If You Build It, They Will Come: Building Learning Communities Through Threaded Discussions

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Introduction

One of the chief tenets for a successful and engaging online course is the development of an effective system that provides ongoing student interaction. In the book, *Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace,* authors Palloff and Pratt note, "it is the relationships and interactions among people through which knowledge is primarily generated. The learning community takes on new proportions in this environment and consequently must be nurtured and developed so as to be an effective vehicle for education (p.15)." This type of interaction allows a student to develop their own understanding of the course objectives plus facilitates how this knowledge will be applied in the "real world."

To accomplish a level of interaction that is conducive to an active and progressive learning community, a facilitator may opt to incorporate threaded discussions as a means of generating or promoting interaction. Just as the architect will design a blueprint to provide the homebuilder direction in completing the house, the facilitator must design and manage the threaded discussion to direct students in achieving the intended learning outcomes. However, if the threaded discussion is to remain an integral part of the online learning experience, administrators must provide facilitators with effective assessment methods to evaluate student's performance and knowledge integration.

Active and focused participation is an expectation of most online courses. Regular contributions to online discussions are integral to the determination that a student is keeping pace with the learner-centered activities and achieving the outcomes of the course. An objective assessment of the effectiveness of participation in discussion forums can quantify for a course facilitator each individual student's commitment to the learning community and involvement in the course content.

The term assessment can be defined from a variety of standpoints; certainly an individual's e-learning experiences will alter the concept itself. For many, the term brings to mind the traditional true/false and multiple-choice tests using some type of machine-graded card and a number two pencil! Yet, the term assessment as defined in *New Horizons for Learning's The Building Tool Room: Assessment Terminology: A Glossary of Useful Terms*, is the procedure of observing learning. The process may include describing, collecting, recording, scoring, and interpreting of information in relation to a student's learning in an educational setting or context.

One must realize that no single method for assessment is considered ideal. Rather, several methods can be used within a single course to provide a summative evaluation of a student's knowledge, ability and participation. For example in the online classroom, where an facilitator is using threaded discussion to augment the learning process, the assessment method would involve more than administering a formatted exam. A facilitator will be evaluating a student's performance throughout the entire discussion process with attention toward the quality of interaction between the facilitator/student and student/student(s).

According to New Horizons for Learning's The Building Tool Room there are five (5) elements that characterize effective assessment of an e-learning experience:

- The assessment may be a continuing interaction between teacher/ student and student/student(s) and should ideally be part of the learning proces
- The assessment should be a real-world performance by a demonstration of the ability to apply knowledge in a real-life setting.

- The performance should be of relevance to the student and learning community.
- The goal or achievement target should be clearly articulated and communicated to the learner.

Just as the homebuilder will use the blueprint supplied by the architect as a guide to insure the house is completed properly, these five elements serve as the foundation and necessary framework for the facilitator to build the discussion process and achieve the intended course objectives. Yet, as the facilitator begins to add finishing touches to the "house building", additional questions will arise as to how best to develop and evaluate the effectiveness of the threaded discussions within a course and the student's performance in them. These questions will serve to further focus the facilitator in the overall course design as well as aid in the construction of a threaded discussion assessment rubric.

In beginning the construction of a threaded discussion, the facilitator should consider how much time students need to effectively participate. If students are required to complete other assignments while participating in several in-depth threaded discussions, student time management becomes a significant issue. Students may not be able to spend adequate time on an assigned paper nor develop a threaded discussion to its fullest potential. Determining how critical the threaded discussion is to the achievement of the learning objective(s) is a crucial step in the construction process. Duplication of efforts in terms of multiple assignments covering similar content does little to assist in the construction of a learning community and may actually avert further development.

For example, as the facilitator gathers the materials from which the course will be constructed, it is vital to create a list of the objectives along with the means by which the objectives will be met. Furthermore the facilitator will need to address the following areas:

- How much value do I place on the threaded discussion for this module?
- Will the threaded discussion achieve the objective for the module alone? If not, what other activities should be developed?
- How much time is needed by the student to sufficiently complete the module?
- Will the student spend so much time finishing the assignments that opportunity to adequately reflect and apply the module material to their personal knowledge is non-existent?

Additional building blocks that need to be placed in order to move construction forward involve reflection upon how to design a threaded discussion so that it can be a positive learning experience for students. The wording of the topic question, the responses posted to students, the redirection as needed and the offering of encouragement to motivate students to explore additional content areas are considerations that a facilitator must embrace if the threaded discussion is to be a meaningful, learner-centered activity.

- Does the topic question provide a sound base from which discussion can be built?
- Does the topic question relate to the module objective?
- How often do I plan to interact to determine the discussion's direction?
- What "style" of management will I use to insure the discussion is moving in the right direction?

Another construction standard a facilitator must address is how to adequately gauge a student's performance as a course progresses. It becomes imperative to establish guidelines for the level/quality of participation that is expected from the student(s). If threaded discussions are used as a part of every module within an online course, the facilitator can continuously assess student comprehension and application of the conveyed knowledge.

As the facilitator continues the course design process, the assessment of student participation in threaded discussion becomes an obvious cornerstone for successful learning community development. In addition, dependent upon the feedback obtained from the assessment tool, the facilitator can modify strategies to enhance the learning process. As the facilitator builds the assessment requirements for the threaded discussion(s), the following list of questions should be contemplated regarding assessment to achieve its purpose of objectively evaluating a student's performance:

- What role will the threaded discussion have in assessing a student's understanding and subsequent utilization of the learning objective(s) conveyed through the course?
- After the module is completed, what will the discussion "tell me" about the student?
- How do I plan to grade a participation in the discussion?
- Can the quality of participation be assessed without compromising individual styles?
- Should students be made aware of the assessment criteria before the first discussion takes place? If so, should strategies that would permit achieving higher assessment be provided?
- Should the course facilitator intervene to improve participation that is below standard? At what point in the course should the facilitator share his/her assessment that the student is participating below the standard?
- Are the student's contributions to discussions perceived as actual insights or merely statements? Is there an objective way to gauge the quality of postings?
- Should students be required to post a "minimum" number of times? Dr. William Klemm of Texas A&M offers the opinion that a facilitator should "tell the students that they must post x-number of items each week or for each topic.

Critics will say that this approach does nothing to ensure quality of input. But it at least gets the students engaged, and hopefully, once they get caught up in the activity, they will strive to improve the relevance and quality of their work, because now they are on display." (p 1)

- Should posts be in response to other student's comments or include original threads as well? Should a combination of simple responses and innovative posts be an expectation?
- Are guidelines established to assure that all participants are using the same level of formality or informality in their posts? Should the facilitator "set the example" for the class to model as discussions progress? In the book, *You Can Teach Online*, Moore, Winograd and Lange share that in modeling acceptable thread responses, the facilitator can stress that suitable thread responses need to "support any assertions or arguments with reasons and examples." (p. 11.27)
- Should students adhere to specific timeframes for discussion and reflection? Should discussion boards remain open for the duration of the course to permit continuous and ongoing input?

The insight the facilitator obtains from the above inquiries will provide him/her the framework to assemble a rubric. Ultimately, the rubric will aid in structuring the assessment to be more objective and consistent. Further, it will serve to clearly show the student how their work will be evaluated and provide guidelines for performance expectations.

A well-written rubric can provide useful feedback regarding the effectiveness of a student's participation in threaded discussions and offer benchmarks against which to measure and document progress. Actual implementation of a rubric for assessment will largely depend upon the individual facilitator's preference for objective feedback; whether he/she would prefer weekly assessment or summative/formative feedback as the course progresses.

Several universities provide assessment rubrics for participation in each topic area that is offered for discussion. Florida State University's Department of Educational Leadership provides an example of this approach in its online course (EDG 5250): http://edg5250-85.fa01.fsu.edu/assignmentgroup1.htm#65 . This approach requires a more consistent involvement in assessment by the facilitator and provides the learner with frequent feedback as to how effectively they are participating in each topic area.

A sample of a rubric that can be readily adapted for an online course or degree program is provided. This rubric, **Assessing Effectiveness of Student Participation in Online Discussions,** incorporates the essential materials for building a learning community as a means of objectifying scoring of student participation in threaded discussions.

Several categories for objective scoring are included in the rubric. The categories chosen are reflective of areas which should be considered by facilitators as having significance to the overall structural design of effective learning communities.

- *Promptness and Initiative* speaks to the student's ability to participate in threaded discussions in a timely fashion which demonstrates self-motivation. It permits commentary on whether or not the student is actively and consistently engaging in the course content.
- *Delivery of Post* addresses the student's attention to detail in terms being grammatically correct with rare misspellings.
- The category, *Relevance of Post*, permits an objective assessment of the student's ability to post topics that are relevant to the original discussion with acknowledgement of references if provided. It addresses the student who stays on topic as well as the student who appears to disengage from the course content.
- *Expression Within the Post* addresses the issue of how well opinions are expressed and how ideas or comments are presented. This category also allows the facilitator to acknowledge the different writing/expression styles of the students.
- Lastly, the category, *Contribution to the Learning Community* (LC), speaks to the assessment of whether or not the student makes an effort to further the development of a collaborative learning experience. It provides distinction between the student who seems relatively indifferent to the building process of a LC and the student who strives to reinforce the LC as the course develops.

The rating scale ranges from 1 to 4 with 1 being indicative of student participation which is less than acceptable for the development of a progressive learning community. A score of 4 in any category represents the attainment of the highest standard of participation and reflects a bonafide contribution to the learning community.

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Assessing Effectiveness of Student Participation in Online Discussions

Student Name _____ Unit _____

Category	1	2	3	4	POINTS

Promptness and Initiative	Does not respond to most postings; rarely participates freely	Responds to most postings several days after initial discussion; limited initiative	Responds to most postings within a 24 hour period; requires occasional prompting to post	Consistently responds to postings in less than 24 hours; demonstrates good self-initiative	
Delivery of Post	Utilizes poor spelling and grammar in most posts; posts appear "hasty"	Errors in spelling and grammar evidenced in several posts	Few grammatical or spelling errors are noted in posts	Consistently uses grammatically correct posts with rare misspellings	
Relevance of Post	Posts topics which do not relate to the discussion content; makes short or irrelevant remarks	Occasionally posts off topic; most posts are short in length and offer no further insight into the topic	Frequently posts topics that are related to discussion content; prompts further discussion of topic	Consistently posts topics related to discussion topic; cites additional references related to topic	
Expression Within the Post	Does not express opinions or ideas clearly; no connection to topic	Unclear connection to topic evidenced in minimal expression of opinions or ideas	Opinions and ideas are stately clearly with occasional lack of connection to topic	Expresses opinions and ideas in a clear and concise manner with obvious connection to topic	
Contribution to the Learning Community	Does not make effort to participate in learning community as it develops; seems indifferent	Occasionally makes meaningful reflection on group's efforts; marginal effort to become involved with group	Frequently attempts to direct the discussion and to present relevant viewpoints for consideration by group; interacts freely	Aware of needs of community; frequently attempts to motivate the group discussion; presents creative approaches to topic	
				TOTAL	

Facilitator's Comments:

Sample Application of Assessment Rubric

In order to determine how "facilitator-friendly" and realistic the rubric - **Assessing Effectiveness of Student Participation in Online Discussions** – would be in an online course and to assess whether or not it provides dynamic objective assessment of student participation, a practical example of a threaded discussion is presented. The example assumes that the sampling of students presented:

- is reflective of different levels of contributions/participation,
- provides for a variance in the promptness of each post, and
- offers postings that are different to some degree in most of the assessment categories

Practical Example

Within a threaded discussion developing in response to an assignment provided by the facilitator in which students are to post responses re: how gender affects maturity, the following student responses/posts might occur:

Student A: Boys who mature late would have a double whammy--not only are they behind other boys, but way behind the girls too. Early maturing boys would likely be more confident, less self-conscious, etc. Most adolescent girls are so self-conscious, no matter when they mature. I guess I matured on time, although I didn't have the genes for a "full figure," so I felt like I was behind, and was envious of the more "shapely" girls the boys stared at. I would say that the late maturing girls have a harder time early on. Early maturing girls most likely feel better about themselves early on. However, this exposes them to older boys who will exploit them,

and experiences they are not emotionally prepared for. Has anyone had a similar experience?

Student B: Negative consequences for early-muturing girls appear to be more severe than for early-maturing boys. Girl problematic behaviors include depresion, eating disorders,and early sexual activity due to their early physical development. Early-maturing boys percieved themselves more positively and had more successful peer relations. However,overall, the research states that late- muturation for late adolescenses has an overall positive impact on there body image, and senses of identity. Took me several years to accept my body and maintain a positive self image.

Student C: I think this like everything else is relative.

Applying the rubric **Assessing Effectiveness of Student Participation in Online Discussions,** the objective scores for each of the students are as follows:

CATEGORY	Student A	Student B	Student C
Promptness and Initiative	4	2	3
Delivery of Post	4	2	3
Relevance of Post	4	3	1
Expression within the Post	4	3	2
Contribution to the LC	4	3	1
TOTAL	16	13	10

The facilitator would determine the range of acceptable participation for each of the modules within a course. For example, scores of less than 10 might indicate that the student is participating below an acceptable standard and strategies for improvement might be presented in order to improve the student's contribution to the threaded discussion and ultimately, the learning community.

Reviewing the scores that the students obtained, it is clear that Student A is participating in all categories to a high degree. It would be further assumed that this student is achieving the learning outcome of effective contribution to learning community development.

Student B is participating at a more average degree. The facilitator may opt to contact the student to reiterate the need for grammatically correct postings which are free of spelling errors and to prompt the student to post in a more timely fashion.

With Student C, a less than acceptable participation is noted in at least two of the categories – *Relevance of Post* and *Contribution to the Learning Community*. The facilitator would be obligated to address concerns with the student and may need to develop strategies to assist the student in becoming a more engaged and successful e-learner.

It would be the facilitator's preference as to the frequency of assessment. For smaller class sizes, the assessment rubric could be used as the end of each module or unit of instruction. For larger classes, it may be more prudent to complete an assessment rubric at the midpoint of the class. This approach would permit the facilitator to make suggestions for improvements and detail strategies that would facilitate a more active participation by the student.

Conclusion

An objective assessment of the effectiveness of threaded discussions can quantify for the facilitator each individual student's contribution to the learning community. Viable learning communities are best built from "the ground up" with materials provided by each e-learner – thread by thread – until the very structure itself is stable and free-standing.

As the facilitator uses the tools at his or hers deposal to assemble an environment which fosters this student/student and student/facilitator interactions and the development of learning relationships where "knowledge is primarily generated" (as

Palloff and Pratt propose), then the art of utilizing threaded discussions as a means of imparting content is essential.

Just as an architect and homebuilder come together with their individual strengths/abilities to construct and create a home in which a family can live and enjoy life, a facilitator can construct a home for the creation of a learning community where students can visit and embrace the joy of learning.

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