Promoting cross-cultural understanding of education through online discussions

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Abstract

Universities are seeking techniques that encourage students to become more globalized in their perspectives. One method of providing students with an international learning experience is to incorporate asynchronous online discussions with students from different countries within courses. The purpose of this study was to explore how participation by American and Chinese graduate students in asynchronous online discussions on classroom case studies can promote cross-cultural understanding of education. Data sources include student transcripts to four case studies and students' responses to open-ended questions on their perceptions regarding their participation in the online discussions. Results indicate that online discussions on case studies are very beneficial to both American and Chinese students and promote cross-cultural knowledge and understanding. The discussions provide an exciting forum for communication about learning theory and the culture behind instructional practices. Importantly, this study also adds to the knowledge base about international collaborative online courses and serves as a guide for those who wish to create international online courses.

Keywords: Cross-Cultural Education; Online Learning; Constructivism

1. Introduction

Universities are seeking techniques that encourage students to become more globalized in their perspectives. As international relations become more complex in today’s world, higher education is placing greater value on intercultural skills. One reason globalization of the curriculum is especially important is because of the demand for hiring individuals who can work with people from different cultures. While study abroad experiences are embraced as a vehicle for broadening students’ outlooks and enhancing cultural awareness, many are unable to take advantage of this type of opportunity. Limited financial resources and delaying timely graduation are cited as some of the reasons for not participating in study abroad programs. This is particularly true for minority students who may face social and cultural challenges as well (Brux, 2010; Yılmaz & Orhan, 2010; Eskay, 2011). Little, Titarenko, and Bergelson (2005) point out that the various reasons that prevent the likelihood of Americans having a cross-national education experience are often even greater for students from other countries.
One affordable and accessible method to provide students with an international learning experience is through asynchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC) via the Internet with students from different countries. In particular, asynchronous online discussions with students from different countries allow for exchanges between people who would not otherwise have the opportunity to interact. Thus, whether experienced as a supplement to study abroad or as a stand-alone experience, asynchronous online discussions with students from different countries can be an international learning experience available to a large majority of students. In general, online discussions are being increasingly used in higher education, and research studies emphasize the important role of the instructor in encouraging participation (Painter, Coffin, and Hewings, 2003) and document both strengths and weaknesses of the approach (Lapadat, 2002; Angeli, Valanides, & Bonk, 2003). There is no doubt, however, that international online discussions are an effective vehicle for cross-cultural communications without the limitations of time and space.

2. The purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to explore how participation by American and Chinese students in online discussions of classroom case studies in an Educational Psychology course promotes cross-cultural understanding of education and increases awareness of different cultures. This research is based on the theoretical framework of sociocultural constructivism that views social interactions at the center of learning and cognitive development (Driscoll, 1997, Vygotsky, 1986, & Lave and Wenger, 1998). In online discussions, students participate in conversations to construct new knowledge, perspectives, and a shared body of knowledge, encompassing the principles of constructivism and social interactions. This work is also informed by the theory of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) that argues the importance of the learners' ability to think critically about their education situation and experience. Finally, international online discussions when viewed as cross-cultural experiential learning may contribute to culturally responsive pedagogy that values the salient cultural reference points of each student within the learning community (Ladson-Billings, 1994; 1995; Hussein, 2010).

In this study, we examine how American and Chinese students' online interactions and critical reflection upon classroom case studies (instructional practices) promote understanding of their respective education and culture. Our key research questions were: 1) What evidence exists that American and Chinese students participating in online discussions construct new knowledge regarding different cultures, 2) What do American and Chinese students perceive as the most important things they learned from the online discussions, 3) In what ways did the online discussions promote students' understanding of teaching and learning in different cultures?

3. Method

3.1 Participants

Participants were American graduate students (N=27) enrolled in an online section of a learning theory class in an urban research university in the southeastern United States. Among the American students, there were four males and 23 females with a mean age of 29. Sixty-seven percent of the American students had taken an online course before, and 70% were full time students. Participants also included Chinese graduate students (N=9), six participating online on a voluntary basis not for credit from China and three participating online while in America as exchange students. Among the Chinese students, there were two males and seven females, with a mean age of 26, and none had taken an online course before.

3.2. Materials

Materials were four case studies illustrating classroom scenarios. Two of the case studies described American classrooms (Ormrod & McGuire, 2007), and the other two case studies described Chinese classrooms (Chen, 2008; Jiang, 2010). The case study examined for this specific paper is titled, "Minmin's Smile" (see Appendix
A), a Chinese classroom scenario about how a teacher worked with a student who lived alone with his illiterate grandmother. The teacher recognizes that the student is struggling financially, socially, emotionally, and academically and elicits help from peers and the grandmother. This case study represents many issues prevalent in both the Chinese and America educational systems, including poverty, classroom management, parental involvement, self-esteem and academic success.

3.3. Procedure

Students were divided into six groups for each of the four online discussions with each group having five to six American students and one to two Chinese students. Specific guidelines encouraged students to analyze each case from a theoretical perspective and to evaluate strategies and interventions. Further, students were asked to justify their position from readings, research, and personal experiences (see Appendix B for specific instructions to students).

3.4. Data Collection and Analysis

Data sources include student transcripts with initial postings and responses to the four case studies describing classroom scenarios. The content management system utilized in this study, Ulearn, tracks entries during discussions and provides a total for average messages read for each of the six groups.

To answer the first research question, "What evidence exists that American and Chinese students participating in online discussions construct new knowledge regarding different cultures," we utilized the Interaction Analysis Model (IAM) developed by Gunawardena, Lowe, and Anderson (1997) in analyzing transcripts of the discussion. The IAM model posits five phases learners move through (not necessarily sequentially) during discussions that represent a distribution that indicates the degree of knowledge construction activities. Although there are a relatively small number of content analysis models, the IAM is one of the most frequently used (Beaudrie, 2000; Kanuka & Anderson, 1998; Schellens & Valcke, 2003) and offers a holistic view of discussion flow and knowledge construction (Marra, More, & Klimczak, 2004). The phase names and associated operations are indicated in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phases</th>
<th>Attributes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase I: Sharing/comparing of information</td>
<td>Statements of observation of opinion; statement of agreement between participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase II: Discovery and exploration of dissonance or inconsistency among ideas, concepts, or statements</td>
<td>Identifying areas of disagreement; asking and answering questions to clarify disagreement.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Phase III: Negotiation of meaning/knowledge co-construction</td>
<td>Testing the proposed new knowledge against existing cognitive schema, personal experience, or other sources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase IV: Testing and modification of proposed synthesis or co-construction</td>
<td>Summarizing agreement and metacognitive statements that show new knowledge construction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase V: Phrasing of agreement and applications of newly constructed</td>
<td>Summarizing agreement and metacognitive statements that show new knowledge construction.</td>
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Reading each posting and applying an IAM phase or phases coded transcripts. Consistent with the original application of the IAM (Gunawardena et al., 1997), multiple sentences or paragraphs were coded with a single phase, and in some cases a single posting was assigned two or more phases. Because of the subjective nature of assigning phases, three researchers coded an entire group's postings individually and then resolved disagreements through discussion.
To answer the research questions, "What do American and Chinese students perceive as the most important things they learned from the online discussions, and "In what ways did the online discussions promote students' understanding of teaching and learning in different cultures," we first examined the transcripts of the discussion, focusing on the content of Phases III through V that represented new knowledge construction. We used the content analysis and constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to determine reoccurring themes. We then examined responses of students to five open-ended questions on their experience in participating in the online discussions. All responses were reviewed using the same content analysis and constant comparative method to determine themes. Themes generated from this set of data were constantly compared with themes developed from the previous data to form the overall themes of the whole data sets.

4. Results

A one-way, single factor Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted to determine the level of engagement in terms of messages read across the four case studies. Both F-value (.475) and p-value (.703) demonstrated that there were no statistically significant differences among the cases, indicating students were equally engaged in terms of messages read whether the case study was describing an American or Chinese classroom.

Preliminary data analysis with one case study described herein indicates students in six groups moved through a total of 284 Phases. According to the IAM analysis protocol, knowledge of construction and negotiation of meaning occurs in Phases III and above. Results indicate clear evidence that knowledge construction occurred during the discussion (see Table 2).

Thirty-seven percent of the entries were coded as activities exploring agreement (Phase I) and 15% as being engaged in discovering or exploring dissonance or inconsistencies (Phase II). However, a total of 48% of entries were coded as representing new knowledge construction with 23% of the statements representing negotiation of meaning/knowledge co-construction (Phase III), 19% representing testing and modification of proposed synthesis of co-construction (Phase IV), and 6% representing phrasing of agreement and application of newly constructed meaning (Phase V).

Data analysis of students' initial postings and responses to the case study as well as students' responses to the five open-ended questions reveal many positive findings. Generally, both American and Chinese students perceived the online learning discussions experience as beneficial to their understanding of different cultures, educational systems, and instructional practices that are embedded in the specific culture.
Results indicate several specific answers to the research question, "What are some of the most important things students learned from the online discussion?" One strong reoccurring theme is the common critical issues faced by teachers in both the American and Chinese education arena. The following comments identify some of the common issues as overcrowded classrooms, high stakes testing, difficult home lives, and challenges of working with disadvantaged children:

"The most important things I learned from the online discussions on case studies were -- as is usually the case -- our similarities far outweighed our differences. Their classrooms are overcrowded; children deal with poverty, familial breakdown, and poor literacy."

American participant's response to the open-ended questions

"I totally agree with you. You bring a new perspective about this story. Most of the Chinese teachers and parents focus more on the score, the higher the better. So many students are tired of doing their homework. Happy learning becomes a beautiful dream for them. Now, there is a growing concern over the heavy burden, both academic and psychological, our children have to bear. It's a good change in China. But more people still look to the scores. In this story, Minmin's teacher take the effective way to correct his [Minmin] behavior and had a good outcome. It takes three generations to make a gentleman. Patience, love, and heart are the essential of education."

Chinese participant's response to the postings of discussion group

"Minmin's Smile" is a sad story, but it offers hope and encouragement to many teachers who want to make a difference in the world by just making a difference with one student. Minmin is a struggling student; he struggles academically, socially, and emotionally.... While Minmin's story seems challenging to any teacher, there are many students in American classroom today who struggle with similar uncontrolled home lives that emotionally, socially, and academically affect their performance in school."

American participant's initial posting to the case study

While the online discussions taught the students about the many similar issues faced by American and Chinese teachers, the discussions also taught the students about differences:

"It seemed like the Chinese teachers focused on prosocial behavior much more than the American teachers. Obviously, we all want our students to behave constructively, but it seemed that the main focus for Chinese educators in our discussions was to get kids to act respectfully toward each other, as we saw in Minmin's smile... Only after we build those skills and behaviors can we hope to have the classroom control upon which content knowledge, concentration and comfort are predicated."

American participant's response to the open-ended questions

"Because the Chinese culture is more collective, I think that having the classmates rally together to provide support would work. I also think that the idea of setting standards based on an individual's performance is more individualistic in nature and therefore more likely to occur in America. As a Chinese educator, I would seek out community-based support for the grandmother and Minmin. In a communally based society, success of the whole is more important than success of the one. I think that Minmin's teacher did everything he could to support his academic success and I would act likewise."

Chinese student's initial response
To answer the research question, "In what ways did the online discussions promote students' understanding of teaching and learning in different cultures," results indicate that the majority of the participants believe that the strategies employed by the Chinese teacher in the case study to motivate her struggling student would be appropriate in both American and Chinese classrooms. Reoccurring themes indicate that both the Chinese and American students considered it crucial that teachers reach out to struggling students to provide academic and emotional support. Many students were able to relate the Chinese case study to their own classroom experience in assisting struggling students and build new knowledge on how to support these students through cross-cultural sharing and discussing. Some representative comments are:

"I was surprised at how similar our classrooms are with the exception of size. For the most part, teachers around the world seem to care greatly about their students. Parents want students to make good grades and students who do are usually leaders in their classes. Principles of learning are universal regardless of cultures."

American student's response to the open-ended questions

"This story reminded me of a student at our school whose mother died suddenly when she was in the first grade. Her father, who played for the [sports team], had never acknowledged her as his child. She was suddenly left alone with her grandparents. She was a hyper child and she struggled academically. She had little support systems and was extremely emotional at school. Teachers, administrators and students knew her story and provided positive calm reinforcement to her. Over time she started to develop a higher level of self-efficacy. She is now in the eighth grade and is a strong reader, holding her own academically and has turned into a confident young lady. The school embraced her and slowly it made a difference. As educators we have a responsibility to improve students’ lives if we can."

American student's initial response to the case study

"I definitely agree with you about the positive reinforcement. As educators we do need to make a difference in our students’ lives. We aren't there to punish the students constantly, but instead there to teach them the concepts needed to move forward in their educations and lives. While punishment may work for some students, I've noticed that encouragement seems to help me. This may only be the case with my students, but so far they respond better to the positive reinforcement in my class. It's so important to know and understand our students. The experience you mentioned of the little girl whose mother passed away is a great example of how a teacher can make an impact on a student. It sounds like that she used school as her comfort zone since she did not have the support around her elsewhere. Knowing this can completely change how a teacher reacts to her poor behavior or grades. Showing her how much the educators care make a difference to her and helped here continue to grow and move on with her horrible situation."

American student's response to the postings of discussion group

"As an American educator, I agree wholeheartedly with the strategies Minmin's teacher used. Often when dealing with students who live in poverty, we must understand the value system they have may be different from our own.... Sometimes students such as Minmin may not be able to think of how education will pay off in the future, because their focus has been on how they will meet needs day to day. Keeping this in mind, it is important for teachers dealing with students in poverty to form relationships with all of their students.... When I first began working in the school where I currently teach, and inner city school that populates a high percentage of students living in poverty, I found that the relationships I formed with students and their parents my first year was extremely important in helping to motivate and heavily played a role in their success.... There are some students I've taught who, never even had plans to attend college, but who later began to place higher expectations on themselves because of my efforts to get to know them, much like Minmin's teacher, and truly focus on their success which helped them build their self-efficacy."
American participant's initial posting to the case study

While affirming the Chinese teacher's efforts and success in the case study to motivate the struggling student academically, socially and emotionally, many American students moved beyond to offer alternative and constructive suggestions on how to further assist struggling students in making academic progress.

"While the teacher [in the Chinese case study] has effectively used operant conditioning, praising and rewarding, and some aspects of social cognitive theory, to help motivate Minmin and improve his self-efficacy, the teacher needs to effectively reach Minmin with classroom instruction. Rather than lowering academic expectations for Minmin, the teacher needs to consider other ways to differentiate instruction and expectations for Minmin. For example, maybe alter Minmin's homework assignments in order to connect what the class is studying to what he is teaching his grandmother. This would allow Minmin to transfer skills needed in this classroom to something that he cares about, his grandmother. Additionally, if Minmin continues to fail to understand teacher lectures, the teacher needs to teach all the students metacognitive strategies and study skills so all her students can make meaning of lectures and find a way to connect the information to other areas of their lives.... Just as cooperative learning plays an important role in my classroom, I would encourage this teacher to engage students in cooperative learning projects and activities. Social learning theory and metacognition are both researched and well-practiced methods in American classrooms, so I would encourage Minmin's teacher to use both of these practices, in addition to her operant conditioning, in her classroom."

American student's response to the postings of discussion group

Students also recognized that teachers in different cultural contexts can learn from each other to help students to achieve.

“I also thought it was interesting corresponding with Chinese graduate students. They seemed very much like American graduate students. We all were answering questions for the assignments the same and working toward the same goals. The only noticeable difference was slight grammar issues in their online responses. If I had not known about the Chinese component to this class I would never have noticed a difference in students."

American participant's response to the open-ended survey questions

“It is reasonable for me to lower students' expectations in my past mind if students cannot finish their assignments. Your opinions about not to lower students' expectations gave me a new perspective.”

Chinese participant's response to the postings of discussion group

Perhaps most importantly, reading and discussing the case study in the online discussions not only allowed students to develop a deeper understanding and respect for teachers in respective cultural and educational contexts but also enabled them to reflect more upon their own practice.

“Any time that technology gives us an opportunity to connect on a common issue or mission, there is a lot that can be gleaned. We are all teachers, trying to convey information to students, take care of their emotional needs, and keep in mind their physical needs as well. I have a feeling we're all pretty stressed out from time to time. For me, the discussions with students from China enhanced my knowledge of the more intimate aspects of education there. They say that you never know what happens after a teacher's door closes, and we can read about broad trends in international education, but actually hearing
One American participant's response to the survey questions

“It’s interesting to hear that Chinese students are also having "success in testing but fail in being a person of self-realization." That is definitely true here, too. In addition to the emphasis that American schools are putting on standardized tests, as Harlan alluded to, the disciplinary measures that many schools take do not put students’ safety, much less their happiness, at the forefront. They seem to be much more oriented toward avoiding lawsuits. I was also moved by the teacher, and I hope to keep this case in mind as an example of the type of humanist educator I’d like to be.”

5. Discussion

Instructions of online courses often use discussion forums to create a collaborative learning activity with social interaction. While discussion forums can take many forms, we intentionally structured the discussions with case studies because of the particular strength they offer in fostering thoughtful dialogue. Successful analyses of case studies underline that there is no 'right answer' or 'right opinion.' Cases also encourage a constructivist approach where individuals bring their own knowledge to the discussion that could deepen understanding of others. Additionally, case studies may also help students see the relationship between theory and practice. For a balanced approach we included two American classroom scenarios and two Chinese classroom scenarios. If exchanges between students become unfocused or confusing, discussions forums can ”...both be an ineffective communication tool and actually impede learning (Moore and Marra, p. 191). In an attempt to foster focus and clarity in the interchanges between students, the same directions or protocols for participation were provided for all four cases. In terms of average messages read within each group, students were equally engaged whether the classroom scenario took place in America or China. Students reported that considering learning theory in a different context emphasized the universality of theory as well as the effect of culture on teaching techniques, both important lessons for fostering culturally responsive pedagogy.

The IAM proved to be an effective method for assessing the content of the discussions. The distribution of our coded results indicates that participants were nearly equally engaged in Phases III and above that represent knowledge construction and negotiating of meaning (48%) compared to Phases I and II that represent exploring agreement and discovering or exploring dissonance or inconsistencies, respectively (52%). This is contradictory to previous research where the majority of postings are typically coded as either Phase I or II (Beaudrie, 2000; Kanuka & Anderson, 1998, Marra et al., 2004). In constructivism knowledge is constructed through interactions between the learner's prior experiences (Bednar, Cunningham, Duffy, & Perry, 1992; Duffy & Jonassen, 1992; Fosnot, 1992, Marra et al, 2004) and knowledge sources encountered. In this study, the knowledge sources are case studies from different cultures discussed with individuals from different cultures. Perhaps the opportunity to interact cognitively in a way that highlights different perspectives accounts for the results of this study indicating a high percentage of new knowledge. Clearly, construction of new knowledge regarding the relationship between culture and education occurred in the discussions between American and Chinese students.

Results from the transcripts of the discussions and responses to the open-ended questions about students' perceptions of participating in the online discussion revealed several positive themes. American and Chinese students realized that there were common challenges faced by teachers in both cultures, but they were also able to share differences. The strategies employed by the Chinese teacher in the case study as she struggled to deal with a troubled student were for the most part embraced by all students. There was clear recognition and identification
with the challenges she faced. Additionally, the universality of learning theory across culture was articulated in many instances. Reoccurring themes indicate that reaching out to students no matter what the circumstances is important to enhance academic success and emotional well-being. Students also recognized that they could learn from teachers who were operating in a different cultural context. One very important theme that emerged from the data was that reading and discussing the case study in online discussions with students from other countries encouraged reflection on their own educational practice.

In conclusion, our findings indicate that online discussions on case studies are very beneficial to both American and Chinese students and promote cross-cultural knowledge and understanding. Additionally, the discussions provide an exciting forum for communication about learning theory and the culture behind instructional practices. Importantly, this study also adds to the knowledge base about international collaborative online courses and serves as a guide for those who wish to create international online courses.

References


Appendix A. Minmin’s Smile Case Study
"Teacher, Minmin did not finish his homework!"
"Teacher, Minmin hit me!"
"Teacher, Minmin played games at the Internet Bar instead of going back home."
"Teacher, Minmin talks too loud!"

You could have guessed a long list of trouble Minmin would make again, and you probably have students like Minmin, who remains your headache and annoys other students in the class. Minmin had transferred to many schools. He came to our class recently but already made a lot of trouble.

Looking at this 10-year-old boy, I did not criticize him harshly and directly. Instead, I was curious about what kind of family he was from. After making many visits to his home I learned that Minmin's parents were divorced many years ago and neither of them lived with him since then. Minmin lived with his grandma, who was illiterate and worked hard to make a living by collecting and selling waste materials. Every day she was so busy collecting trash that she had no time to educate Minmin. After learning this information, I knew what I should do.

On the one hand, I tried to communicate more with Minmin's grandma. We reached an agreement about how to educate Minmin. I kept Minmin's grandma informed of every progress Minmin made in class each day and I asked her to praise Minmin more frequently. At the same time, I encouraged Minmin to teach his grandma how to read, to tell her what he learned at school and what progress he made. To accomplish this task, Minmin would have no time to go to the nearby Internet Bar to play games after school. In order to teach Grandma, Minmin started to work hard at school.

On the other hand, I wanted Minmin to feel that his teachers and classmates cared about him. For instance, when it was cold and I saw him wearing thin clothes, I would give him my warm coat. When it was raining and Minmin didn't bring his umbrella, I would share my umbrella with him. I would take his hand and walk him home. My students and I praised him whenever he did something well. My students voluntarily played with him at recess time. Gradually Minmin felt that his teachers and classmates were his friends and they cared about him. He started to do something good for the class and rarely made any more trouble or upset his classmates to draw attention as he did before.

Minmin was getting along with his new classmates and became much better behaved in class. However, new problems came. He could not understand the lecture. Do you have such students in your class? He wanted to learn but he could not understand what the teacher was talking about. I saw his puzzled face every day. What should I do? Can I just judge him by grades? His grades may never be good enough, but still he needs to experience the joy of learning.

First of all, I lowered my expectation of him because I knew he could not make up for all he had missed just in a few days. If other students got three correct answers while Minmin only got one right, I would comment excitedly, "Very nice! This is well done. Would you like to try the other two questions?" Other students in the class also encouraged him to do so. Whenever Minmin answered a question correctly, the whole class would applaud for him. Minmin was no longer timid. He began to ask for teachers' help more actively when he did not understand.

There was another problem. Minmin did not like doing his homework. What should I do? Criticize him for not doing his homework? I tried that before but it didn't work. I started to look for his strength and I did find some. For instance, he liked labor work. He always actively participated in class and campus cleaning activities. Once it
was our class's turn to wash the toilet, Minmin worked hard to make it very clean. Our class was highly commented for this fine work by school administrators at the school assembly. What was more, Minmin was very polite. He would nicely greet all the teachers he met. What I did then is that whenever I found him doing something nice, I would praise him in class and then ask him in privacy after class if he finished his homework. His face turned red and he would shake his head saying "I'll do it soon." I would smile at him and said, "OK, I'll check soon." Seeing my encouraging eyes and smile, gradually, Minmin became more confident of himself. He began to answer more questions in class and worked hard to complete his homework.

Minmin hasn't made good grades yet, but he is working hard to improve. He starts to feel the joy of learning and communication with his classmates.

Appendix B. Instructions to Students

Please read and reflect on the case study, "Minmin's Smile." As you do this, look at the situation through the eyes of an educational psychologist. What theory or principles of learning are represented in this case? Describe the strategies the teacher used and whether the strategies would help or hinder Minmin's learning. Which strategies might be effective in both an American or Chinese classroom, i.e., across cultures? Which strategies might only be effective in China or only be effective in America? Why? Please discuss what you would do from your perspective as an American or Chinese educator (as appropriate) and explain why you would do the same as Minmin's teacher or do things differently. Support your comments using concepts from the textbook, your own experience, observation, class assignments and any other readings from the literature with which you are familiar. You may use web resources for this except Wikipedia. Please include literature citations or URLs that you may use so others can add to their own resource lists. Please describe any personal relevant experiences related to this case study. As stated in the syllabus: 1) Discussion postings are required and graded (see grading rubric) and 2) Each student is required to make a minimum of one original posting and three follow-up postings per discussion board.