

Asynchronous Discussion Boards and Significant Learning

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Abstract

This paper evolves out of a desire to apply significant learning principles to asynchronous discussion board learning activities. We base it on our experience and informal research through focus group discussions to lay the foundation for additional research that will provide qualitative research data for examination and interpretation.

Warren (2008) addresses the questions of the usefulness of asynchronous discussion boards as learning activities that foster deep learning. Warren's review of the literature reports three positive aspects of Asynchronous Discussion Boards (ADB) and four negative aspects. The positive aspects include: 1) the process of writing engages the student in reflection and contributes to learning; 2) ADB's reduce the opportunity for domination of a verbal conversation by one student; 3) the asynchronous nature provides more time for reflection and critical thinking, thereby increasing the effectiveness of the discussion process. Conversely, the negative aspects of ADB's include: 1) fear associated with posting written thoughts subject to other's comments; 2) reluctance to engage in unstructured learning activities; 3) student bias in viewing discussions as ineffective learning activities and; 4) a willingness on the part of students to meet only the minimum standards necessary for high grades. Warren concludes the literature support as view "that asynchronous discussion forums, where reflective writing is required, can add to the learning experience of students and result in a deeper understanding of the subject under review" (p. 3).

Notwithstanding the aforementioned characteristics of ADB's Warren (2008) further concludes that a finding of "at least 36% of students engaged in the discussion demonstrated a deep understanding of the issue under discussion and were able to enter into critical

argument" as a demonstration that ADB's can achieve deep learning.

The institutional purposes of asynchronous discussion boards are varied and based for the most part on the effective practice literature, but are not always effective, in tune with the student's perceptions of purpose, or rigorously formulated to provide quality learning experiences. There are discussion boards that are set up as evidence of truth in advertising of interactivity of programs. The mechanics for communication are present and available, they are used, but deep learning is not an apparent primary objective, rather the objective is to meet the criteria for having a methodology of interaction in the curriculum. Within this framework instructors may allow the discussion to be a place of community gathering with discussion taking on whatever seems to be a discussion generating direction. Others may require a formal scholarly dialogue to take place with evidence to support the arguments required as well.

Lim (2007) suggests an institution's assumptions about learners may well constrain a learner's deep engagement with an ADB, for example: 1) prior acquisition of learning strategies for taking advantage of an ADB; 2) prior acquisition of necessary foundational knowledge of the topic; 3) prior acquisition of attitudes that motivate them to use the strategies and knowledge to learn at a deeper level.

While instructing a recent course that received particularly strong push back on the grading of ABD posts inspired a deeper look

into the institutional and instructor-perceived purposes, as well as the correlated student-perceived purposes of the asynchronous discussion board. Those purposes must be brought into alignment if any of the purposes are to be realized. The instructor considered the instructor-desired purposes and outcomes and determined that in addition to a community place of encouragement, collaboration, enthusiasm, and anxiety dispersal, we wanted more. In the first several postings these are worthy outcomes, but at some point in time we wanted the students to engage in scholarly dialogue about an academic topic and to demonstrate rational and critical thinking skills, or at least the early stages of skill development in these areas. A short monograph of the instructor's perception of asynchronous discussion board purposes and requirements was created and posted for the students to comment on (for extra credit). The results of that informal focus group research are the basis for this paper and our early conclusions and interpretations.

The first purpose of discussion boards usually brought up in a discussion of this nature is the opportunity for peer-to-peer and instructor-to-learner interaction. We do not argue that this is a significant purpose but would suggest in light of deep learning principles interaction is of greater value to the student when such interaction is contained within the context of a scholarly dialogue. Adult students are already, for the most part, adept at social interaction and the introduction section of the discussion board

provides a clear and open opportunity for the building of community in this regard, including social interaction with the instructor. Introduction videos, audios, posting of pictures and music by the instructor can certainly help in this regard.

Students may approach the asynchronous discussion board from an egocentric viewpoint without regard for other cultures or ethnic backgrounds. They may see the board as a place to encourage one another, a place to dispense their folk psychology, to gather support or to push back against an instructor or another student, a place of social interaction that replaces that which they would gain from a face-to-face class, and the opportunity to learn from their peer's knowledge base and experience (too many times without a filter concerning validity, reliability and recognition that a person's experience might be an anomaly in the area being discussed). They may perceive the conversation to be an informal chat and editorial opportunity and they may take learning from other students without evaluation of the patterns being established or connections being made.

The building of a community of scholars practicing their craft of learning through dialogue seems to be a more worthy purpose since these generally are academic courses engaged in presenting theory, history, and practice of the larger community of scholars. To that end our desire was to see a finely crafted learning activity designed to provide an opportunity for the student to engage in scholarly

discourse, demonstrate and practice their critical and reflective thinking skills, consider other's frameworks, references at a higher level of epistemic beliefs and knowledge. Warren's (2008) research reported student posts "not necessarily fully in tune with the discussion or they provided unsupported opinion" (p. 9). Evaluation of Warren's sample indicates only 12% "performed at a distinction level, demonstrating a high level of learning and critical analysis of the problem" (p.9). We also see the discussion board as an opportunity for the instructor to assess progress and evaluate the learning accomplished.

The course started innocuously enough. The first sign of trouble came from a student complaining about not receiving all the points available for the first week, although they had posted the required number of words. The grading procedures for discussion boards were explained and the student was referred back to the syllabus which included the instructions for posting (see Appendix A).

Unexpectedly, the student communicated how unfair this was from their perspective since they had never been required to meet these kinds of criteria in any other class they had taken in two years in the program. That response caught our attention because: 1) apparently we were not like other instructors in our expectations and; 2) apparently what we thought were clear, concise instructions and criteria for grading were not read carefully by the students or were not as well communicated as we initially thought.

Given some additional student communications we decided to create a short paper (Appendix B) that communicated the instructor's understanding of the purposes of a discussion board in greater depth. That paper was posted on the discussion board and student comments invited for extra credit. We were surprised at the response rate (14 of 28 (50%) students including e-mail responses, equally divided between male and female, with 35% of the responses considered positive, 65% negative) and the open, and in some cases, harsh responses. The results of this informal focus group caused us to take a second look at our communication and the expectation we held regarding the outcomes from the energy required to moderate a discussion board.

The response of the students gave insight into their expectations in regard to grading and to their perceptions of the needs they perceived as being met by the course's discussion board. Some saw the board as a place to collect points toward their final grade and assumed if they posted at least the minimum times and the minimum number of words they would receive full credit for the week. The students also regarded the board as at least partially a place for them to share their experiences (related or not to the topic), share their assistance and encouragement to other students. We have been repeatedly surprised by the number of times a student will publically evaluate another student's posting, with the great majority of responses being very positive, perhaps unconsciously and



preemptively to set the stage for positive responses to their own postings. In some cases the student will use the discussion board as a place to take shots at a person or institution that are the subject of their momentary displeasure. All of these (except the latter) are legitimate uses of the discussion board and do work to increase the social presence of the instructor and learners.

One area that stood out was the low level of epistemic beliefs held by students and the lack of critical thinking exhibited by many students, evidenced by their less than thoughtful communication, whether formal or informal. In addition, a number of logical fallacies were committed in the argument presented by the students. Additional deficiency was demonstrated through the absence or poor use of evidence and rational thought for their arguments due to lack of quality research into valid academic resources. Students seem to think their unsupported opinions and personal experiences were enough evidence to meet the criteria and the asynchronous discussion board postings were an appropriate venue.

These experiences indicated a closer look at the questions students were being asked to respond to and the explanation of those questions was appropriate. Sometimes, the response indicated the shortcomings of the questions themselves, that is, the framework from a disciplinary standpoint was different in language and meaning than colloquial meanings the students ascribe to various words and phrases. Students using certain words that are carefully defined in

the discipline's literature but have very different meanings in folk or pop sociology, or in a business connotation.

A closer look was also taken at the perceived shortcomings of student responses. Universal affirmative statements being taken as absolute statements rather than as statements of category and students responding that they both agreed and disagreed with the statements though the categories were mutually exclusive.

Some students approached the discussion board as a place for personal opinions that needed no support or evidence to their validity. When given permission to use personal experience they presented that experience as valid though their experience may have been an anomaly and in contradiction to research in the field rather than as illustration of their thesis (egocentric and ethnocentric). *"If we do not agree with a theory that the book is presenting then I am going to provide real life examples that contradict what is being said in print"*.

The fallacy of generalization is a major issue; because something is true for me in my context and environment, it must also hold true for the population at large. Some students failed to present evidence on behalf of their argument, or an irrational, or irrelevant argument.

The patterns of student expectations may be limited to this particular institution although we think not. The push back from students in this focus group was substantial, and they seemed not

to fear reprisal since they were granted extra credit. *"Personally I do not like the way the paper is written on the use of the discussion board."* There were two very interesting takes from some of the students. First, the students had never read anything like a rationale for the discussion boards as a learning activity, with the implication that this rationale was limited to a particular instructor or simply invalid. A lengthy rebuttal indicated that they as a student had the correct approach and purpose for the discussion board (*"Because as far as I am concerned I am doing what I am suppose to be doing", "I appreciate the time you took to develop the document and the thought that went into it, but I'm not sure that anyone in the class shares in your opinion of what makes for good discussion."*). Second, some students believed that the discussion board activity should be administered on an institutional-wide basis with no variance between instructors grading or approach (*"I can understand your point after reading the rules that you posted, but I wish that the college had posted that information before I started taking my first class."*).

A significant pattern to the responses was the affirmation that if they post an original post of 50 words, and two responses to other's posts there should be given all the points possible for the exercise regardless of the quality of their work. In other words, no one should lose points for their discussion board postings (*"I started taking online classes here about 6 months ago and none of my previous*

*teachers gave me less than the highest points possible so I don't know what to think.*"). Some of the comments suggested the discussion board is a class participation exercise and as in many face-to-face courses, if you are present you get all the points.

Perhaps the most disturbing theme woven throughout the responses is the level of critical thinking students use in their responses, indicative of the level of thinking exhibited in many of the course's discussion board posts and responses. Is it unreasonable to expect personal opinion and experience to be based on something more than egocentric beliefs? Do students understand the difference between beliefs and scholarly discourse on ideas and concepts? Some of the student responses chosen below may seem innocuous on the surface. However, taken together with typical responses on a discussion board platform they seem to point to a student thought process that is superficial and shallow.

*"When a person is asked their opinion I do not go out and look for references that will back up my personal opinion but provide real life situations that demonstrate what we have learned in the reading and/or in the real life situation itself."*

*"If I am relating something that has happened to me using what I have learned from the reading material then I am giving established, supported facts with real life examples."*

*"My interpretation of the discussion forum was merely that of a soap box where I could voice my opinion, agreement or opposition to the questions at hand."*

*"I believe this is more of an opinion thing and you can't seek outside resources on your opinion. Also, how do we do outside resources in answering questions such as, "How do you deal with stress?" That really seems to make no sense to me."*

*"How do you cite your own thoughts? I do cite if I needed to do research; but we don't always have to research to give our opinion or thinking process."*

*"I believe our personal opinions on the discussion board should be fine and we should not need references to back up our opinion."*

Berry (2007) looked at student perceptions regarding courses using asynchronous discussion boards (ADB) and those courses that did not use an ADB to address the question of whether an ADB is an essential component of online courses. From the student's perspective "outcomes such as; 1) increase in course content and skill based knowledge; 2) increase in ability to apply course content and skill-based knowledge; 3) contribution toward professional and educational goals; and 4) increase in proficiency in technology were not correlated with the presence of an ADB although courses with an

ADB were positively correlated to levels of student satisfaction (p.124).” In essence, perhaps students perceived the inclusion of an ADB as a satisfaction component rather than a learning component of an online course and as a result the ADB may not be “having the impact that faculty members may have anticipated” (p. 121). The conversation we had with students in fall 2007 seems to corroborate the findings of Berry’s study.

Some student responses indicated an understanding of the performance expected from the syllabus and additional materials provided.

*“From my understanding the discussion boards should be more than just personal experiences or 2 line agree or disagree comments. They should be based around the current topic of discussion, yes you can add a personal experience however back up your information with reasoning and research.”*

*“It is astonishing how differently teachers/professors chose to grade the discussion board postings. Some are satisfied with two solid paragraphs of personal insight; others wish to view relevant facts for supporting claims, gained through the utilization of investigated research (which clearly seems much more so to be the very function of the board).”*

*“As I understand the document the expectation of the discussion board*

*is one in which the comments can be proven or supported, such as in a math problem. Another student makes a statement. My comment, if I choose to make one, should incorporate a reference to an outside source that supports my position regarding the statement, especially if I disagree with the initial comment made. When I initiate a comment I should interject those references from legitimate, reputable sources to support my position. My comments should demonstrate correct grammar, punctuation and vocabulary indicative of my college level."*

There were some who seemed to grasp the point of the discussion board and the explanation or rationale for including an ADB in the course as a learning activity.

*"I now understand, according to the journal excerpt, that my writings and opinions contained therein need to be fact-based with research and/or examples of personal experience. I understand that my work should add to the value of the course and a "clear and structured" argument should be presented."*

*"The explanation from the draft of the discussion board was very clear and to the point. The syllabus was concise while the draft defined both requirements and expectations of the purpose for the discussion board while taking online classes. The much needed clarification will help myself and all the other students with the discussion board in our future online classes."*

*"Reading over all my posts up to this point I would have to say that they were of the "egocentric" category; adding little more than opinion and baselessness [sic] to the discussion,"*

*"Wow! Wonderfully explanatory and well-construed message."*

Based on this early focus group student expectations and institutional and instructor expectations can be easily misaligned. The instructor expected students in this course to: 1) demonstrate an increase in critical and reflective thinking over the period covered by the course; 2) make and support rational arguments; and 3) demonstrate an increasing enhanced skill in scholarly discourse. These expectations were shared by some of the students but not all.

Warren's (2008) review of the literature suggested there are "two distinct schools of thought regarding instructors level of participation in the ADB: 1) the instructor may actively participate and risk dominating the conversation; or 2) the instructor may moderate, a role effective only when students participate and engage in an active conversation. Lim (2007) suggests an active approach to participation (as much as 10% contribution) through answering queries, posing conflicting views and providing feedback.

Based on this experience additional research into the alignment of expectations and the use of ADB's as learning activities seems



warranted. To that end the author intends to survey students to answer some of the following questions. Warren's (2008) finding that 28% of students checked the board weekly with 22% checking the board less than weekly engendered the interest in the survey questions regarding: What percentage of posts do you habitually read? Do you read even those you do not intend to respond to? Do you prefer high levels of instructor interaction? Do you prefer low levels of instructor interactions? What level of instructor interaction do you prefer? Explain.

Warren's (2008) research also found that, "only 15% of students made more than the required 3 postings to the forum compared to 25% that did not even make this minimum" (p.9). This finding leads to questions regarding the level of student participation in discussion boards since about half the students in his sample took the minimalist approach: Do you read all of the instructor's posts? Do you make the required minimum or more than the minimum number of posts? Do you try to post before anyone else or after most have posted? Explain why. Do you ever look back at your prior postings to evaluate where you have been and where you are going in your learning journey? The additional data gather from these questions should provide clues for use in creating a learning experience that not only contributes to student satisfaction but in addition contributes to student engagement in higher levels of thinking and learning.



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## **Appendix A**

### Syllabus Explanation of Discussion Board

Discussion Board: Learners are required to answer the Primary Discussion Questions each week and respond to at least two other postings (comments) for that week. (Example: if there are two questions then you are required to have two answers and two responses for that week, you are required to respond to at least one of the student-posted papers in week four) Responses may be to postings by other learners and/or the instructor. Completion of the readings and active class participation will enhance your learning and return on your investment in the course.

Post your answers and responses according to the following criteria:

1. Formulate your answers and responses carefully and express them clearly. They need to demonstrate evidence of thought and reflection.
2. They should be substantive contributions and in some way enhance the learning of others.
3. In formulating your answers use your knowledge of the course readings, other readings, body of knowledge, experience and examples. If you quote or use ideas from other resources you should cite those resources using APA style.
4. Answers and responses should be a minimum of 50 words to reflect analytical and/or critical thinking needed in substantive comments. (Answers and responses such as "I agree" and "Great point" do not meet the criteria even if expressed in several sentences.)

**Appendix B**

## Instructors Original Explanatory Post

The discussion board serves two purposes in the online class environment. First, it provides a place of interaction between students, or a place for interaction between instructors and learners. Second, it provides a way to measure the progress of the student toward an understanding of the course material. Freshman and sophomore level courses have a lower expectation of the level of writing, documentation, argumentation, and interaction. Of course, at the junior, senior and graduate level the expectations increase. The discussion should shift the flow of learning from the individual interaction with course content to interaction with others. In so doing, the learning environment becomes collaborative and perhaps even constructive. As such, a discussion board is not a before class conversation, but rather a scholarly discourse.

So, what makes a great post or great response to another's post? First, the post should present discussion points on a combination of premises and claims that advance understanding of the subject matter. These premises and claims are then supported with references to assigned readings, independent research, examples and personal experience while adhering to citation guidelines. There should be a clear structured argument presented. Responses to other's posts may be in agreement or disagreement to the premises and claims made by the original poster and provide an explanation of the rationale

and logic. The response may pose a provocative question, raise profound or controversial points or methodological issues and are of course supported by appropriate reference to the course materials, independent research and personal example. Responses should also advance the understanding of the topic and subject matter. Both original posts and responses should be written in clear, concise, and grammatically acceptable terms and adhere to the guidelines regarding length, subject lines and text formatting.

How, then, does the grading or assessment of discussion boards take place in what is a somewhat subjective environment? The assessment looks at the nature of the evidence presented: positive evidence is that which consists of established, supported facts, or causal/logical reasoning; negative evidence consists of beliefs, opinions, or speculations. There are levels of analytic scores using terms such as: egocentric when the student presents subjective perspectives but does not advance understanding; subjective role-taking where there is discrimination among various perspectives but understanding is not advanced, reciprocal perspective-taking where a student acknowledges the value of other's perspectives and the understanding is advanced minimally; mutual perspective-taking in which a student would coordinate perspectives and discussion progresses from mutual experiences to more elaborate debate; and finally societal-symbolic perspective in which students conceptualize subjective perspectives and the discussion

demonstrates a capacity to advance abstract multiple mutual perspectives. Scoring can be simplified to low-level discussions which involve mainly separate comments and opinions, mid-level are those involving generalizations, some joint knowledge building, and cross references, though not theory based, and high-level that involve shared, theory-based discussions, new points or questions, and rich cross-referencing.

Adapted from:

Gant C.. 2007. Assessing asynchronous discussions: an Exploratory Hybrid Model. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*. Retrieved on September 19, 2007 from <http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/fall104/gant103.htm> University of West Georgia.

