

## GRADUATE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF ONLINE DISCUSSIONS: IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTRUCTORS

By

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper is based on a qualitative study that investigated graduate student perspectives of online discussions in higher education courses. The data are drawn primarily from interviews and student journal entries. The study examined student experiences of online discussions from a "technorealist" perspective thereby taking into account not only the potential but also the limitations of online spaces for teaching and learning. This paper focuses on some of the popular claims of asynchronous discussions as presented in the literature; along with findings from a study of student perspectives of the same. Finally, the implications of the findings for online instructors are discussed.*

*Keywords: Online Education, Cognitive.*

### INTRODUCTION

Online courses have embraced asynchronous discussion formats arguing that the greater time for preparation and contemplation has led to the display of a high level of cognition (Hara, N., Bonk, C.J., & Angeli, C., 2000; Tallet-Runnels, M.K., Thomas, J.A., Lan, W.Y., Cooper, S., Ahern, T., Shaw, S.M., & Liu, X., 2006). In addition, the argument that discussion formats promote a learner-centered environment by empowering the student along with displacing the teacher from the center to the "guide on the side" (Arbaugh, 2010) is also well documented in the research on online teaching and learning. The student empowerment theme claims that online spaces eliminated the discomfort for students shy of participating in face to face classes and moreover, reduced or purged domination by one person or group and allowed a more egalitarian participation by students and in addition, lessened faculty dominated lectures.

Not all educators bought into the egalitarian and empowerment arguments as some scholars chalked up many of the claims to a "rhetoric of technology" (Selfe, 1999) or the result of an instrumentalist approach (Burbules & Callister, 2000). As instructors began to document the paradoxes they found (Merryfield, 2001), it became clear that much research was required into the area especially

given the fact that many student views of online learning came from course evaluations (Rossman, 1999) rather than from student surveys or interviews.

This study was designed to collect and interpret graduate student perceptions of online discussions in an effort to better understand how faculty can engage in continuous improvement as they develop more refined and sophisticated online courses for graduate students.

### Methods and Data Sources

This study was informed by the critical paradigm. According to Agger (1991), a critical theory approach may be either substantive or methodological. In a substantive approach, the topic under study would connect to themes of domination, alienation or social struggle. This study connects to the themes of empowerment or alienation as experienced by students in online environments and examines the role of the instructor in creating and sustaining discussion based online courses.

This study was qualitative in design and the primary means of data collection consisted of interviews. Purposive sampling (Schensul & LeCompte, 1999) was used in order to locate participants experiencing online learning. For the purposes of this study, students enrolled in three education courses were approached. All were previously certified teachers who were taking continuing education courses to

renew or extend their licenses. All the participants were from different geographical locations and did not know each other socially or professionally until they were part of the online course. All those enrolled in the courses agreed to participate since they were eager to reflect on their own learning experiences especially as it pertained to discussions and dialogues online.

A forum was created in the course sites for students to be able to journal anonymously about their experiences in the online courses. These journal entries were forwarded to the researcher after the removal of any identifying information. The data from the journal entries prompted a further round of data collection in the form of interviews. From the initial pool of 60 participants, 15 participated in in-depth interviews (Rubin, 2012). All 15 participants were enrolled in more than one online course and could provide perceptions and descriptions that were not restricted to the context or content of solely one course. Of the fifteen, ten were women and five were men, a gender ratio reflective of the enrollment in the courses. Each participant was interviewed twice over the course of the semester and each interview lasted forty-five minutes.

## Research Question

1) How did students describe and analyze their experiences of online discussions?

*Questions that informed data collection were the following:*

- 1) What were students' perspectives of online discussions?
- 2) What did students perceive as the advantages and disadvantages of online discussion formats?
- 3) How did students describe their online experiences in terms of empowerment and equality?
- 4) How did students experience empowerment online?
- 5) What lessons can instructors learn from student perspectives of online discussions?

## Data Analysis

Data analysis was ongoing throughout the study and the analysis was used to inform further data collection. The process of analysis began with organizing data files, into phases one, two and three, studying the data, making reflective notes on interviews and categorizing initial codes.

Coding the data involved identifying patterns of similarity, difference, frequency, sequence, correspondence and causation (Hatch, 2002). In order to facilitate the analytical process, we drew on the Creative Qualitative Inquiry Framework (Mulvihill & Swaminathan, 2011) and first identified significant 'encounters' as described by participants. Next, we examined the situation and context and reflected on our own dispositions. Finally, we utilized prompts to question the data to allow the 'whole picture' to emerge so that we could present the results of the study.

## Results of the study

The results of the study revealed that students' experiences of participating in online discussions varied over the course of the semester. Thematically there were distinct phases. Phase One data were collected in the first four weeks of the semester. Phase Two data were collected in weeks 5-9 of the semester; and Phase Three data were collected in the final four weeks or Weeks 10-14 of the semester. In Phase one, when the data comprised student journals, students reported on the 'advantages of online discussions'. In Phase two, data from journal entries were supplemented with interviews conducted with a purposive sample from the group. During Phase two, students continued to be positive regarding the lack of stereotypes and the potential for equity in online platforms. However, they also started to discuss 'disadvantages' of the online experience similar to those they experienced in face to face courses. In addition, they reported that competition and pressures to perform now overshadowed their early experiences of empowerment. In Phase three, data from interviews continued to be gathered and students reported that the online platform was no longer preventing stereotypes from emerging; online cyber stereotypes emerged not based on visual cues but based on use of language and grammar or spelling. Judgments were not suspended simply because students were in an online platform; instead new ways to categorize and distinguish between students became evident in the new context. The results of the study impact the role of instructors in online courses.

Table 1 represents the different stages of data collection, types of data gathered and themes for data analysis.

**Advantages of online discussions: Phase One (Journal**

Phases of Data Gathering	Theme One Advantages	Theme Two Disadvantages Sub Theme: Time	Theme Three Empowerment, Competition & equality	Percentage of responses	N
Phase One Journal Entries (First five weeks of the semester)	X			98%	75
Phase Two Journal Entries (Weeks 6-9 of the semester)	X	X	X	96%	75 for Journals
Phase Two Interviews (Weeks 6-9 of the semester)	X	X		100%	15
Phase Three Interviews (Weeks 10-14 of the semester)	X	X	X	100%	15

Table 1. Different Stages of Data Collection

## Entries)

Data from the first phase of student experiences were analyzed based on their journal entries regarding their experiences. Of the 75 students in the courses, 98% posted an average of two journal entries every week for a period of four weeks resulting in 550 entries altogether. An overwhelming majority of the participants (94%) enjoyed the convenience of asynchronous posting to discussion boards. They reported being relieved from the pressure of having to respond immediately – “it took me off the spot”. In addition, 95% of the students mentioned that they finally felt able to participate fully without having to “fight for air time with other opinionated people” in the class.

Finally, the lack of face to face social cues relieved students of color who comprised 30% of the overall group of 75 students. 15% of students who described themselves as 'shy' were similarly positive about the lack of visible cues. Both groups reported that they were happy to participate in what they perceived as a more “neutral” space.

75% students commented that their thought process in online formats was “peaceful and unencumbered because you are alone and only with your computer.” The “anytime” format of online discussions was also mentioned as an advantage that allowed them to participate more fully in the course. However, this point of having more time to think had an inadvertent side effect over the course of the semester as they began to see it as a disadvantage as well as an advantage.

## Phase Two: Disadvantages of the online discussion format (Journal Entries and Interviews)

In Phase Two all the students continued to journal, however, fifteen students were identified for follow up in-depth

interviews. Data findings from Phase Two differed from those in Phase One in several ways. While in Phase One, students had mentioned that being allowed more time to think and write was a blessing in online discussion formats, in Phase Two 80% of the students reported in journal entries as feeling conflicted about the issue of time in asynchronous online learning. They observed that being the first to post in an asynchronous discussion gave one an advantage over others. As one student wrote in a journal entry, “If you were the first to post, you could pretty much get away with saying something obvious or commenting on the main point while if you were among the last to post, you might have to come up with something new which would take both more time and effort so that you didn't lose points for the discussion.” This led to a “race to post” which interfered with the “peaceful” thought process that many students enjoyed about the online environment.

In-depth interviews with fifteen students yielded examples of the problematic nature of asynchronous discussions. One student summarized the problem in this way: “For example, one popular prompt was to ask us to quote something from the reading and respond to it or explain why we agreed or did not agree with it. Those who responded early could get a quote right away without having to check to see if others had already quoted what you were planning on quoting. But if you posted a bit later, you were left searching for a quote that others hadn't already used.”

Another student expressed: “If I don't want people to think – ‘who's this yahoo out of nowhere,’ I have to get in first and that way I am done and everyone else can refer to me or at least I have something to go on.”

In Phase Two, as seen from the analysis of journal entries

and interview data, students moved away from the idea that online discussion formats allowed them more time to express their thoughts to a position that it was best to respond early in online discussion formats to avoid being redundant or avoid having to work harder to come up with something more creative than what had already been posted by others.

In addition, lack of immediacy was an issue that was brought up by students both in journal entries and in face to face interviews. 55% reported in the journal entries that while they liked the convenience of the “anytime” format of asynchronous discussions, they were frustrated when their peers did not immediately respond to their posts. In the face to face interviews, 8 out of the fifteen students clarified further. Instructors in online formats typically asked students to make two posts; an initial post by a certain day of the week and a second, responding to their peers. An example would be a Tuesday -Thursday schedule where the first post was due on Tuesday and the second due on Thursday. There were two issues with lack of immediacy. The first was that not everyone received a response from her/his peers. As one student pointed out, “The instructor didn’t tell us we had to make sure everybody had a response. So one or two people got lots of responses and others got none.” Students tied responses to a sense of being heard or listened to in the online format. Used to the immediacy of text messaging, they were frustrated with the asynchronous format that left them waiting for a couple of days for a response that they might not receive after all. In addition, some students mentioned Facebook as an example of a space where one feels heard because “people can click like.” Five students suggested that synchronous discussions and online chat formats might work better in terms of immediacy.

### **Student Experiences of Empowerment, Competition and Equality**

Themes of empowerment, competition and equality were brought up in Phases Two and Three. In the journal entries during Phase Two of the data collection, 75% of the students reported a sense of self-direction, confidence and a sense of competence that were coded in the analysis as empowerment. Students in the course used language such as “we are given a lot of choices in the

online discussions. We can change the direction of the discussion to where we want.” In the follow-up interviews, all the students described empowerment in terms of self-direction, autonomous decision making and confidence in their abilities. They pointed out the lack of micro-management by instructors or by the facilitators of the discussion as positive. They were confident about their ability to tackle discussion topics and present arguments to each other. As one student put it, “I like that I am able to present my point of view because I have the time to think about what to say and I think I usually do a good job.”

When describing equality in online discussions, 90% of the students mentioned having the space to express oneself as a crucial component of equality. “Everyone gets a chance to have their say,” said several students in a journal entry. This observation however, was tempered with other perspectives in Phase Two and Three of the data collection. As the semester progressed, it was clear that students faced new concerns regarding being ‘heard’. Elaborating on this phenomenon, five students attributed the responses or lack thereof to imagining who was at the other end online. As one of the students put it, “I respond to folks who I think made a smart comment...I have a mental picture of them.” Another student said, “When I see that someone has posted using incorrect grammar or with spelling errors, I have a bad impression of that person...So why should I bother wasting my time responding to them? I want to learn from my peers, not go down a level.” Other students whose posts were ignored in turn attributed the lack of responses to “some people taking up all the air space online.”

45% students reported that asynchronous discussion forums’ lack of visible social cues allowed them a sense of relief and safety. Students of color or students who described themselves as “shy” or “not particularly outgoing” felt comfortable with the lack of visible social cues. However, in the interviews, they explained that lack of face to face interactions also led to misunderstandings and miscommunications online. As one of the student’s explained, “it’s hard to get jokes or a kind of sarcastic humor because you can’t see the person smiling or something. So it can get taken the wrong way.” Students suggested the use of emoticons to develop better online communications.

## Discussion and Implications

This study examined student perspectives of online learning from a “technorealist” standpoint in order to reveal the potential as well as the limitations of online platforms for empowering students. The results of the study have implications for online instructors.

The literature on online learning is mixed regarding the right amount of instructor presence in online courses. While some scholars emphasize the need for instructors continuous presence online, others urge instructors to maintain a position of “silence is golden” (Brower, 2003) warning that instructor over facilitation may lead to superficial posts on the part of students (Peters & Hewitt, 2010). However, as this study found, instructors need to figure out the best way to balance the structuring of the course discussions so that they allow for spontaneous discussions without over organizing who speaks when and to whom. In addition, instructors need to consider how to create authentic dialogue in an online format and rethink the ways in which they organize discussions for students. Providing students with clear objectives for online discussions will facilitate small-scale self-assessments regarding the effectiveness of their contributions.

This study pointed to the tensions of time in online forums. Having time to think was often trumped by the desire to post first. Additionally, students who joined the discussion later found they had few new ideas to contribute. Online instructors need to perhaps think about the best ways to use discussion formats so that they generate lively and critical discussions. This means that instructors need to move away from using discussion formats as a way to monitor whether or not students have read the articles in the course and instead use discussion formats as a way to enhance or go beyond what is in the book.

Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000) identified three types of “presence” in online discussions: cognitive, social, and teacher. The cognitive presence signifies the degree to which ideas are constructed and explored collaboratively in online discussions; the social presence indicates how students create a discourse among themselves as they interact in online discussions; and teacher presence describes the degree to which the educator instructs,

prompts or directs the students throughout the length of the discussion. Online discussions are more effective when they are designed to help students demonstrate their ability to think critically and practice applying the information to practical problems in a collaborative team approach. When students compete against each other for “first post” status the collaborative benefits of online learning are lost.

This study found tensions between empowerment and equality in students' experiences of online discussion forums. Students presented mixed reviews of equality in the online environment. They were positive about equality (everyone getting a chance to post), and were critical of equity (who gets heard and why). Students admitted that they interacted with some peers over others based on how they perceived their peers' posts or participation. Silence was used as a type of response to ignore some students.

Overall, online participation afforded some students a sense of safety and comfort while it presented others with a cover to avoid interacting with some students. This tells us that it is not enough for instructors to structure discussions and allow for equal opportunity of participation. It is important to consider the quality of participation and the interpersonal dynamics within which such participation occurs. In addition, instructors need to find ways to intervene, create structures or privately converse with students in order to scaffold the quality of their work.

## Implications for Instructors

This study tells us that there is much to learn regarding how to organize, structure and teach online courses in general. Since this study focused on online discussions, we emphasize the need for promoting dialogue in online asynchronous discussion boards that encourages interpersonal communication and community building. We use the term 'dialogic encounters' to denote this in the way that physicist David Bohm (1996) used the term dialogue as distinct from discussion. According to Bohm, the distinction was qualitative. In discussions, the end point was to win whereas, according to him, dialogue made possible a “flow of meaning in the whole group, out of which may emerge some new understanding” (p.7). This understanding is in line with Gardner's (2008) point that the important goal of graduate education is to nurture students

to become scholars. For graduate students to develop their scholarship, it is crucial that instructors pay attention to the quality of student interactions online.

## **Promoting Dialogic Encounters in Online Courses**

Several scholars have used the term 'dialogic' with reference to education. Gordon Wells (1999) uses the term dialogic inquiry or the art of engaging in questioning to arrive at a mutual understanding. Paulo Freire (1970) uses the term dialogic action to explain those actions that promote understanding, cooperation and liberation and emerge out of communication. For dialogic encounters to occur in classrooms whether face-to-face or online, instructors need to create conditions and a structure that will promote dialogue that is dynamic, relational and engaged. To create such dialogic spaces online, we offer some prompts that instructors may use to promote graduate students' development as scholars.

## **Suggested Discussion Prompts for Online Asynchronous Formats**

### ***Six Thinking Hats***

Edward de Bono (1985) put forth a tool for thinking and engaging in collective dialogue called the Six Thinking Hats that may be modified for use in online asynchronous discussion formats. The colored hats are metaphors to indicate the direction that a group discussion may take and allow for an in-depth exploration into an issue. The different colored hats signal the direction of the exploration and discussion. For example, the White hat symbolizes fact gathering leading to a preliminary discussion of the issue of concern. The red hat stands for sharing one's emotion or a gut instinct. The black hat stands for discernment and encourages the group to apply logic to consider why one must be cautious. The yellow hat encourages an optimistic line of thinking and finally the green hat stands for thinking creatively and applying creativity to the situation or question under discussion. In online discussion formats, the Six Thinking Hats can be used in order to promote an in-depth discussion of a question or problem.

### ***Socratic Questioning***

Socratic questioning includes probing assumptions, clarifying concepts, substantiating viewpoints and

reflective learning. Questioning may be initiated and modeled by the instructor so that students learn how to critically reflect on their taken for granted ideas and beliefs. Socratic questioning encourages students to use tools of inquiry for learning from their peers.

## ***Analyzing Case Studies or Problem Based Learning***

Assigning a case study for students to utilize problem solving strategies can create a venue where students can collaborate and apply knowledge and have the freedom to be creative.

## ***Debates***

Organizing online discussion debates whereby claims and evidence are articulated and arguments evaluated in order to more fully examine a broader range of ideas and points of view in relation to a particular question or issue can be used to enliven exchanges and turn students into investigators expanding their literature searches.

## ***Role Playing***

Assigning roles or tasks within a particular online discussion encourage students to temporarily think and act-as-if they held a particular point of view within a particular context and expand their understanding of how others construct points of view and what theoretical perspectives may be guiding those ways of thinking.

## ***Conclusion***

According to Lebaron and Miller (2005), online courses do not do enough to create camaraderie among students. It is clear from this study that online instructors need to move beyond being a 'guide on the side' to playing a much more central role in online discussions. As emphasized by Singh and Pan, (2004), for online education to be effective as well as useful, the importance of participation is crucial. This would require online instructors to pay close attention to interpersonal dynamics in online discussions as they relate to empowerment and equity. Best practices in online education would promote dialogic encounters that encourage active participation, promote student to student interactions and pay attention to issues of equity and empowerment.

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