



Structured and unstructured discussion forums as tools for student engagement



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ABSTRACT

Online discussion forums as teaching tools are becoming increasingly popular in college classrooms. The manner in which they are designed (and in particular, the amount of structure imposed) can affect how engaging of an activity it is for students. The current study analyzed responses to structured and unstructured discussion forums to determine how each impacted student engagement (specifically by studying the use of feedback, modeling, and empowerment). Results found students to respond positively to both forums, but structured forums were generally perceived to be more engaging. The nature of “structure” in forums is discussed, as well as how it can be manipulated to promote student engagement.

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1. Introduction

College students today are digital natives; they grew up familiar with the Internet and other forms of virtual technology (Prensky, 2001). In the classroom, many instructors are leveraging their students’ digital literacy to create engaging and innovative learning experiences (Buzhardt & Semb, 2005; Poirier & Feldman, 2004). One such tool is an asynchronous online discussion forum (Hiltz & Goldman, 2005; Palloff & Pratt, 2007; Vai & Sosulski, 2011). Many have suggested that forums can be used to promote student engagement (Bean, 2011; Brookfield & Preskill, 2005; Donnelly & Gardner, 2011), but we argue that the level of structure imposed on forums can influence how students engage in the activity. Therefore, this study examines the effects of structured and unstructured discussion forums on student engagement.

1.1. Discussion forums and student engagement

A discussion forum is a type of asynchronous learning network used to increase out-of-class student dialogue about course content (Hiltz & Goldman, 2005). Students can ask questions about concepts, give examples of how they encounter class material in their everyday lives, or discuss particularly difficult topics to gain greater understanding (Palloff & Pratt, 2007; Vai & Sosulski,

2011). Because of the asynchronous nature of the activity, students are not necessarily required to immediately respond to an idea; instead, they can carefully and thoughtfully construct a contribution to the online discussion in their own time (Carter, 2011). Forums can be used in fully online courses, hybrid courses (i.e., a course that involves both online and face-to-face components), or as a supplement to traditional face-to-face college classes (Bean, 2011). Nagel, Blignaut, and Cronje (2009) argued that in any online educational setting, active communication on the part of the students is critical; discussion forums can help encourage this.

The relationship between the use of discussion forums and academic performance has been studied previously (Buckley, 2011; Davies & Graff, 2005). However, some have suggested that forums could also increase student engagement (Bean, 2011; Brookfield & Preskill, 2005; Donnelly & Gardner, 2011), though this assertion has not been empirically examined. Kuh (2009) defined student engagement as being cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally involved in the class. This is a broad concept that can manifest in multiple ways in a classroom, but the critical feature of engagement is “involvement” (Axelson & Flick, 2011); engaged students are mentally involved in their learning through deep thinking and interactive activities and educational experiences. Student engagement is an important outcome to promote for many reasons, one of which is because it is linked to increased student learning (Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006; Hu & McCormick, 2012; Schlenker, Schlenker, & Schlenker, 2013).

Discussion forums can be engaging learning activities. Rather than passively sitting in class listening to an instructor, a

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discussion forum requires students to actively participate in the class, which is a form of engagement (Jones, 2008; Rocca, 2010). Discussion forum participants must actively choose what conversation they will respond to, how they will respond, and when they will do so (Carter, 2011; Palloff & Pratt, 2007; Vai & Sosulski, 2011). Discussion forums can also allow students who typically would not participate during a class session to still engage (Asterhan & Eisenmann, 2011; Ng, Cheung, & Hew, 2010). Students who participate in discussion forums benefit in many ways, such as increased class preparedness and more active learning (Bean & Peterson, 1998; Dallimore, Hertenstein, & Platt, 2008; Petress, 2006).

Engagement is typically assessed via student self-report measures (e.g., the Classroom Survey of Student Engagement, CLASSE; Ouimet & Smallwood, 2005; the College Student Experiences Questionnaire, CSEQ; Pace, 1984). Within measures such as these, one particular aspect of engagement commonly assessed is participation. Discussion forums increase participation (Asterhan & Eisenmann, 2011; Dengler, 2008; Ng et al., 2010), however there is more to engagement than simply participation. Similarly, Naranjo, Onrubia, and Segué (2012) argued that participation is necessary but not sufficient for a good quality discussion forum. We argue that a broader exploration of discussion forum engagement (than has been empirically examined thus far) should be considered. The current study focuses on three specific operationalizations of engagement: feedback, modeling, and empowerment.

1.1.1. Feedback

One way students can engage in a class is by giving feedback to and receiving feedback from others (either the instructor or peers in the class). Feedback is widely recognized as a critical element in the learning environment (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman, 2010; Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Fink, 2003; Wiggins, 1998). However, feedback can also play an important role in engagement; measures of student engagement prominently feature the use of feedback as a form of engagement. For instance, both the CLASSE (Ouimet & Smallwood, 2005) and the CSEQ (Pace, 1984) include questions such as how often students have “received prompt feedback,” “contributed to class discussion,” and “asked questions.” The creators of these measures argued that these questions are indicators of student engagement; if students report doing these behaviors, then they are engaged because they are actively thinking about the course material and adjusting their understanding based on what others say. In a classroom study on the topic, Chen, Whittinghill, and Kadlowec (2010) increased student engagement in an engineering mechanics course through the use of feedback (specifically, feedback using classroom “clickers”).

Feedback is a foundational component of discussion forums (Arbaugh & Benbunan-Fich, 2005; Rovai, Ponton, & Baker, 2008). An example of discussion forum feedback is a student posting his or her opinion on the topic currently being discussed, and the instructor responding with an evaluation of the post. However, feedback need not be as formal as this. The National Research Council (2000) suggested that peer feedback can be an important source of feedback in the classroom, and Xie (2013) found that peer feedback in particular (rather than just instructor feedback) led to increased participation and engagement in online discussions. An example of peer feedback is a student replying to a peer's post by discussing the reasons why he or she agrees or disagrees. Regardless of who gives feedback, receiving it can engage students because it is directly relevant to what they posted about; Marzano, Pickering, and Heflebower (2011) suggested that making class content personal and relevant is an important component to making the class engaging.

1.1.2. Modeling

Modeling is the second factor highlighted in the current study as an operationalization of student engagement in discussion forums. Bandura (1986) defined modeling as the active process of observing others, thinking about what they are doing, and behaving in a similar manner. This is not a passive process of simply watching someone else and mimicking this person; it requires the modeler to think about the model's behavior and interpret what it means. Modeling is a form of metacognitive thinking, which is thinking about how one learns and processes information (Flavell, 1979). Research on classrooms and metacognition has found this to result in engaged students (Mullen, 2000; Parker Siburt, Bissell, & Macphail, 2011; Ryan, Jackman, Peters, Olafsson, & Huba, 2004; Smith, Rook, & Smith, 2007). By metacognitively thinking about how one learns (as well as how others learn), students can model their thought processes after someone else. Thinking in this manner is an engaging process; it requires the student to actively think about how he or she learns information and how thought patterns can change to match others.

In the context of discussion forums, one method in which students can model their thinking is by reading their peers' posts and modeling their own posts after what they read. Rather than simply reading *what* other students post and then mimicking these ideas, modeling in this context would require students to notice *how* their peers think about and respond to questions and then use a similar process when responding to their own questions. For instance, a student may think to himself, “When I posted on the discussion forum, I listed definitions of important terms from the textbook. However, my classmate posted by discussing times the class concepts applied to her life. She did better on the exam than me – maybe it's because of how she posted (and therefore how she learned). In the future, I should post similar to how she posts.” Not every student will necessarily think this way, but the opportunity is present. Modeling is not as visible as other forms of online activity, but Dennen (2008) argued that less visible aspects of discussion forums (such as reading and reflecting on the discussion) are engaging activities.

1.1.3. Empowerment

Empowerment is defined as having control over and making decisions about one's education (Zyngier, 2007), and this is the third operationalization of discussion forum engagement highlighted in the current study. There is much evidence on self-directed learning to suggest that empowering students to be in charge of their own learning is an engaging endeavor. For instance, Gibson (2011) redesigned her Sociology of Aging course to allow students to choose how they would be graded, as well as how much weight each assignment would factor into their overall course grade. Students in her class reported this to be an engaging and welcome change. Similarly, Perepelkin (2012) found that empowering pharmacy students through the use of self-directed learning increases student engagement. Studies such as these lead to the conclusion that when students are given the opportunity to decide for themselves what and how they will learn, they become more engaged in the learning process. They think about what works for them and how to make the learning process better.

Discussion forums offer many opportunities for students to be empowered. For instance, students can choose which discussion thread they wish to respond to, or they can create their own (Palloff & Pratt, 2007; Vai & Sosulski, 2011). This allows them to choose which topic they want to talk about based on their interests as well as what they are having a difficult time understanding. In addition, students can choose when they want to respond (Carter, 2011). This allows students to respond not only when it works best in their busy schedules, but also after they have given time and thought to how they can create the best quality post

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