

Taming the Beast: Designing effective online discussions

Elizabeth Murphy



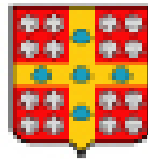


Social Sciences and Humanities
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en
sciences humaines du Canada

Canada

Collaborative learning supported by
online asynchronous communication
in university-based courses



UNIVERSITÉ
LAVAL



Memorial
University of Newfoundland



Part 1 →

Online discussions:
Benefits, challenges & solutions



Part 2 →

Group work:
Preparation of preliminary designs



Part 3 →

Individual group presentations
of preliminary designs

Part 4 →

Open discussion:
Questions, comments.

Benefits

- Race, gender, accent or status not visible
- Constructing & negotiating meaning
- Opportunities for critical thinking
- Higher levels of abstract cognitive processing
- More careful, formal and reflective responses
- Presence of a real audience for communicating
- Increased motivation to participate and to write

Benefits

- Freedom from temporal and spatial constraints
- Shift in locus of control to learner
- Less domination by the teacher
- No requirement for turn taking
- Discussants contribute at their own pace
- Time to reflect on comments
- Equalizing effect for slow and shy responders
- More interaction and flexibility in communication
- Lack of physical presence shelters against "status signalling" and "social games"

Challenges

- Monologues & lack of interaction
- Domination
- Low rates of participation & lurkers
- Playing the grade game: forced interactions
- Repetition
- Over-posting
- Stream of consciousness posting
- Overemphasis on description without analysis
- Unsupported claims & over-generalization
- Feelings of exclusion
- Lack of responses to messages

Challenges

- Empty postings: *Thanks!*
- Digressions: *By the way...*
- Flaming: *That's a stupid argument!*
- Politeness: *I agree!*
- Lack of visual and aural cues: *Did you mean..?*
- Procrastination in responding: *Sorry to be late...*
- Grammar & spelling: *I now hwat u mean*
- Teacher domination
- Misuse of subject line and threads
- Information overload

Challenges in moderating

- Reply vs. reply privately
- “Great posting! Thanks! I agree!”
- Praise
- Groups and size
- Flaming
- Politeness
- Monologues
- Sustaining momentum

Taming the beast

GOALS

GUIDELINES

GRADES

Goals

**What is the
intent or purpose
of the discussion?**

Goals

- What is your goal for the discussion?
- What is its purpose?
- What do you want to achieve by having a discussion?
- What are your outcomes?



Critical thinking

Problem solving

Knowledge building

Reflection

Argumentation



Collaboration

Community

Social presence

Interactivity

Teacher presence

E.g. Critical thinking?

- What is problem solving?
- How is it different from critical thinking ?
- What types of discussion behaviours does it reflect
? What are examples of these behaviours ?
- What types of activities/prompts or questions are needed to promote it ?

Problem Resolution

Process	Indicator	Example
Identifying Solutions	Proposing solutions	<i>I feel teachers need to use French more if they expect their students to use it.</i>
	Hypothesising about Solutions	<i>I believe that if a teacher were to make mistakes and correct them in front of a class, it would ease the students' minds about making mistakes themselves and enable them to correct themselves.</i>
Evaluating Solutions	Agreeing with solutions proposed by others	<i>I agree strongly with participant 6's views. Especially for Immersion students.</i>
	Weighing & comparing alternative Solutions	<i>I sincerely believe that using the target language 100% of the time creates a stagnant environment for learning. On the other hand, too much use of English would only serve to 'baby' students.</i>
	Critiquing solutions	<i>While I agree somewhat with participant 3, I think some students at lower levels may become too frustrated when trying to learn the language when a teacher uses only French.</i>
	Rejecting solutions judged unworkable	<i>I don't think it is right to start the year off with a solid plan of attack.</i>
Acting on Solutions	Planning to act	<i>Personally, I have decided to speak English the first day of classes.</i>
	Reaching conclusions, or an understanding of the problem	<i>The methods which all of these sources have suggested prove that language use in the classroom is a major problem, but is also easily mended with use of the proper tools, and creativity.</i>

Guidelines

- Length of postings
- Number of postings
- Time of postings
- Social postings
- Folders and topics
- Locking of modules
- Use of reply vs. reply privately
- Postings as attachments
- Subject line & snippets

Grading

- Quantity versus quality
- Time
- Guidelines
- Role of claims
- New insights, alternative perspectives
- Articulation, grammar ,spelling
- Interaction
- Tone & attitude
- Weekly, monthly or at end of course
- Role of student in grading

Grading claims

**Empirical
support**

**Logical
argument**

**Anecdotal
evidence**

Additional resources

Book:

Collison, G., Elbaum, B., Haavind, S., & Tinker, R. (2000). *Facilitating online learning: Effective strategies for moderators*. Madison, WI: Atwood Publishing.

Online bibliography:

Murphy, E. (2005). *Online synchronous discussion in teaching and learning: A bibliography*. Available:
<http://www.ucs.mun.ca/~emurphy/biblio.htm>

Resources for grading

Murphy, E. & Jerome, T. (2005). Assessing students' contributions to online asynchronous discussions in university-level courses. *The e-Journal of Instructional Science and Technology (e-JIST)*, 8(1). Available: http://www.usq.edu.au/electpub/e-jist/docs/vol8_no1/commentary/stu_contrib_ansynch.htm


Murphy, E. & Loveless, J. (2005). Students' self analysis of contributions to online asynchronous discussions. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 21(2), 155-172. Available: <http://www.ascilite.org.au/ajet/ajet21/murphy.html>




Thanks

MERCI


Part 2: Your designs



Decide on your goal or purpose for the discussion. e.g. critical thinking



Decide how you will operationalise the construct. e.g. prompts, questions



Decide on parameters or guidelines:
e.g. length & number of postings etc.

Decide on grading.

