

# **An Audience of None: How the Discussion Board Has Failed Us, and What We Can Do about It**

Dan Clark, ABD  
Division of Extended Programs  
Western Oregon University  
United States  
clarkdan@wou.edu

Rob Walsh, Ph.D.  
Department of Communication Arts  
Valley City State University  
United States  
rob.walsh@vesu.edu

**Abstract:** The Discussion Board has long been considered the crucible of the online learning environment. Through misappropriation and misuse, however, it tends to resemble an instructional wasteland of superfluous effort and unfulfilled promise. This paper provides a brief history of the evolution of online discussion strategies and practices, a summary of various interactions that occur in the online environment, as well as proposed approaches for fostering effective and useful interactions in the online context.

## **Under the Florescent Light**

Approaching twenty years into the grand experiment of online education, discussion board practices have largely fallen far short of their intended goal of fostering true academic discourse, and remain a monument to missed opportunity and busywork (McPherson & Nunes, 2004; Osvaldsson, 2011; Kupczynski, Mundy, Goswami, & Meling, 2014). Although reasons for the current state of affairs are manifold, a distinct evolution can be traced that has led online practitioners to this circumstance. Early champions of online instruction were often instructors who, while intrigued by the possibilities of this new form of instruction, were left to their own devices in terms of instructional design and development support (Thomas, M. J., 2002). First generation adopters of online strategies fell back to what they knew: trying to replicate the activities and learning models of the classroom in the online environment. History is replete with examples of employing this same strategy. For example, one need only consider why most automobiles have their engine in the front of the vehicle, upon the development of the horseless carriage. What is to become innovation begins with imitation (Segerstrom, P. S., 1991).

The influence of standardized Learning Management Systems (LMS) such as Blackboard cannot be minimized. Although a certain level of inherent flexibility was present, these systems were clearly designed to facilitate the creation and delivery of text based, asynchronous courses that leaned heavily on the discussion board to provide interaction (Kunz, 2004). The work of the Sloan Foundation, Quality Matters, and others began to establish a de facto expectation of online instruction that reinforced this asynchronous, text-based model.

As institutions of higher education (both for-profit and not) have come to realize the potential dollars available through the broader student base facilitated by online instruction, resources have continued to pour in. Regrettably, the rush to secure market share has too often led to an abridged design and development cycle, copycat (“truck fender”) design practices, and insufficient faculty training (Noble, 1998; Gehrke, 2014). The resulting ‘Florescent lighted’ world of online learning has facilitated a culture of consistency (where consistency is mistaken for quality) in online design to the point where the concept of a *traditional* online courses, complete with prescribed discussion board interaction, has clearly emerged.

## Communicating Online

Despite its unquestioned advancements, one rune stone in particular has proved exceedingly elusive for practitioners in the online context: recreating the personal, real-time interactions enjoyed in the face-to-face classroom. Initial efforts focused on three basic forms of interaction that could be readily supported by available LMS technologies:

- *Topical Discussion* is student interaction with the content, intended to mirror the Socratic method that may ensue when an instructor opens the floor for discussion.
- *Socialization* is student interaction with other students, occurring between students (and sometimes the instructor) as they network among each other. Typical forms of socialization include students studying in groups, collaborating on assignments, or even meeting socially outside of class.
- *Mentoring and Guidance* is student interaction with faculty, usually provided by an instructor in a one-on-one setting, during office hours, for example. In this form of interaction, the instructor might provide a student with remedial instruction as well as encouragement and support.

As the accepted definition of online learning became increasingly synonymous with *asynchronous* learning, the discussion board became the logical tool to use to attempt to facilitate these forms of interaction (Kupczynski et al., 2014). Strategies and best practices were quickly developed, as they continue to be, in order to help instructors avoid common mistakes that led to runaway discussions, stalled discussions, and the dreaded “I agree” discussions. The online discussion board fairly quickly settled into a relatively comfortable place, but is it an instructionally effective one?

Of the three interaction types, topical discussion continues to be by far the most commonly attempted in online courses, most commonly represented by the ubiquitous weekly discussion question where instructors attempt to instigate academic dialog or debate by posing a specific question for discussion. Initially, instructors were pleasantly surprised at the depth and insight of their students’ responses. Ness (2010) suggested that the built-in time delay of asynchronous, albeit impersonal, communication allows students to be more introspective in collecting and organizing their ideas before posting. The seclusion and anonymity of the online environment may be rightfully credited with accounting for higher quality postings, as many students feel safer to post true feelings. Unfortunately, overzealous students often tended to use the discussion board as a personal platform for posting extended diatribes (discussion board publishing’). These protracted compositions often consisted of recycled material, contributed little to the class, and stifled conversational momentum.

To foster quality postings while guarding against discussion board publishing and other problems, instructors soon resorted to posting often lengthy, prescriptive (and often proscriptive) ground rules and expectations for discussion. These ground rules commonly included specifications and directions related to quantity, frequency, and procedures for effective participation. A typical example might include the following:

*Post one response to this question, then post 2 responses to other students posting, including at least one response to a classmates response to your posting. All postings for a week should amount to approximately one page of text.*

These (often convoluted) rules and procedures, while intended to defend against pitfalls and foster effective discussion, in many cases served instead to inhibit academic debate, and resulted in stilted, inorganic interaction. In fact, the discussion board was rarely a place for scholarly discourse, and instead became (and in many cases remains) a repository for mini book reports of student-regurgitated content (Thomas, 2002). Far too often the discussion board students are talking *at* each other, rather than *with* each other. In short, the online discussion board included little actual *discussion*.

Unlike topical discussion, true socialization in the online environment is far more elusive (Wallace, 2003). This is largely because, traditionally, much of this communication occurs outside the confines of the classroom. Until recently, scant research establishing the instructional value of socialization (online learning communities) left many instructors to omit it from their course design. This is unfortunate when one considers the value of the personal and professional connections students make as a result of their informal networking with classmates. By far the most common example of socialization in the online environment is the *Post your Bio* Icebreaker exercise. Here students are tasked to post a brief biography in a specified discussion board forum while reading and commenting on the bios of other classmates. Collaborative group projects or forming interactive, rotating teams are additional ways to promote social interaction between students. Periodic social chats using the chat room feature of the LMS became

another standard socialization strategy. While feedback from students was generally positive, instructors quickly learned that the skills necessary to effectively moderate real-time, text-based chat were quite different than those of the discussion board (Mazzolini & Maddison, 2007). Coupling student assessment to social interaction activities proved to be another hazard as instructors' attempts to steer social conversation toward course materials and objectives quickly became frustrated. Despite these difficulties, Caplan (2003) agreed that social interaction can provide instructors with a valuable resource for evaluating course effectiveness and can generally be seen as a tremendous opportunity to stopgap the social disconnect inherent to online courses.

Many instructors discover that the mentoring mode of communication in the online environment is comparable to what they already do in traditional contexts and may find they are able to fulfill student needs in this mode. Novice online instructors quickly learn and are generally unprepared to find their email inbox bulging with countless messages from needy students. While many online students do require additional support, instructors soon understand that a well-designed communication strategy can prevent premature burial under an avalanche of student email. Online office hours held in the chat room became another break from the purely asynchronous model as has been used by many to facilitate the mentoring and guidance mode.

Online communication strategies have come a long way, and, in general, instructors have mastered many of the most important concepts about online course communication such as responsiveness, setting expectations, and developing an integrated communication strategy to address each of the communication modes. Notwithstanding, the discussion board remains the realm of stilted exchange. As current best practices hailing the importance of interaction have led instructors to shoehorn a variety of tasks on to the discussion board, tremendous efforts (by both instructors and students) have been dedicated to fulfilling these prescribed interaction requirements. Furthermore, one might question the inequitable expectations extant in many discussion boards where postings are required from *every* student on *every* topic. Are students in the face-to-face classroom held to the same expectation?

A careful and honest inspection of the results of these 'discussions' might reveal a surprising amount of text that serves almost no instructional necessity, and is, in short, *largely a waste of time*.

### **Approach One: Reflection**

The first remedy for improving online dialogue presented here relies primarily on a fourth mode of online communication, *reflection*. In this mode, students can be thought to be communicating *with themselves* in an introspective manner as they internalize and synthesize course concepts and content. Although introspection is an internal conversation, it should not be considered a monologue; rather it represents the *dialogue* that occurs as learners synthesize course content with the knowledge skills and beliefs of their personal worldview. It is a *personal narrative* of the journey through the learning experience.

The key to the proposed reformation of discussion board practices is simply ensuring that the instructional aim of the communication activity is in alignment with the activity itself. The failures of online discussions can often be traced to a failure (or unwillingness) to utilize the discussion board in other than a traditional, one size fits all question a week type mode. More often than not, the intended instructional purpose for the activity is not a conversation (or debate) rather introspection. Online instructors make a crucial error when they attempt to force-fit this personal narrative into a discussion board conversation (Wilson & Berne, 1999). When these introspections are assigned in the typical discussion board model, there is no wonder why the responses are stilted at best—a reflection is not a conversation. The problem does not lie with the instructional strategy—introspection is a valuable learning tool; rather, it is with the *application* of the strategy to the confines of the current best practices discussion board.

There are several inherent difficulties with fostering academic debate on the discussion board. Often, students are simply not knowledgeable enough about the subject matter after completing the assigned reading to carry on any sort of meaningful debate (Gilbert & Dabbagh, 2005). All the open-ended, thought-provoking questions in the world cannot elicit educated response from students who have only been cursorily exposed to the material. Additionally, there is often not a critical mass of participants who have completed the readings in time to maintain any sort of conversational momentum, and participate in a meaningful way (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005). By the time students have formulated enough of an opinion to actually have a *stake* in the debate, the conversation has moved on. One of the real tragedies of online learning in the week-to-week format is that when the light goes on and the epiphany happens, the weekly discussion has forged ahead to another topic.

Having students relate their personal experiences is another typical lever employed by instructors to encourage participation, but this is hardly the basis of a conversation; rather, it is much better suited to the personal reflective dialogue. Although the reflective narrative is a personal one, it is not a private one; that is, other students can (and should be encouraged to) follow along with their classmates' comments, and comment when appropriate.

Another issue that arises when students are asked to share personal, introspective comments is the institution-owned and ephemeral nature of the LMS-based discussion board itself.

Continued efforts to standardize and define expectations of the online learning environment have resulted in an unfortunate mismatch between the communication activities assigned and the instructional aims of those activities.

### **Approach Two: Purposeful Rubrics**

When participation is used as an assessment tool, an inverse relationship seems to develop between the *ease* with which the instructor can assess participation, and its actual *instructional value* to the class as a whole (Hansen & Stephens, 2000; Kohn, 1994; Anglin, Anglin, Schumann & Kaliski, 2008). If something is set up for student response, a weekly list of discussion questions for example, it is fairly simple for the instructor to see if a student has responded to the questions, and thus participated. This arrangement, however, rarely leads to the type of scholarly debate (or dialogue) that can serve to advance understanding of the subject, or bring new knowledge (or at least perspective) to the students.

Summarization of weekly content, while easily assessed, adds little or nothing to the academic dialog. Recounting of related personal experience, another favorite strategy used by instructors to engage students in the material, tends to be equally useless in moving the discussion forward. Far too often discussion participants feel obligated, often by course policy, to add comments simply to fulfill the assignment. This results in copious text but scant scholarship. This assessment by volume strategy can also lead to the bane of online courses: *discussion board publishing*, itself an insidious “time sink.”

The first question we must ask when developing rubrics for class discussion is the instructional goal (or rationale) for the activity itself. Most instructors would agree that the intent for participation on the discussion board is immersion into the course content and the engagement in a scholarly debate in the quest for new knowledge. However, comprehensive rubrics that outline content criteria in detail can saddle the online instructor with the unenviable task of countless hours of grading and line-level editing of student discussion submissions, a task with no equivalent in the face-to-face context.

### **Conclusion**

The ideal discussion format in an online context should be to collaboratively integrate the assigned subject matter with the perspectives, opinions, and contributions of the learners. The outcome of such an environment would be to provide an enriching learning experience. By creating an open forum, opinions and input can be presented honestly and transparently. A safe and open environment may set the tone for constructive comments, perspectives, and opinions, each of which is respected and encouraged by the students and the instructor.

The goal of such an effort would be the engagement of students who are fully invested in the project outcome and who contribute to the endeavor in a timely and professional manner consistent with the project timeline, goals, and objectives. Each of whom would fulfill their responsibilities to the best of their ability while interacting constructively to bring a diversity of individual perspectives and substantive ideas to the project to create new knowledge as a class.

Useful participation may be divided into two categories. The first is adding synthesized knowledge to the online conversation. The second is admitting a gap in understanding in the material. Both responses force participants to reassess their own understanding of a concept. Are educators asking students to *complete* something that is different from what we want them to *accomplish*?

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