
An Organic and Generative Online Discussion Alternative

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Abstract

As online learning grows, we have an exciting opportunity and responsibility to create online discussion structures that promote engaging, generative, and discursive conversations that increase critical thinking and reflection. Organic-style discussions that are similar to classroom conversations increase critical thinking skills and offer a viable alternative to the parallel monologues promoted by post-and-reply-to-two instructions.

Introduction

While online education has been going strong for over 20 years, it is still in its infancy compared to face-to-face education. It is incumbent upon us to change to a more engaging and generative discussion structure that promotes critical thinking before we become too entrenched in the current structure. Classroom discourse engages students and promotes collaborative critical thinking. Online students deserve the same opportunity.

Asynchronous online discussions (AODs) are useful for online courses because they allow students to engage with the material (applying, understanding, evaluating), their peers, and the instructor by responding at any time of the day or night while the discussion is active, usually a period of days or weeks. While some online courses require students to attend synchronous sessions, in an attempt to recreate the face-to-face classroom conversations, these sessions are difficult for the many students who live in different time zones, work swing shifts, have competing family and work responsibilities, have more limited technology options, or are in the armed forces.

Currently, many online courses use a homework-style discussion structure in which students start threads by posting answers to a question posed by the instructor and then reply to the threads started by two of their peers. Students may not be able to see other students' posts before they are required to make their initial post, thus reinforcing the homework nature of this structure. The initial post is easy to grade and the responses to peers ensure that students have read at least two other posts so that they experience perspectives different from their own. This traditional structure is helpful because all students answer the same question and it is easy for faculty to assess whether or not students completed and understood the assigned readings.

The concern that some professors and researchers have is that students may see AODs as uninteresting busy work (Hew, Cheung, & Ng, 2010). Furthermore, Hew and colleagues found that students often do not participate in traditional AOD because of unclear expectations, uninteresting questions, or because their previous posts received no responses by other students or the instructor. Wise, Hausknecht, & Zhao (2014) called these traditional discussions "fragmentary engagement" and Champion and Gunnlaugson (2018) refer to them as "parallel monologues" because the conversational sharing and construction of knowledge that help students learn does not occur.

In our face-to-face classrooms, faculty engage in short lectures and then open up a discussion to the class by posing a question, sharing a case study, posing a problem, or asking students to predict results or evaluate the relative merit of various positions. One student responds, another student adds more information or a different perspective, the next student shares thoughts inspired by previous comments, and together, the class learns various points of view and can begin to construct a more complete concept because of each student's contribution. That is, students are engaged and learning in a collaborative atmosphere. How, then, can we meet these goals in an asynchronous online environment?

Creating Generative Organic Online Discussions

In experimenting with alternative structures over many years, instructors have found that it is most helpful for the instructor, instead of each student, to start the discussion threads to decrease the repetition common in traditional AODs. After the first student has responded to the instructor's initial post, professors can instruct students to add to the conversation by responding to another student, acknowledging that student's contribution, and then adding *new* information and analysis to the discussion. This alternative structure is more effective if the instructor begins each thread with a multi-level prompt designed to inspire conversations about the assigned readings rather than limit them. This combination of the instructor starting discussion threads with multi-level prompts, and students responding to each other with new information, analysis, and perhaps evaluation, leads to more generative and organic discussions that engage student's interest and better support higher-level learning.

Instructions to Students

To help students understand AOD expectations, instructors can provide sample posts, conversation starters (Gilbert & Dabbagh, 2005), and announcements and emails about the objectives of this alternative structure. In these communications, it is important to remind students that the goal of the AOD is to have great conversations and to learn the material by applying it in their own posts and from reading their peers' posts. Students want guidelines in addition to these explanations. Here is a sample instruction set.

Students, please respond to each other (after the first person responds to me) to engage with your peers in the threads I started to create great classroom conversations. To keep the conversations going, please follow these steps:

1. Read my initial questions and any peer responses.
2. Find an interesting comment by one of your classmates and click *Respond*.
3. Address your post to your classmate (use their name) and briefly comment on their contribution.
4. Share new information from the assigned readings and apply it using critical thinking skills.
5. Sign your name and adjust the subject line before posting.
6. Repeat steps 1-5 twice more for at least three 100-word responses.

The Questions

Discussion tools are better suited to increasing engagement than being used as a way to assess whether or not students read and understood the assigned readings (quizzes and self-assessments are great for assessment). To that end, discussion questions work best if they help enliven the conversation, promote engagement, and support critical thinking. Asking provocative questions motivates students to participate in the discussion.

In a face-to-face classroom, we can ask one question, let the conversation go for a while, and then ask another question to re-direct, clarify, and explore. While these options are available in an online discussion with follow-up replies to the discussion, starting the thread with multi-level prompts that represent different levels of Bloom's Taxonomy (Toldeo, 2006) keeps the conversation going when you are not there. Asking multiple questions at different cognitive levels allows for a more inclusive

pedagogy so that student who are struggling to understand the material and students who want more of a challenge will both have questions that they can address in their responses: higher-order questions in which students are asked to evaluate the material lead to more interesting conversations. A multi-part prompt also opens up the question for students to explore different areas of the assigned readings. The best questions might have the following characteristics (Hall, 2016):

- Relate assigned readings to the self or society
- Use conditional phrasing (what might happen if everyone ...)
- Motivate with a poignant vignette
- Place students in a dilemma
- Provide students with real-world application or a case study

Instructor role

After posing multi-level prompts to start one to three conversations, instructor participation in the AOD increases critical thinking with not only their presence, but also when they model critical thinking in their replies to the ongoing conversation (Dennen & Wieland, 2007; Foo & Quek, 2019; Rovai, 2007). Instructors can also summarize previous posts; ask new questions to deepen, broaden, or redirect the conversation; provide meaning for the discursive aspects of the conversation; and share teaching stories that further engage and motivate students (Mazzolini & Maddison, 2005).

Advantages

The main advantage of this alternative asynchronous discussion structure in which the instructor starts a few threads (covering more topics) is that it achieves the goal of classroom conversations: students engage with the material and each other in a constructivist learning process. This more natural conversational model provides an opportunity for more generative and discursive conversations, increased critical thinking, community building, and supports the development of a Community of Inquiry (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007; Lambert, & Fisher, 2013).

Because the conversations are more natural, they invite and create room for increased instructor and student social presence. Because students are always responding to each other, collaborative conversations result, thus increasing community building (Tolu, 2013). With this structure, students feel heard (responded to), and engage in more coherent and interactive dialogues than are supported by the post-and-reply-to-two parallel monologues (Champion and Gunnlaugson, 2018). The interactive nature of these conversations supports students building shared meaning in a collaborative reflective inquiry, and increases critical thinking skills (Shindler & Burkholder, 2014). In a recent pilot study, students using the alternative structure scored 8 points higher on a shared objective midterm exam (proctored) than students in other sections using the traditional discussion structure.

An additional advantage for faculty is the increased impact of each post that the instructor makes because more students see the instructor's posts instead of just one or a few students. For example, if the instructor or another student takes on the role of skeptic or challenger, most students will view those posts and their impact on the following posts in the conversation. Similarly, if the instructor asks Socratic or other scaffolding questions, more students are apt to see and respond to the resulting conversation that follows.

This alternative structure leads to more natural and generative online conversations that support increased critical thinking, while still being easy to assess. We owe it to our students to provide them with opportunities for engaging discourse in which real learning takes place, whether they enroll in online or face-to-face classes.

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