

Title: Creating Community and Student Engagement beyond the Online Discussion Board

Abstract:

A sense of community and student engagement are factors that contribute to students having a positive learning experience. Achieving both of these elements in the classroom is challenging but even more so in a virtual classroom setting. Online instructors usually resort to the old standby – discussion board – as a tool to foster community and student engagement. However, the effectiveness of discussion boards is limited in asynchronous online courses. In this symposium, we present four different activities that complement discussion boards by stimulating critical thinking, teamwork, and interaction between students.

Keywords: Online Teaching, Community, Student Engagement

Introduction:

In 2015, over six million students enrolled in at least one online course which equates to almost 30% of higher education enrollments (Allen & Seaman; 2017). With online courses increasing in popularity, it is incumbent on instructors to refine their teaching methods to create a positive online learning experience. Research suggests when a sense of community and student engagement occurs with online students the result is positive student satisfaction (Liu, Magjuka, Bonk & Lee, 2007; Rovai, Wighting, & Liu, 2005).

In online courses, the discussion board is used to encourage community and student engagement since it is viewed as a tool that can replace in-class discussions. However, there are other ways to encourage interaction between students. The purpose of this symposium is to present a collection of activities that online instructors can incorporate in their courses to create a sense of community and encourage student engagement that takes advantage of the online format. Rather than merely trying to mimic the traditional classroom format course, there are aspects of the online format that instructors can use to their advantage, as opposed to viewing those aspects as hurdles. For example, the fact that the students are geographically dispersed means that students will have different local environments and can share things that their classmates cannot see in their local areas. Additionally, future work environments are expected to be comprised of more and more employees that are not physically at the same location so learning to collaborate online can mirror real world possibilities. The target audience is online instructors and anyone who is thinking of teaching an online course. At the end of the session, participants will have new activities that they will be able to incorporate in their online courses.

Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications

Online course design and teaching can be a challenge for several reasons. Some instructors might not be comfortable with new technology platforms while others are reluctant to try a new way of teaching (Koehler et al, 2004). Others instructors fear diminished quality of courses and student learning (Barker, 2003) due to a lack of face-to-face contact or presence,

consequently, impacting student engagement. Students might feel alienated (Slagter van Tryon & Bishop, 2009) because online courses typically have geographically dispersed students and the feeling of presence (or community) in the course is missing (Picciano, 2002), and can reduce student engagement (Young & Bruce, 2011). Addressing the challenges of on-line student community and engagement are important because increasing them can improve higher order thinking (Baker, 2010; Engstrom, Santo, & Yost, 2008), student satisfaction, and overall success in the course (Liu, Magjuka, Bonk & Lee, 2007; Rovai, Wighting, & Liu, 2005; Swan & Shih, 2005).

Instructors are tasked with designing an environment that engages students and provides them with a sense of community. “Students who learn the most from online courses have online instructors who provide a structured and comfortable classroom environment that involves the participation of everyone in the learning activities” (Young & Bruce, 2011, p.3).

While the discussion board is often used in online courses (Lynch, Kearsley, & Thompson, 2011) to create community and engagement, Andresen’s (2009) review has shown that there are limitations to the effectiveness of asynchronous online discussion boards. Discussion boards seem to be very effective for discussing concepts and open-ended questions. However, when there is a specific correct answer (e.g. a math problem), discussion boards do not seem to be as useful. Even with open-ended questions, discussion boards can be limiting. For example, unless very specific guidelines such as the number of words and responses required, discussion board interactions may lack depth and critical thought. Research conducted by Dennen (2005) indicates students become frustrated when classmates do not participate fully on discussion boards. Rather than relying mostly on discussion boards for online courses, we propose that there are other assignments and tools that instructors can use to create a sense of community and student engagement in an online course.

Symposium Overview

The symposium is a collection of activities/exercises that instructors will be able to easily adopt in their courses to address the limitations of asynchronous online discussion boards. We will also hand out relevant materials for each activity/exercise that participants can take with them. These are the activities we intend to present:

1. DIY: Creating an online team simulation on a budget

Simulation programs are popular for providing students with real-world experience. Simulations utilizing computer technology can challenge students from multiple perspectives, i.e. technology adeptness, multiple decision-making in a short period, virtual collaboration, etc. Costs for management simulations range in price. Participants will receive directions to create an online simulation exercise at no cost and only requires a learning management system (i.e. Blackboard) and email.

2. Organizational culture – A virtual and actual field trip

Limited teaching materials exist for teaching organizational culture that takes students beyond the content in a textbook which also limits the number of organizational culture experiential activities. An activity that allows students to analytically explore the linkages between an organization's culture, values, and leaders' behavior will be presented. Students take a virtual and actual field trip to fulfill the assignment.

3. *Virtual team project*

The online format creates a situation in which realistic virtual team projects can be created. In traditional courses, instructors would need to either ask students to not work with each other in person or partner with other classes in other schools. Virtual teams assignments can be assigned in different types of online management courses such as organizational behaviour, leadership, or any kind of course where there would normally be a team project. A sample virtual team assignment will be distributed.

4. *Presenter's Podium*

Students in online courses are often unable to see their classmates. Presenter's Podium is an online video presentation activity that instructors can assign in either online or traditional courses. In the online format, this tool is especially useful because it enables everyone to see and listen to each other in recorded video presentations. Instructors choose the topics and time limits for each week. Students record their presentations before Wednesday evening and then evaluate four of their peers' presentations by Friday evening.

Session Description

This session would work well in a 60-minute format. The following table shows the intended schedule of our session:

Time:	Activity
10 Minutes	Introductions, get a sense of who the participants are, what kinds of online courses they teach
35-40 minutes (8-10 minutes for each activity)	Presentation of each activity (total of 4), followed by Q&A
10-15 minutes	Summary and more Q&A, participants can share their activities

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