

THE ASYNCHRONOUS DISCUSSION BOARD AS AN ASSESSMENT TOOL: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL

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Abstract

This paper reports on the preliminary findings of a study on the efficacy of asynchronous discussion forums within an on-line MBA course, currently enrolling students from all over the world, from many different time zones. The institution offering this course, Universitas 21 Global (U21G), is committed to a pedagogy founded on problem-based learning and extensive use is made of Harvard Business School case studies. Importantly, there is explicit recognition that, as adult learners, U21G students are 'active partners in the design and implementation of their academic experience' (Rossman 1999), and that they have as much to learn from each other as they do from the texts, the courseware and other media. To this end, the efficient use of an asynchronous discussion board tool is considered to be crucial to the success of the student learning process. However, to date, efforts to encourage high quality participation in on-line discussions have produced mediocre results. This study suggests that this may be an outcome of the way contributions to discussion boards are assessed.

The hazards of assessing discussion

There is an abundance of academic literature documenting the benefits of learner interaction and how it can promote deep learning (see, for example, Peters 2000; Palloff and Pratt 1999). It follows, therefore, that if we are so convinced that interaction is such a critical element of the learning process, it makes sense to provide learners with incentives to participate. What better way to induce this participation than to grade students for their efforts? As Swan *et al* (2000) have demonstrated, this after all, is the currency that students deal in. But is it appropriate to assess discussion? Some might argue that this is counter-intuitive.

It is certainly the case that in the on-line environment, asynchronous discussion forums have emerged as the *modus operandi* for the facilitation of interaction among learners, and a number of academics have turned their attention to how participants in these discussion forums might be assessed

(see, for example, MacKinnon 2000; Sabin *et al* 2000, and especially Meyer 2004). Is it possible, though, that by simply declaring one's intention to monitor an activity – that would otherwise have proceeded in a relaxed manner – there is a risk that interaction might become stultified by the 'fear factor' of writing something that might cause a learner to lose marks? The learner worrying, for example, that by opening up too much on the discussion board they might reveal a lack of knowledge or a level of understanding that could count against them.

There is a view in some education circles that 'what you test is what you get' (Raikes & Harding 2003) and there is a real danger, therefore, that unless a discussion forum proceeds in a non-threatening environment, the desired learning outcomes will be less than optimal. In short – as Harlen & Deakin-Crick (2003) have observed – the motivation for learning can be discouraged unwittingly by assessment and testing practices; the negative impact being greater, the higher the stakes associated with the assessment item. This is obviously of concern to educators in an era when there is widespread acceptance of the need to foster life-long learning, and recognition that learners need to develop self-managed learning skills.

Learning through discussion

Observing that 'collaborative learning is undeniably important', and that 'the communicative media are powerful enablers that match what is needed for discussion and collaboration', Laurillard (2002, p. 148) queries the extent to which these media actually succeed in enabling learning. The 'properties of the medium', she observes, 'do not determine the quality of the learning that takes place' (2002, p. 148). In the case of U21G, the experience with the discussion board tool in the first 6 months of operation was, for the most part, unsatisfactory. During this period it was mainly used as a medium for a series of small-scale assignments (carrying an assessment weighting of between 2 to 5 per cent) that, by and large, did not produce any great depth of response on the part of learners, despite the use of assessment criteria that clearly sought to elicit such responses. End of subject evaluations submitted by the students conveyed their general disappointment with the quality of the interaction and the value of the exercise in terms of their learning, explicitly stating that they had anticipated being able to draw far more on the rich 'real-world' experience of their fellow students. Instructors, meanwhile, experienced difficulty in encouraging quality input from the students; the pattern being one where, typically, a student did the minimum required to 'earn their grade' and not much more. In summary, there were discussion forums, but little in the way of discussion.

Work-in-progress is currently focusing on initiatives to foster greater learner collaboration. Discussion board assignments focusing on discrete small-scale problems have been abandoned, and replaced by discussion board assignments that are integrated with case study assignments. The thinking, simply, is to replicate the on-campus case method on-line, where vigorous group discussion precedes individual case analysis that is submitted for

summative assessment purposes. In short, although the small assessment weighting for participation in the discussion forums remains, the main incentive to contribute and add to a healthy discussion is the benefit to the individual learner in terms of the preparation it will provide for the submission of a case study assignment with a larger assessment weighting.

Using this approach, three variations in the assessment of discussion board participation are being trialled:

1. All discussion board activity is evaluated with an overall mark awarded (rather than marks for each separate discussion board)
2. Students nominate selected discussion board contributions that they would like to be considered for assessment purposes (e.g. their 5 best from 15)
3. Discussion board participation is not assessed *per se*, although students are advised that their contributions to discussions boards will be considered by the instructor in validating peer assessments of their performance which, in turn, determines their individual grades in team assignments.

Preliminary findings and future research

As Laurillard (2002, p. 199) points out, students are 'not simply learners of an academic subject; they are social beings' and 'like everyone else, they respond to the social, political and organisational context around them...'. After the indifferent feedback from students to the original format of discussion boards, the early signs are that the students in this study have, indeed, responded to a restructuring of the context of discussion board assignments, as the following comments suggest:

"This prompted actual threads of discussion rather than what I've found in other modules where one makes rather artificial comments on other student's postings as the class attempts to get marks for making exactly the same points in slightly different words."

"I thought the discussion boards were useful in preparing for the assignments because they focused on the content of those assignments so you were able to get tips from your fellow students and the tutor. In other modules, discussion boards were separate to the written assignment and so represented an additional rather than complementary task."

"I think [you] got it right by making the discussion boards focused and task-orientated."

The project is ongoing, and the goal is to perform a comparative analysis of the qualitative substance of discussion board postings before and after the change in format. While it is early days yet, preliminary findings do suggest that, if used effectively, discussion boards can, indeed, provide a useful vehicle for learner assessment. Importantly, it is possible for students' contributions to be assessed without this process having a stultifying effect on the quality of debate and the depth of learning.

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