an element of the story they can relate to.

That's where the "meta," as Professor LaPlante calls it, comes in handy. A good meta theme is an idea that most people can relate to. Many of our stories are centered on human tragedy. The average reader won't be able to relate with most of those tragedies, but when we create a meta theme that connects to the story, readers will be more likely to feel empathy.

My feature is about a woman whose son has many illnesses and disabilities. I realize not everyone can relate to that, so the meta theme I've incorporated is the common human experience of feeling burnt out but persevering out of necessity. If most people can relate to the meta, it won't feel like exploiting our subject's weaknesses. Rather, the reader will feel empathy because of their shared struggles.

What is your meta theme?

Maya Barcelona | Sep 23 at 6:38pm

Darlene asked, "Do you think empathy is necessary in creating a compelling story?"

Empathy is most definitely necessary. If a reader cannot empathize or connect with a character, it won't be compelling. Although "compelling" can be considered subjective, if there is a lack of empathy there will be a lack of relatability. As Michelle mentioned, there is often a confusion of sympathy and empathy.

Despite the differences, empathy still allows readers to recognize an issue that the character is going through that they can also relate to. A unique aspect of features is that you have the ability to convey the feelings and attitudes of characters. For example, in [the article about President Biden's stutter](#), it opens with this sentence: "His eyes fall to the floor when I ask him to describe it. We've been tiptoeing toward it for 45 minutes, and so far, every time he seems close, he backs away, or leads us in a new direction."

Lines like these allow readers to feel more empathy for their characters. Which lines in any features you've read were you able to relate and empathize with and why?

Darlene Richmond | Sep 23 at 11:49pm

Maya asked, "Which lines in any features you've read were you able to relate and empathize with and why?"

In "My Friend Mister Rogers," a line that stuck out to me was, "He spoke most clearly through his example, but our culture consoles itself with the simple fact that he once existed. There is no use asking further questions of him, only of ourselves. We know what Mister Rogers would do, but even now we don't know what to do with the lessons of Mister Rogers." I think I empathized with this line not just because it is written very powerfully, but because it very clearly explains the author's complicated emotions of Mister Rogers' legacy. While I didn't grow up on Mister Rogers, I'm very aware of his impact. I didn't watch him growing up, but this line made me empathize with people who did, who have now grown up and realized the world isn't as kind as Mister Rogers wanted it to be.

The feature on Mister Rogers was less about Mister Rogers' life than about his legacy, and I think the author is not afraid to state what we should be getting out of the feature outright. To me, this feature seems to have more than just one message. It's about kindness and prayer and growing up and the negative effects of the Internet all in one.

Do you think this story had more than one meta, or do you think all of these messages can be summed up with one? Does this affect how compelling the story is?

Brad Marsailles | Sep 24 at 9:11pm

Darlene asked: "Do you think this story had more than one meta, or do you think all of these messages can be summed up with one? Does this affect how compelling the story is?"

Though the story talked about prayer, kindness, growing up, and the horrific effects of radicalization through 8chan, I believe the narrative is this: The ties that hold the tarnished to innocence.

This paragraph of the feature solidifies my point:

"How like you. He had different things he told different people, and "how like you" was one of the things he told me, in his ongoing effort to convince me that I was a good person."

While that was my stab at finding a meta, I could be wrong. I often am.

What do you think is the meta of this story? Are there multiple that can't all be captured in my analysis or any?

Ally Kingstown | Sep 26 at 1:45pm

Brad asked, "What do you think is the meta of this story? Are there multiple that can't all be captured in my analysis or any?"

As I read the article I found the meta to be about finding the good or potential in others and the world.

Mister Rogers chose to find the good and believe in it.

I had a question about using multiple metas in my article. Professor LaPlante advised, to stick to one and let the others service the meta.

You can see this ring true in My Friend Mister Rogers as the elements of "kindness, prayer, growing up, and the negative effects of the internet," as Darcy said, all help to demonstrate the goodness Mister Rogers chose to see in the world and in people.

We can all relate to someone believing and seeing more in us than we do ourselves or seeing it for someone else.

What can we do to ensure our meta is clear?

Kelly Baltimore | Sep 27 at 10:39am

Ally asked, "What can we do to ensure our meta is clear?"

Professor LaPlante and I just spoke about this during our last meeting. I was having a hard time bring my story back to the meta. In fact, my meta is hard for me to pin down. We discussed bring each scene back to the meta. As I was trying to tell my story I was having a hard time bringing it all together. If you bring every scene back to the meta it makes it easier for the reader to relate. If the scene has nothing to do with your meta maybe it isn't important to the story.

How are you explaining or alluding to your meta?

Taylor Hubei | Sep 27 at 5:28pm

Kelly asked, "How are you explaining or alluding to your meta?"

I'm currently writing an article about a rescue that happened on Mount Rainier. Basically, two climbers were rescued. One fell in a crevasse. The weather was horrible, and rescue teams risked their lives to rescue the climbers. My meta is how far would you go to help others and how it feels to be helped in a time of need.

The way I'm attempting to portray this meta is by being descriptive when talking about the climbers, especially the one in the crevasse. If I can create empathy within the readers, it could inflict a feeling of needing help. When I talk about the rescuers, I make it very obvious what dangers they are putting themselves in and go in depth about these risks. If I could create a sense of tension or uncertainty about the operation, perhaps the readers will think about how far they would go to help these climbers. That could spiral into a moral question about what they do to help others.

Of course, that is what is in my mind. Readers have a totally different one. I've also been struggling with sources, so my characters not being as well written out may drop a few emotional points.

How have you created your characters in your story?

Assessing the Quality of a Discussion

One of the best parts of this job is learning from students, and I derive great joy from ideas such as the one Raley shared in the second post of this thread when she noted that even a president's supporters see that person "as a president first, human second." This is my admittedly subjective way of assessing whether a discussion is "good." After all, I have used some of these prompts for more than 10 years. Having seen many hundreds of variations of responses, it stands to reason that if I am still learning new things, my students are as well.

I also look for signs of synthesis and social construction. Specifically, I ask myself: Are students building on ideas they have picked up in other parts of the class? Michelle's September 21 post on using a "meta," for instance, is a reference to a writing technique the students learned about earlier in the class. It is a concept that students often struggle with, and it was good to see them working through it together. As another example, on September 27, Taylor mentions the subject of an assignment she is working on for the class, bringing several parts of the learning experience into her response. And although I stay out of the fray, my presence does not completely disappear. Students often bring up a point from a lecture or something they learned in a meeting with me, as Ally did on September 26. These discussions often take on the qualities of a "moveable feast," as myriad parts of the conversation are invoked and re-invoked along the way. To wit: On September 23, Maya answers a question asked by Darlene on September 20 but also references an observation made by Michelle on September 21, drawing from multiple parts of the ongoing conversation to make her point.

Every thread ultimately ends with an unanswered question. These are not wasted queries; they are great fodder to turn back upon the asker. When I met with Taylor after this discussion

ended, for instance, I asked, “How did *you* go about creating the characters in your story?” Students are often well prepared for this, sometimes without realizing it. The act of asking a question seems to spawn a process of self-discovery. Indeed, Taylor told me about the successes he felt and the struggles he faced in bringing his subjects “to life.” He further explained the steps he was taking to improve his practices.

A more objective assessment of the quality of these discussions, however, goes back to the principles introduced at the beginning of this chapter. Did student voices dominate? Did they interact with one another? Did they contemplatively communicate? Did they present supportive evidence? Were they listening with understanding and empathy? Were they questioning and posing problems? Were they thinking and communicating with clarity and precision? Were they striving for accuracy? Were they thinking interdependently? In the case of this thread—and nearly every discussion I have watched unfold as students apply the Pioneer Method—I believe the answer to all these questions is “yes.” Online discussions that exhibit these characteristics are true academic discussions.

A Good IDEA

Given the role asynchronous discussions play in most online courses, it is unfortunate that my university does not have a student course evaluation metric that is specific to this part of the learning experience. But we may derive my students’ experiences with this model from their anonymous post-course comments and answers to scored questions on seemingly related topics. Since the spring of 2020, when I began teaching exclusively online, I have been the instructor of nearly 20 undergraduate classes that use the Pioneer Method. These classes are a mix of lower- and upper-division courses. Some have included all journalism majors and others are a mix of majors. (Several of the classes did not have enough course evaluation responses to merit quantitative assessment; only qualitative feedback from those courses is described below.)

The qualitative comments on the IDEA course evaluations for these classes reveal that not every student views the discussions favorably. A response from a student enrolled in a *Public Affairs Reporting* class in the spring of 2022, for instance, was particularly negative. “The discussions! Ah, they’re terrible,” the student lamented. “People just say dumb things and I don’t want to take time answering them.” In that same semester, a student enrolled in *Sports Writing* expressed a seemingly similar opinion: “Discussion boards are not good,” the student wrote. “They feel like busy work and an excuse for the professor to not lecture. I wasn’t taught anything in this class. I had to research it myself.”

While feedback like this can feel deflating, this last comment was not necessarily indicative that the discussions are not having their intended effect. In this case, I can affirm that “the professor” was indeed trying “to not lecture,” in order to allow student voices to dominate and self-discovery to prevail: These discussions were indeed intentionally devised to encourage students to engage in their own research using meaningful and credible sources. Likewise, in the fall of 2022, a student enrolled in *Feature Writing* suggested the discussions could have been “graded a bit more leniently,” while another in the same class said the discussions made the class “very difficult.” As rigor is a key principle of my teaching, I do not consider such comments to be indicative that the discussions did not play their role. I want my students to enjoy my classes, but I also recognize that students’ experiences with learning are like many people’s relationships with eating vegetables—it can be beneficial even if they do not necessarily like it.

Some students understand the difference between enjoying an aspect of a class and benefiting from it. “I hated the discussion boards,” a student enrolled in *Immersive Crisis Communication* wrote in the spring of 2022, “but I learned a lot from them!” In the same spirit, in the fall of 2021, a student enrolled in *News Writing* shared the following: “I hate having to do

any discussion posts, but I will say that this class' discussion assignments were better than any of my other classes," while a classmate added, "Honestly, I found the discussion a little annoying at first. But once I got the hang of it, it [became] easier."

Some students recognize the benefits of the discussions and enjoy this part of their learning experience. In the fall of 2021, another *Opinion Writing* student noted the conversations grow in meaningfulness when more students participate, an affirming reflection of co-creation. In the spring of 2022, a student enrolled in *Public Affairs Reporting* wrote the assigned readings were "enlightening and perspective broadening," an indicator of self-discovery. A fall of 2021 *Feature Writing* student added: "I liked the discussion posts where we were able to answer each other's questions and learn from one another," a nod to social construction.

Many students who had their first experiences with online learning in 2020, the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, seemed particularly appreciative of Pioneer Method discussions. In the spring of that year, a *News Writing* student shared that "I really liked the feedback from the professor and group discussions where students could collaborate," and another added that "the discussions helped the online course to feel like normal classes. I enjoyed getting to know and communicate with other students this way." In the fall of that year, there were more positive comments. "I felt that the discussions were an interesting part of the class and gave us students a good opportunity to discuss important matters and learn from each other," a student enrolled in *News Writing* shared. "The online discussions were actually helpful and my classmates weren't just 'BSing' their way through—I learned a ton from them," a *Feature Writing* student added.

The students in spring 2021's *Podcasting* class were a particularly enthusiastic lot. "I also loved the discussions and thought the prompts were engaging and the responses were genuine and natural," one wrote. "I loved the weekly podcast discussions and the simplicity of the course. I never felt like I was doing busy work," another added. "I really enjoyed the Pioneer Method of Discussion in our weekly class discussions. They really helped me understand different—sometimes opposing—world views," a third noted. "I liked the ability to collaborate with other students both in the project and through discussion questions," a fourth wrote.

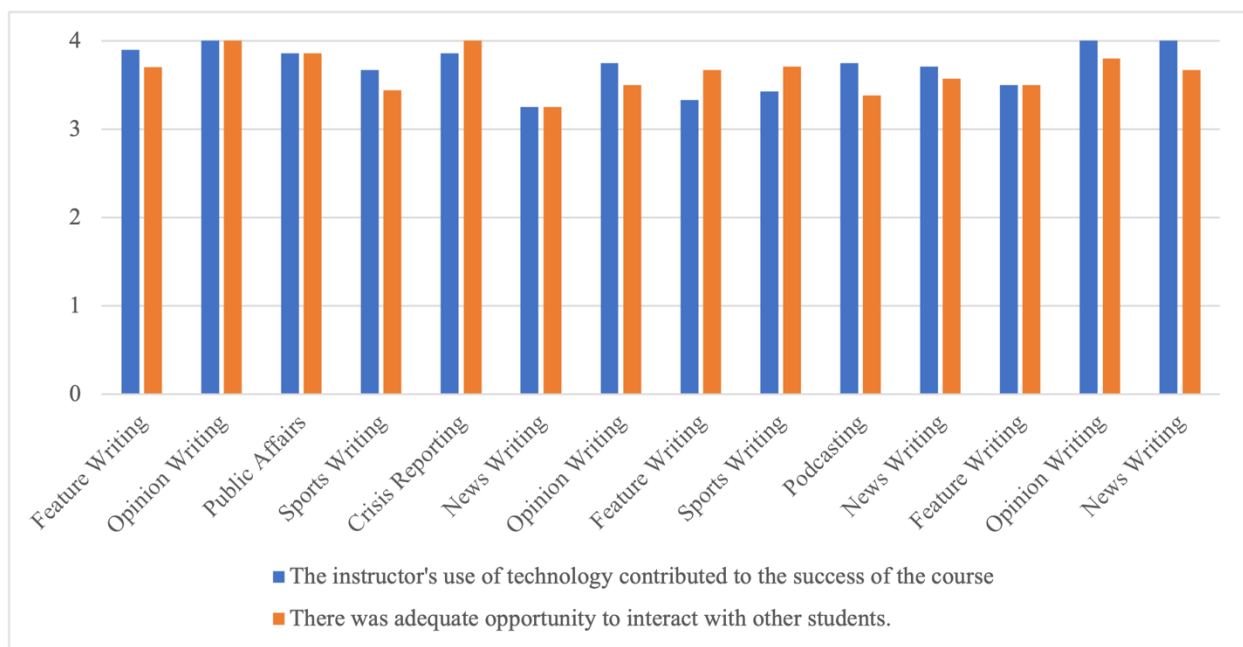
Quantitatively, there are two student-scored statements in the IDEA surveys that seem most relevant:

- The instructor's use of technology contributed to the success of the course.
- There was adequate opportunity to interact with other students.

Students are asked to score these questions on a four-point scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Agree; 4 = Strongly Agree). For both assessment points, students have indicated strong agreement. Across 14 classes for which enough students participated in the course evaluations to merit qualitative summation, the average score for "The instructor's use of technology contributed to the success of the course" was 3.72, and the average score for "There was adequate opportunity to interact with other students" was 3.65. While "instructor's use of technology" may be inclusive of myriad parts of the course, it is important to note that there was no other group work or student-to-student interactions in these online classes, so "opportunity to interact with other students" could only refer to the discussions.

Figure 8.2

Fourteen Online Classes Using the Pioneer Method and Rigorous Scaffolding



Conclusion

“I’m not sure there is anything I dislike more than online discussion boards,” a teaching colleague recently confided in me.

“I’m not sure there’s anything I like more,” I told her. “May I tell you why?”

My colleague graciously accepted, and I told her much of what I have written here. True discussion—that which is student-dominated, interactive, contemplative, evidence-based, and promotive of voice, co-creation, social construction, and self-discovery—is not easy to achieve in any educational space. But I believe it is possible, and I commonly see it as an outcome of the Pioneer Method and the scaffolding that supports it.

Asynchronous discussion boards are now ubiquitous in online and hybrid classes—and common as a supplemental learning space for even primarily in-person classes—and yet few rigorous studies have been focused on identifying instructional improvements (de Lima et al., 2019). As a result, students and instructors alike still commonly express frustration with this part of the contemporary learning experience. So, into this relative void, I humbly offer the Pioneer Method and my experiences with it. It has served me and my students well, promoting habits such as listening with understanding and empathy, questioning and posing problems, thinking and communicating with clarity and precision, striving for accuracy, and thinking interdependently. I hope it will do all these things for your students, too.

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