

How to Create and Sustain Meaningful Discussions in Online Courses?

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Abstract: While taking online courses students are required to participate in online discussions. These are often mandatory activities that count towards the course final grade. Even though, in many occasions, online students find this requirement dreadful and unproductive. A case study has been conducted with a postgraduate educational technology online course at a large university in the United States. This course offers two innovative strategies to overcome this issue and concomitant evidence of effectiveness.

1 INTRODUCTION

Online discussions support students and instructors' interactions in online learning environments and promote students' critical thinking and deep learning. Studies (e.g., Chenga et al., 2011) indicate that students who participated in discussions forums show better performance in online courses. However, many times students fail in engaging in meaningful conversations and providing thoughtful and reflective contributions while participating in online discussions. Several issues linked to online discussions have been widely reported. Examples are: limited participation (Hewitt, 2005); inadequate critical analysis of ideas (Rourke and Anderson, 2002); lack of motivation, commitment, and time; and failure to communicate effectively (Brooks and Jeong, 2006).

The case study described here is an attempt to address some of the pitfalls mentioned above that impact most of distance educators and hinder learning in online courses.

2 THE CASE STUDY

The next paragraphs describe the case study conducted. It took place in the context of an online course (*Evaluation of Online Learning Environments*) taught at a large university in the United States as part of a postgraduate program in

educational technology. Data collection occurred between January and May of 2015. Twenty-three postgraduate students participated in this study. Ages ranged from 24 to 51 years old and gender representation was balanced (13 females versus 10 males) the course. Most of them were part-time students working in a multitude of related professions such as, instructional designers, teachers, corporate trainers and user experience designers.

The course was developed in Blackboard Learn (<http://www.blackboard.com>). Blackboard Learn is a learning management system used by many universities and colleges in the United States. It is a web-based server system that includes content and course management features as well as open architecture and scalable design to permit integration with information systems and authentication protocols. It offers a platform for communication (e.g., chat, discussion boards and email) and sharing content (e.g., post articles, assignments and quizzes; compose text; add videos, still images and audio files; use a media library; and create a calendar).

Evaluation of Online Learning Environments (Figure 1) offered opportunities to design, carry out, and report the results of evaluation or usability studies, including instrumentation, reliability, validity and impact. The course was organized around themes (e.g., The Big Picture of Evaluation; Formative and Summative Evaluation; Usability Testing; and Collecting Evaluative Information). Selected themes called for online discussions. For example, there were week-long online discussions

around Formative and Summative Evaluation or Alternative Evaluation Approaches.

The assignments consisted of an individual project, a team project and an individual reflection. Since participation, involvement and leadership in class were particularly important when learning online, the course participation made up an important portion of students' grade (45 out of 200 points).



Figure 1: Snapshot of *Evaluation of Online Learning Environments* offered in Blackboard Learn.

3 PEER FACILITATION OF ONLINE DISCUSSIONS

Peer facilitation increases participation and fosters meaningful dialogue and participation in asynchronous online discussions. Having students facilitating online discussions on selected topics is one of the strategies used in this case study.

This practice has been extensively used by the one of the authors since 2008 (e.g., Baran and Correia, 2009) and stemmed from her interest in investigating alternative online discussion facilitation strategies that put the student at the center. Other research studies have been conducted around this phenomenon (e.g., Wang, 2008; Hew and Cheung, 2011).

3.1 Peer Facilitation Sustained

In *Evaluation of Online Learning Environments* students were randomly assigned to an online discussion group with 5 to 6 members.

Each group would have a student facilitator who volunteered to moderate the online discussion. Students were encouraged the use different media to express their ideas and insights and take full advantage of Blackboard media integration features. This was another innovative aspect of the online discussions that most of the time tend to be centered around text-based contributions (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Example of an online discussion introduction by student-facilitator.

Since the student-facilitators were volunteers a sign-up form was set up on Blackboard and several calls were emailed to students and posted on Blackboard. Following is a summary of the benefits of being a student-facilitator, which consisted on the main recruitment effort: *Why would you like to be a moderator?*

- Get to know your peers better and learn about what they do academically, professionally and in their personal life;
- Learn about others' perspectives and enrich your own knowledge and understanding of the topic;
- Actively interact with others, develop a sense of connectedness, and collaborate for learning;
- Become a thoughtful, critical and reflective professional;
- It builds your résumé;
- It gives bonus credit points.

In terms of guidance and support on becoming a student-facilitator, students were given a list of guidelines, as follows:

- Set the agenda for the discussion: the objectives of the discussion, guiding questions or exercises, scenarios for discussion or activities on the discussion topic (Figure 2);
- Clarify the purpose: What is the expected outcome of the discussion?
- Encourage the participation: Create a trustful atmosphere;
- Guide the discussion by asking questions rather than speaking up for him or herself;
- Ensure that some participants do not dominate the conversation by inviting less participative elements to jump in the discussion;
- Keep the discussion focused on the topic(s);
- Encourage multiple views of the same issue(s);

- Bring the discussion to an end by summarizing the main ideas (Figure 3).

Resources on “Moderating Online Discussion” were offered to all students in class and posted under “Additional Resources” on Blackboard. A week in advance of their online discussion facilitation, the peer facilitators were sent an email as a reminder of their role as student-facilitator and the expectations associated to this role. In sum, the course offered a series of weekly online discussions led exclusively *by* and *for* students.

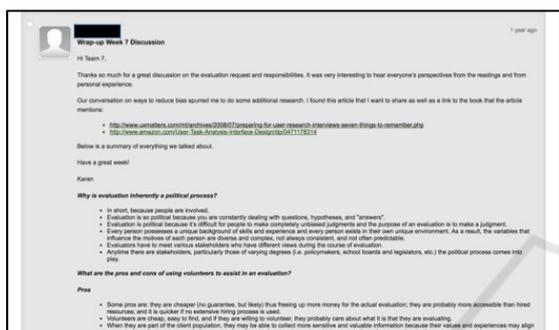


Figure 3: Example of bringing the discussion to an end by student-facilitator.

3.2 Effectiveness of Peer Facilitation

The online discussions around the themes discussed in class generated 844 postings on Blackboard in addition to 292 postings on the first week (introductions). As mentioned above, as part of the course assignments, students had to submit an individual reflection about their learning experience in class. Their insights about the online discussions showed that they considered the discussion prompts as “thought provoking and allowed for even more reflection on [their] own thoughts.” They valued how much they learn *from* and *with* their peers. One of the students wrote:

I found that this learning method was not only useful in exploring concepts covered in the reading assignments, but it also was a great way to get to know other students; it emulated the experience and benefits of a live group discussion asynchronously. Because the students had such varied backgrounds, their contributions made for interesting discussions and I enjoyed the varied experiences provided by different group discussion moderators. Upon reflection, I not only learned about concepts covered in reading assignments and more about my

classmates, but the different ways that moderators approached the group discussions was also instructive.

The use of different types of media (e.g., video, infographics and audio files) to prompt the discussion and address the issues at hand, was also highly regarded by the students. One of them explained: “I used multimedia to support my ideas or shared multiple information formats with other classmates...”

The opportunity to become an online discussion student-facilitator and the experience that came with it, was considered a significant contribution to students’ learning. One student commented:

I am so glad I took the opportunity to moderate a discussion board. I especially appreciated that moderators were allowed to truly drive the discussion by coming up with our own questions versus just shepherding the group through canned questions. This extra credit format was another great way to engage with online classmates and get to know people. So much of what I learned in this class was about soft skills, but as a classmate and as an evaluator. Those experiences only came with being willing to “get our hands dirty.”

4 DIGITAL CONTENT CURATION

Another strategy used in this course to overcome much of the lack of motivation, commitment and communication among online learners was the digital content curation. It provided students and instructor with an alternative way to participate online that built on the rise of “share the sharing” culture.

The word “curation” in Latin comes from “curare,” which means, to take care of or to preserve. In today’s world curation leads to a re-interpretation of the use of digital resources. Content curation was mentioned for the first time in 2009 and 2011 in Bhargava’s blog. At that time, this concept was more focused on online marketing than on education. He defined content curation as: “the act of finding, grouping, organizing or sharing the best and most relevant content on a specific issue” (Bhargava, 2011, para 4). Different from content creation, curation refers to finding and providing a link to the content one has already created. Curated content is meaningful, filtered and directed toward a specific target or topic. The power of collaborative content

curation emanates from the fact that it is filtered and organized by *humans* in opposition to the many rating/reviewers’ systems that are machine generated.

4.1 Digital Content Curation Framework

In this case-study, the focus was on the learner-curator, meaning postgraduate students enrolled in *Evaluation of Online Learning Environments*. A part of students’ graded course participation consisted on curating specific theme-related artifacts using Scoop.it (<http://www.scoop.it>).

Scoop.it is a content curation platform that allows learners to curate, add their perspective and publish to their own topic page; share to social channels; embed in websites; and discover content instantly based on keywords/tags (Figure 4). Students can upload relevant digital artifacts, post their insights and react to their peers’ insights. Keywords/tags can also be added to the artifacts.

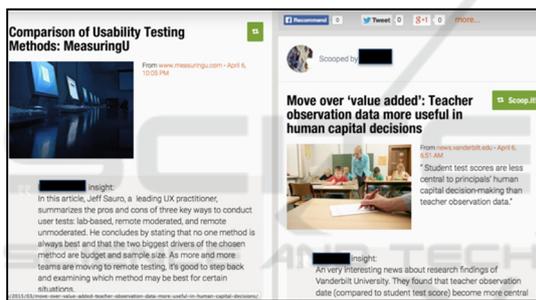


Figure 4: Screenshot of Scoop.it interface.

Students were expected to curate and link their insights to the course readings and their professional experiences at least one digital resource related to a specific theme (e.g., evaluation versus usability; collecting evaluative information; and politics, ethics and standards of evaluation). They were also expected to react to at least two other artifacts curated by one of their peers and/or instructor. The reactions to their peers’ insights offered an opportunity to extend the discussion around the artifact and themes (Figure 5).

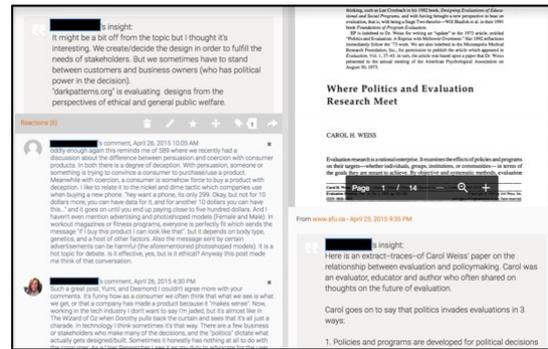


Figure 5: Example of learner-curators’ reactions to their peers’ insights.

In relation to the different types of artifacts curated by students, they included:

- illustrations, infographics or any other visual;
- videos;
- articles published in online journals, or websites, d) websites or blogs;
- applications (e.g. PowerPoint slides, software applications, and others).

The most common type of artifacts curated around all themes were websites/blogs followed by articles and videos. Two resources/tools were also curated.

4.2 Effectiveness of Digital Content Curation

A total of 75 digital artifacts were created by the learner-curators. They contributed with 79 insights and 121 reactions to their peers’ insights. A content of analysis of students’ end-of-course reflections showed that the majority of the students valued their role as learner-curator. One of the students mentioned:

Alternating reading and assignments that required contributing to the Learner-Curated Knowledge Base made the course bright and exciting. [this activity] is a very powerful tool for engaging students. At first sight it seemed to me like a simple task ... to share some articles or other sources related to a particular topic. However, I changed my mind when I spent more than two hours finding a good article or informative video to curate. I went through several articles and chapters from different textbooks. I watched many YouTube videos related to the topic. As a result, I got familiar with the entire topic

and introduced myself to many opinions from different sources regarding this topic.

Another student emphasized that the learner-curated knowledge activity in Scoop.it “was a necessary complement to discussion board in Blackboard by integrating more multimedia resources, enriching online interactions, and better accommodating different learning styles.” A few students reported that in the beginning it was hard to work with Scoop.it because of usability and navigation issues. For example, inserting a tag or posting a reaction was not easy to accomplish because of how these functions are offered in Scoop.it.

5 CONCLUSIONS

This case study offers two strategies to create and sustain meaningful discussions in online courses and to overcome the challenges of instructor-led facilitation (e.g., instructor dominated discussion and limited application to students’ contexts of practice). They are: peer facilitation and digital content curation. While case studies cannot assure sampling representativeness, they may offer important information to be applied in similar contexts and situations.

The peer facilitation strategies can be used to enhance the sense of learning community and encourage students’ participation in online discussions. This seems aligned with existing studies on students as online discussion facilitators (e.g., Rourke and Anderson, 2002) that suggested that this approach is beneficial not only to encourage student involvement, but also to improve learning outcomes.

Today’s learners have a myriad of content sources at their disposal for refinement and mash-up. A recent study investigated how *Pinterest* (www.pinterest.com), a content sharing service, was used by students in a graduate class (Song et al., 2017). The activity explored the use of language everyday life. The findings show that the affordances of *Pinterest* as an electronic board allowed for on-going communication with classmates and the cyberspace represented by other *Pinterest* users. “Both images and accompanying messages revealed pinners’ intentions to express their thoughts about noteworthy language use and to invite their audience to pay attention to what they had shared. The *Pinterest* activity as digital curation created a participatory culture that encouraged students’ collaboration and informal learning.” (Song et al., 2017, p.33)

Being able to sort through huge amounts of digital content compile, scrutinize and recommend it, is as an important skill as creating content. This study evidences the effectiveness of digital content curation to motivate and support online interactions among students and instructors. Scoop.it’s commenting and curating features supported information exchange and learners’ curiosity and willingness to discuss with their peers.

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