

THE ROLE OF FORUMS IN ONLINE INSTRUCTION

Lamara Kadagidze, Prof.

Grigol Robakidze University, Tbilisi, Georgia

Abstract

Student's learning and teacher's teaching could be enhanced by technology if used appropriately. Technology could encourage more independent and active learning among students. A key reason for the use of technology within a learning situation is to enhance the quality of learning and teaching. Computer-based online discussions or online forums have been used in a wide range of higher education setting to provide major learning environments for distance education or to supplement face-to-face discussions. The article reviews the challenges and benefits of forums in online education and poses the issues of characteristics, integration, maximizing learning, controversy and the role of the instructor and administrator as a facilitator/participant within the discussion forum. It reveals several foreign studies regarding the topics and provides recommendations for potential users of the tool throughout the international arena of education. In order to foster an interactive learning community and encourage student interactions, all of the administrators, faculty, and staff in a distance education program need to collaborate with each other at an institutional level. Besides fostering common educational practices in conventional classrooms, distance education is portrayed as possessing more potential and thus more promise in promoting student interactions and enhancing learning outcomes by utilizing advanced computer technology.

Keywords: Forum discussions, online education, instructor role, students' interaction, higher education setting

Introduction

Online forums also known as discussion boards or message boards enable users of a website to interact with each other by exchanging tips and discussing topics related to a certain theme. Learning through online forums is an important learning strategy for students to improve their language skills along with others. The use of computer based online discussion through online forums is evident in the curriculum of many courses throughout the world in universities in Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, the United Kingdom, the United States (Scott & Ryan 2009) and in Georgia as well. With the rapid development of computer-mediated communication, online forums have become more involved in classroom settings to promote student critical thinking, knowledge construction and language learning autonomy. There is a need for teachers to encourage students to use new technologies such as online forums to gain more exposure in the language along with many other various disciplines. Asynchronous online discussion forums are some of the simplest computer-mediated communication tools that teachers can easily integrate into their teaching to extend discussions beyond classroom contexts.

Characteristics and Integration

Online forums require students to participate; grade student efforts; involve learning teams; structure discussion; have a hand in assignment; use experience in posing questions and scenarios; relate the discussion to course objectives; establish a friendly, open environment; use authentic tasks and topics; emphasize learner-centered instruction;

encourage students to give constructive feedback and suggestions; let students experience, reflect and share the benefit of using threaded discussion; be sure that instructors facilitate collaboration and knowledge building; encourage dialogue and referencing of other student postings; use humor for motivation; use emoticons to help convey ideas and feelings; provide a social presence, in which students and instructor are able to present themselves as "real people" and communicate with their personality.

The online discussion forum allows students to work together on projects in small groups, participate in on-going discussions focused on course content, and to "present" group project products to the rest of the class. All of this is done independent of student location and time of actual participation in the discussion forum. This is coordinated with a separate web site for the readings and assignments of an online course. Making weekly participation in the discussion a requirement "institutionalizes" the discussion forum within the course.

Weekly discussion topics are coordinated with the web course assigned readings for each week. Students are asked to respond to one or two open ended questions designed to elicit discussion about the topics. Requiring students to respond to at least three other student postings initiates a round of discussion among the participants. Each student's posting is listed in the forum under the weekly topic.

Student group projects are on-going across 14 weeks of a 15-week semester. Students assign themselves to a topic by posting their name and email addresses and stating what sub topic they are interested in doing research on. Group size is usually limited to 6-10 students for ease of communication. Students may exclusively use the work area set aside for their topic in the discussion forum or they may correspond using email or chat rooms.

All postings within the large group are public and archived so that whole transcripts can be re-viewed as needed and readily accessible to all participants. This written record constitutes a body of knowledge collectively written by participants in the course. Group project work can be public or sheltered by password assignment.

Participation in the virtual conference demands that students become actively engaged with the course content and through the interaction with their peers, negotiate the meanings of the content. They construct knowledge through the shared experiences that each participant brings to the collaborative discussions. The online web courses about teaching offer deeper perspectives and opportunities to learn because the participants are teachers from school districts around the state and other states. This is not a narrowing of perspectives, but a broadening of the knowledge base as experiences are shared and compared relative to teaching issues.

This particular use of the discussion forum, to negotiate and construct knowledge, is an example of using the technology as a cognitive tool and not simply as another kind of blackboard or one-way communication method. Cognitive tools and environments stimulate cognitive learning strategies and critical thinking (Jonassen, 1998). Students engaged with course content in discussions and group work with other students engage in generative processing of information. Students draw upon their own experiences and interpretations and share these with the group discussion. They draw on their own teacher stories to relate to the course content. They read other student responses and interpretations and compare these with their own thoughts. This involves the processes of reflection and the construction and reconstruction of domains of knowledge. It is a negotiated interpretation of knowledge with student ownership. The learning is deeper and more long lasting and students refine their thinking and their voice.

The discussion forum environment evens the playing field of opportunity and accessibility. Those students who have a reflective style that does not lend itself to quick, off the hip questions or comments now have time to contribute their well thought out responses. Connections that few have time to make in the stream of classroom discourse now stand out

in a discussion forum flow of asynchronous discussion. Those students who migrate to the back of classrooms suddenly find that in the virtual environment their voice is not only solicited, but it is required and they are discovering that they can interact with the content of the course and their peers.

Group work within this environment imparts a shared sense of purpose and develops a group identity with a sense of interdependence and belonging. The initiation of these tasks can be perceived as exceptionally difficult for students who are not familiar with the concept in a web-based environment. The tasks must be structured with clear instructions and expectations. The public display of group work products in the discussion forum through the use of graphics, Power Point displays, or links to web sites maximizes the learning potential for the whole class and provides a model for students to use in future work.

Students are never anonymous as their name is posted with their comments. They develop an identity online as well as a voice as they tell their stories and mutually construct understandings around the course content.

The discussion forum makes active participation by all students the price of citizenship within this learning community. The asynchronous environment assures that there is time enough for all to respond. Hartman, et al. (1996) found that computer-mediated-communication did not just redistribute shares of a constant pie (communication time), it actually increased the size of the pie. Communication is among all participants, including the instructor and it is accessible at all times.

Benefits

Online forums provide many benefits to students and teachers. Students are found to be in favor of the self-paced, self-regulated feature of asynchronous discussions compared to face-to-face discussions.

On the other hand, online forums create a discussion environment. Everything that gets posted gets read over and over again. Online forums rarely turn into heated arguments as people are given time to research and consider their comments before replying. This in turn, makes high-quality discussion. Smith (2001) points out that well structured and appropriately facilitated online discussion can provide a learning environment that allows the immediate application of new information to learners' personal and professional lives. Besides, online forums are more flexible compared to face to face communication as they provide time to reflect and think and allow both introverted and extroverted students to be involved in online discussions. By participating in online forums, access to knowledge is free; forum members could willingly share their wealth of knowledge and experience with other members. In return, every member of the forum can benefit from this infusion of free knowledge.

Here are some potential benefits of regular online forum participation according to Pavlina (2005): Intellectual exchange; learning new ideas and refining old ones; enjoying community membership; influencing the forum's evolution; contributing to others; making new friends and contacts; new business leads; keeping up with current events; learning about new opportunities.

There has been evidence that the messages composed by students in online forums include longer solutions for problem-solving, and consist of deeper reflections compared to face-to-face discussions. Researchers have found that students can take more time to read, craft, reflect on their responses, and find relevant information when composing messages in such an environment (O'Neill et al. 2006). Online discussions build a motivating social practice of current generation students, who use technology to contact friends and family throughout the day. In online forums, students develop their autonomy in language learning. Each participant is given more authority to shape or lead the discussion in the direction they prefer, while teachers may have relatively less control over the learning interactions.

A well-structured online discussion forum can provide students with extensive practice in writing. The online forum allows opportunities for the facilitation of curricular objectives via modern technology. Online discussion forums provide an authenticity in writing and therefore serve as a meaningful supplement to the writing curriculum. The implementation of the online forum appears to provide reinforcement tasks to enable students to practice their writing. Besides that, the online forum also facilitates collaborative learning. Students could share their ideas and opinions in order to produce better quality writing as compared to if the tasks were to be completed independently.

Schuetze (2010) conducted a research in the University of Victoria Canada and the University of Kiel in Germany. The study showed that most students of both universities felt comfortable writing online and they wrote more than ever before. They used the forum more actively than in a face-to-face classroom or chat. In turn, some students also mentioned that they liked to read what other students posted in online forums.

In a study among twenty-five Chinese and Kiwi learners, Gerbric (2005) encountered that online forums provide opportunities specifically for particular groups of students. Chinese students found the virtual and text-based nature of the medium allowed them to enter discussions more easily and they felt more comfortable with their written responses compared to face-to-face discussions.

A number of studies have found that online forums are beneficial in developing communication skills. The greatest potential for effective use of online communication as a learning tool is when the students are 'at a distance' from the school and their teachers.

Holmes (2004) acknowledged a period of increased communication between online participants of his study after 10 days of interaction on online forum and asserted that input from teachers or instructors during this period led to maximized learning opportunities.

Scott and Ryan (2009) in their study discovered that online members become more engaged in discussions and interacted effectively when they were set appropriate tasks. For an example, a complex task that requires research and discussion is more suitable for small groups to work on collaboratively. When students are given problems related to their prior experience, the discussions show higher levels of interaction, and the participants show more passion for the topic.

Through online forums, teachers are able to document the growth of their students' ability to support a point in their messages. Students improved their ability to respond to a classmate and to make a point supported with evidence.

Online forums are a good way of communicating, especially when the teacher or lecturer is unavailable. It is also a good way to communicate with everyone as it creates a good communication between students and school. Students are more comfortable and less aggressive when participating in online forums. Online forums also offered more equal opportunities for group members to voice their opinions; they demonstrate very high levels of interaction among group members. Online forums are regarded as a social interaction that reduces students' reliance on the face-to-face discussions.

Challenges

Because of the limited opportunities for face-to-face interactions between an instructor and their students, distance education has brought many new challenges to the teaching and learning process. Effective curriculum design is hindered by the lack of understanding of the characteristics, attitudes, and needs of the students in these courses (Williams, 2006). At the same time, the faculty needs to develop skills in helping students adjust to the unique features of distance education. However, the lack of adequate training may prevent them from fully participating in the distance education practices, especially considering that they have to spend twice as much time in preparing and delivering an online

course as compared to a traditional course. Distance learning students desire content and motivational support beyond course materials and are limited in their success without it (Williams, 2006). Collaborative learning is necessary in building one's own cognitive process. To promote learner-centered education, the American Psychological Association (APA) designed a document -- Learner-Centered Psychological Principles -- to provide a guideline of the factors affecting learning in the 1990s (APA Work Group of the Board of Educational Affairs, 1997). It includes 14 principles which are grouped into four domains: cognitive and metacognitive factors, motivational and affective factors, developmental and social factors, and individual differences factors. Principle 11 relates closely with student interaction issues under the developmental and social factors. It states that learning is influenced by social interactions, interpersonal relations, and communication with others. Besides active communication, interaction, online presence, and moderated discussions, the formation of an online community is one of the key elements for high-quality online education. Fostering interactivity in an online community is the main indicator of success in online courses (Bender, 2003).

Outcome of traditional education and distance education are the same, only if one selects the appropriate teaching material and method, including student-to-student interaction and timely teacher-to-student feedback. In general, the collaborative learning culture promoted by the cognitive apprenticeship theory can be applied into all the situations of the teaching and learning processes. However, because of its unique application for the distance education field and the urgent needs of such theories in the field, the cognitive apprenticeship theory is very helpful in planning distance learning courses.

The implementation of a constructivist approach to learning and teaching that emphasises the "social" construction of knowledge causes some problems for both the online learner and online teacher. Some learners may prefer to work independently so group projects, or the requirement to participate in online discussion forums at a particular period of time in a course may not suit all approaches to learning.

The level of learner engagement with communication features is both a reflection of the design of the online course, and the ability of teachers to engage the learners in dialogue. It indicates that online interaction between course participants is a critical feature of online teaching.

The emphasis placed on social interaction in a constructivist context and the opportunities for interaction provided by technology support the importance of collaboration and group knowledge construction in an online context. In the online classroom, it is the relationships and interactions among people through which knowledge is primarily generated.

Operating in the online environment means that bodily differences and social values attached to visible differences are invisible and irrelevant - teachers and learners online construct themselves through text in the discussion forums, for example (distinctions of gender, ethnicity, body shape or impairment, accent or speech styles 'don't matter' – visual cues of difference are missing) and the challenge is to know more about online sociality and the 'special circumstances' of learners.

Using grades to reward participation requires careful thought, as meaningless postings do not equate to quality learning outcomes. Clearly defined expectations in terms of levels of participation and assessment requirements are essential.

Instructor Role

Course leaders have the opportunity with the online environment to adapt, modify and change whole sections of the course, or ways previously planned to proceed, to engage with content, to assess – according to the students' needs, interests, expectations, contexts and prior learning's, so long as the Course Specification (objectives, etc.) continue to be met.

Online means being able to truly take account of what students want, re-shaping the environment to make the most of students' collective experience and expertise, mobilizing them to construct knowledge for their own purposes.

Online instructors rated the following as the top four techniques for keeping asynchronous online discussion on topic:

- carefully design questions that specifically elicit on-topic discussion,
- provide guidelines to help online learners prepare on-topic responses,
- reword the original question when responses are going in the wrong direction, and
- provide discussion summary on a regular basis.

From the growing use of online forums for education, we see that they can operate well — with specific questions getting resolved quickly, and open-ended discussion questions receiving a strong flow of contributions. But they can also operate poorly, with little student participation and questions that go unanswered for long periods of time. An instructor would like to make use of an online forum so as to promote better outcomes. How can an instructor use her own behavior to incentivize higher student participation? For example, if the instructor actively appears on the site, does this tend to increase student participation (because they are hoping to get the instructor's approval) or decrease it (because they assume that the instructor will answer the questions herself)? Is there an optimal way to trade off these two forces, and how does the best outcome the instructor can elicit through her behavior depend on the size of the class — as the class size becomes large, can the instructor step back and let the class do most of the work on the forum? While such questions appear at the heart of discussions about best practices in these forums (Andresen 2009), there has so far not been a formal way of reasoning about them.

In a study that asks the question of what role an instructor should undertake in an asynchronous discussion forum (sage, guide, or ghost), Andersen (2009) found that it depends on what the instructor wishes to accomplish. Learner ratings of a course will show that an instructor is more enthusiastic and expert if s/he increases his/her postings. ... However, an instructor that contributes significantly to a discussion tends to decrease the length of discussions (this does not necessarily decrease the quality of the discussion, however) as well as their frequency. What appears to be occurring in this situation is that the instructor can decrease learner-learner interaction because the learners begin to rely on the instructor to answer questions, becoming the expert or sage to 'settle' debates.

The role of the instructor in online discussion forums is a key one in many forms of online education. However, (Mazzolini & Maddison, 2005) argue that without face-to-face feedback, it is not easy for instructors to gauge the "health" of their discussion forums, especially when dealing with distance education students, and it can also be difficult for coordinators of online programs to judge when their instructors are doing a good job in supporting their students-learning online.

The coordinators of online programs are likely to judge forums intuitively and assume that forums containing large numbers of student postings are best. As a consequence they are likely to encourage their instructors to "jump in" often, by making frequent postings and starting new discussion threads in order to encourage students to post.

If coordinators aim to achieve positive responses for issues such as instructor enthusiasm and expertise on university evaluation surveys, then our experience suggests that coordinators should encourage their instructors to post often, even if the student posting rate does go down in the process. Obviously there is a balance to be achieved here. Instructors posted approximately half their postings during each forum and half at the end, which is compatible with the instructor survey. Instructors who tend to post most towards or at the end of forums scored particularly highly for enthusiasm and expertise on university evaluation

surveys, but as these were the instructors who also tended to post the most overall, this was not surprising. The instructors tended to post questions, answers or a mixture of both, had very little effect on students - responses to the surveys, except that students did seem to regard instructors who answered lots of questions as more enthusiastic, and they did not appreciate it when instructors mainly posted “housekeeping” type postings rather than engaging actively in the online discussions.

Conclusion

Williams (2006) applies the institutional theory to higher education institutions and concludes that six basic components underly the institutions' capacity of offering distance education courses. The six basic components are Administrative commitment (allocating resources), Online student support services (registration, advising, providing access), Full-time online coordinator (assisting course development and online teaching issues), Internal/External financial and technology resources (computers, online course management system), Online professional development (developing faculty online knowledge), and Adequate faculty participation (enough innovators supporting online education). Teachers are experiencing change in terms of their teaching philosophies, their relationships with learners, and their work patterns and activities. The physical space defined by a classroom has been replaced by a virtual space defined by a learning management system. Teachers' roles have changed from being the “experts” in their field to being facilitators of learning. They are reasonably comfortable with the notion that they combine this role with another one that defines them as learning partners. This is a situation that not only allows but also encourages other members of the group to assume leadership by enabling participants' opportunities to change the course direction, share resources or assist the group by proposing initiatives. Much progress is being made in getting the best out of the online environment. Nevertheless, it is pointed out that many of the difficulties that online teachers continue to raise focus on the tensions between teaching philosophies, learner expectations and traditional organisational mindsets. While the experienced teachers are well aware of the importance of shared understandings, there is also the acknowledgement that the rapid pace of change in the information and communication technologies requires a great deal of flexibility and adaptability by both teachers and learners.

References:

- Andersen M. A. 2009. Asynchronous discussion forums: success factors, outcomes, assessments, and limitations. *Educational Technology & Society*, 12 (1).
- APA Work Group of the Board of Educational Affairs (1997, November). *Learner-centered psychological principles: A framework for school reform and redesign*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Bender T. 2003. *Discussion-based online teaching to enhance student learning: Theory, practice and assessment*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Gerbric P. 2005. Chinese learners and computer mediated communication: Balancing culture, technology, and pedagogy. In H. Goss (Ed.), *Proceedings of the 22nd Annual Australian Society for Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education Conference: Balance, Fidelity, Mobility: Maintaining the Momentum?* (Vol. 1, pp. 241–251).
- Hartman K., Neuwirth, C., Kiesler, S., Sproull, L., Cochran, C., Palmquist, M., and Zubrow, D. (1996). Patterns of social interaction and learning to write: Some Effects of network technologies. In *Computer Mediated Communication and The Online Classroom*.vol. 2: *Higher Education*. Berge, Z.L. & Collins, M. Eds. Hampton Press, Inc.
- Holmes K. 2004. Analysis of asynchronous online discussion using SOLO taxonomy. From <http://www.aare.edu.au/04pap/hol04863.pdf>

- Jonassen D. (1998). Technology as cognitive tools: Learners as designers. *IT FORUM Paper 1*. Available at: <http://itech1.coe.uga.edu/itforum/paper1/paper1.html>
- Mazzolini M., Maddison S.; When to jump in: The role of the instructor in online Discussion Forums, 2005, www.elsevier.com/locate/compedu
- O'Neill P., Duplock, A., & Willis, S. 2006. Using clinical experience in discussion with problem-based learning groups. *Advances in Health Education*, 11, 349–363.
- Pavlina LLC. 2005. Effective Online Forum Usage. <http://www.stevpavlina.com/articles/effective-online-forum-usage.htm>
- Schuetze U. 2010. Motivation to write online: Chats and Forums. *Gfl Journal No.1/2010* ISSN 1470 – 9570.
- Scott A. and Ryan J. 2009. Digital Literacy and Using Online Discussions: Reflections from Teaching Large Cohorts in Teacher Education. In *Comparative Information Technology Globalisation, Comparative Education and Policy Research*, 2009, Volume 4, 103-120, DOI: 10.1007/978-1-4020-9426-2_8
- Smith T. 2001. Asynchronous discussions: Importance, design, facilitation, and evaluation. Retrieved May 10, 2003, from http://www.ion.illinois.edu/pointers/2002_11/page1.html
- Williams P. (2006). On-demand tutoring in distance education: Intrinsically-motivated, scalable interpersonal interaction to improve achievement, completion, and satisfaction. *Dissertation abstracts international section A: Humanities and social sciences*, 66, 11-A, 3933.