



Does it matter if the teacher is there?: A teacher's contribution to emerging patterns of interactions in online classroom discussions



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ABSTRACT

Our purpose was to explore the role of a teacher in synchronous online discussions taking place in a graduate level course across a semester. We focused on identifying the roles a teacher played as well as on investigating the influence that her presence and discourse moves made on students' involvement in online discussion. Data came from 15 students enrolled in a graduate level seminar who, assigned to one of two discussion groups, discussed course topics weekly, with the teacher switching group every week. Data sources included 20 online discussion transcripts, weekly pre- and post-discussion surveys of students' engagement in online discussion, and final self-reflective essays in which students described their experiences of the different discussion modes of the class. Data analysis was inductive, interpretive, and qualitative, aimed at identifying the discourse moves made by participants in each online discussion. Also, descriptive statistics were used to calculate mean number of comments posted by students and mean ratings of student engagement immediately following online discussions. Results showed that the teacher's presence did influence the dynamic system making up the online discussion, yet her influence was more subtle than has traditionally been assumed. In many ways, the roles the teacher took up were similar to those students enacted as co-participants in the discussion, perhaps because students were modeling their teacher's discourse moves in this innovative classroom activity. This study highlights the shifting nature of teacher roles in online learning environments, with the teacher sharing a more symmetrical relationship with students.

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1. Introduction

When students are engaged in classroom discussion, a distinction is often made between peer-led and teacher-led interactions. Generally focused on K-12 settings, research on these two discussion structures has not shown a uniformly positive impact of the teacher on the conversation, instead pointing to the complexities involved when this instructional approach is used (e.g., [Almasi, 1995](#); [Aukerman, 2007](#); [Maloch, 2002](#); [Mercer & Hodgkinson, 2008](#)).

When classroom discussion takes place online, however, there is a need to re-examine the influence of the teacher. This is because an online environment, particularly when it involves a synchronous discussion, changes the dynamics of teacher-student and student-student interactions, with the teacher's influence and power over the direction of exchanges potentially reduced ([Faigley, 1992](#); [Maor, 2003](#)). Having for many years focused our research on understanding different aspects of university students' experience in online discussion activities ([Lee et al., 2011](#); [Schallert, Reed, & the D-Team, 2003–2004](#); [Vogler et al., 2013](#)), we turned in this study to describing the influence of the teacher in terms of amount and content of student postings and degree of student self-ratings of engagement, taking a systemic view of the teacher's influence.

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To provide the theoretical and empirical basis of the rationale for our work, we describe three lines of work, beginning first with the extensive literature on classroom discussion and turning next to the work on the role of the teacher in online learning environments. In a third section, we describe the underlying theoretical perspective we used to understand the teacher's impact in online classroom discussion by addressing what it means to take a system's view of learning.

2. Literature review

2.1. Classroom discussion

There is a relatively robust literature on the role and influence of the teacher on classroom discussion (Almasi, 1995; Aukerman, 2007; Maloch, 2002; McNeill & Pimentel, 2010; Scott, Mortimer, & Aguiar, 2006; Tabak & Baumgartner, 2004). Yet, findings do not provide a clear consensus. In an investigation of peer-led and teacher-led discussion groups in a fourth grade classroom, Almasi (1995) found that in peer-led discussions, students were more prone to elaborate their contributions, more easily engaged in discussion topics aligned with their interests, and resolved conflicts better than students in the discussion groups led by the teacher. At the same time, comments in peer-led discussions showed a less in-depth attention to the text than did teacher-led discussion. By contrast, Maloch (2002) reported on how a teacher's gradual release of guidance in the discussion helped her third-graders become willing to share their partly-formed or tentative ideas while guiding students to delve more deeply into text meaning. Maloch's study implied that teacher-led discussion provided a model for students on ways to question, challenge, and share ideas.

A possible bridge between the findings of Almasi's (1995) and Maloch's (2002) studies may come from Aukerman (2007) who investigated a fifth grade teacher's efforts to change his students' views of himself as a source of authority so as to develop their own ability to determine the legitimacy of claims they were making and to validate why their interactions with peers could be useful to them. Aukerman introduced the construct of *shared evaluation pedagogy* in which students are brought to evaluate details of a reading by repositioning themselves as "possible knowers" (p. 56) with the teacher and students shifting roles throughout the process.

Our research was aimed at broadening the focus of the previously reported literature on discussion taking place in K-12 classroom settings to include the college classroom where less is known about teacher-fronted and student-led discussion. Additionally, our study differed from previous work as it was focused on discussion taking place online. In such a context, reading, writing, and thinking processes are intermingled (Vogler et al., 2013) in ways that seem distinct from processes occurring in face-to-face discussion. Like much of the research on classroom discussion, ours took advantage of classroom activities that were a natural component of ongoing instruction, rather than introducing any experimental artifice.

2.2. Teacher role in online learning

As much as it has gained increasing currency in educational settings (Kim, 2013; McKenzie et al., 2013; Urhahne, Schanze, Bell, Mansfield, & Holmes, 2010), the experience of participating in computer supported learning environments and the ways such environments affect teacher-student dynamics in class still need careful disciplined examination (Kern, 2006; Mazzolini & Maddison, 2003; Tiene, 2000). For example, Kern (2006) identified three areas of research deserving of greater attention, one of which emphasized the importance of "teacher involvement in discerning, explaining, and reflecting on [course-relevant concepts] with their students" (p. 200). As he went on to state, various teacher roles can dynamically interplay with students, tools, and the context, thereby defining "what successful participation means in ... different CMC contexts" (p. 200). In what follows, we review the literature on how the teacher's role is shifting as computer technologies become more ubiquitous in students' experiences, and we describe some of the role categories that have been reported in the literature.

2.2.1. Shifting teacher roles

Online environments have been described as challenging traditional views of the role of the teacher. In a study of preservice teacher's conceptions of technology, Koc (2013) reported that some participants perceived *technology as facilitation*, as when one mentioned, "Technology is like a teacher" (p. 5), implying that the teacher and technology are sharing pedagogical functions. However, there is still much that a teacher must do in order to design instructional uses of technology that truly facilitate student learning. For example, based on nine years of action research, Warden, Stanworth, Ren, and Warden (2013) described how instructors can design a supportive environment for virtual videoconferencing by paying particular attention to creating social interactions equivalent to those common to a face-to-face classroom. Similarly, Kim (2013) investigated factors that were under instructor control that influenced students' participation and interaction in an online environment. Influenced by the size of the group, the teacher's support, guidelines, and encouragement positively affected students' contributions, as reflected in total number of messages contributed and the number of responses such messages received. Finally, while implementing a *blended learning lecture delivery* course with a large number of students representing much diversity, McKenzie et al. (2013) reported that teacher feedback in the form of student progress reports influenced the quality of discussion.

Thus, acknowledging that technology can be a powerful teaching tool, the teacher must take on additional responsibilities as learning environment designer in order to take advantage of the technology's potential. In a study of teachers learning to teach online in a hybrid environment, Comas-Quinn (2011) reported on the need to understand how teachers' roles and identities are redefined in the process of teaching in a new environment. The author documented how teachers appropriated new ideas and implemented them in their course, describing the new roles, pedagogies, and skills they needed to become effective in the online medium.

2.2.2. Categories of teachers' new roles when teaching online

The changing role of the instructor in online learning environments is perhaps best highlighted by the number of different categorization schemes that have been introduced, beginning with the basic idea that the role of an instructor in online discourse can range from "prominent sage" to "keeping low visibility" (Mazzolini & Maddison, 2003). Depending on the frequency with which the instructor inserts himself/herself into the ongoing dialogue, responds as an authoritative resource to student questions, or initiates and closes topics, students

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