In-Class and Online: Using Discussion Boards in Teaching

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ABSTRACT

Discussion boards provide instructors a unique opportunity to extend their classrooms into cyberspace. This article offers some observations about student behavior in these online forums and practical suggestions for the instructor, including the creation of rules and structure for the online environment, factors influencing student participation, and strategies for facilitating discussion. Critical concepts for understanding the effective functioning of these online groups, such as confidentiality, the disinhibition effect, and the integration of the online and in-person settings, also are explored.

INTRODUCTION

ONLINE RESOURCES for education and computer-mediated teaching techniques are as diverse as the Internet itself. In this article I will focus on the use of one of the oldest online communication environments—what used to be called bulletin boards or message boards, now often referred to as forums or discussion boards.

The original term "bulletin board" metaphorically captures how these systems work. A person enters a specific location on the Internet and "posts" to the board a message consisting of a subject title, author identification, and a message body—analogous to how one might pin a note to a corkboard. When other people arrive at the board, they can read and post a message in reply to that subject, or place a message introducing a new subject with a new subject title. Multiple posts referring to one particular subject is called a "thread" of discussion. The series of messages can evolve into a very complex, multi-layered, and animated conversation among several people, in some respects similar to face-to-face conversations and quite different from the much more static cork bulletin board. Hence the newer term "discussion board."

Teachers have devised many creative techniques for using this communication environment. The structure and purpose of discussion boards vary according to teaching style and course objectives. Because a variety of software are available, ranging from bare bones freeware to sophisticated commercial products, the complexity of the available features also plays a crucial role in structuring the educational environment, determining what can and can't happen. In this article, I will focus on basic ideas and strategies that apply to almost all environments.

STUDENT MOTIVATION AND ABILITY

When the instructor creates a discussion board, students may or may not actively participate. In smaller classes, especially when course activities encourage discussion and getting to know each other, students tend to carry over that desire to communicate to the online group, resulting in an active discussion board from the start. Those students who rarely visit the forum may begin to feel "out of the loop" when interesting conversations occur online, which sometimes motivates them to join in, and other times leads to an increased feeling of alienation that holds them back from participating.

In large in-person groups, students might be reluctant to talk in front of the whole class, which can generalize to the discussion board. Students might also neglect the online forum because, in their

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mind, it is something superfluous, not really the class per se, but rather some kind of separate, peripheral activity that can be ignored if they so chose. If the instructor tends to feel the same way, consciously or subconsciously, students will detect this attitude quickly. Although instructors might feel good about adding modern technology to their teaching repertoire, simply setting up a discussion board without effectively integrating it into the course, and without taking specific steps to generate motivation to use it, will probably end in a trickle of posts that quickly fade to complete silence.

Instructor's presence and facilitation

The instructor's presence online, much like that in class, can help inspire productive discussions. The instructor may have to encourage students online, draw them out, ask questions, set an example—act as a good "facilitator" as they call it in online communities. In many but not all respects that facilitating role is similar to moderating a face-to-face discussion. In fact, instructors might choose to alter their teaching style while online, speaking and acting in ways via text communication that are somewhat different than when in-person. This online "persona" may attract students to participate, and may also give the instructor an opportunity to experiment with new teaching styles—for example, being more (or less) Socratic, casual, humorous, or personal.

Concrete incentives

The instructor might offer incentives to motivate students. Online participation may determine part of the student's grade. Extra credit points can be awarded for participating. Of course, the bonus point system that instructions use will vary according to their grading methods. In those classes in which I adopt this strategy, I usually award half a point per post, with a cap on the number of bonus points possible. To qualify for extra credit, I set the rather lenient rules that a post must consist of at least three sentences and must pertain to the course content.

Although instructions would rather not have to use such a system to reinforce discussions, it be very effective. Sometimes enthusiastic students will continue posting beyond the point of attaining the maximum number of bonus points, indicating that pure interest in the course has taken root. Sometimes, once they hit the cap, students stop posting. If the instructor sets a specific date as a deadline for posting in order to earn points, be prepared for a flurry of activity during the hours before that deadline.

Student's online skills

Knowing our students have grown up during the age of computers and the Internet, we might assume they all have the knowledge and skills they need to work with a message board. This is not necessarily true. Some students may have limited exposure to computers, feel uncomfortable with them, or not have much experience specifically with online communication. Even those who have spent a great deal of time online may be skilled at web browsing, email, or instant messaging, but may not have much experience with message boards. Each of these online environments is different from the others, requiring a different set of skills and knowledge. Similarly, no two discussion board systems are exactly alike, so any student who is not familiar with the system used in the course will need time and perhaps some coaching in order to adapt.

Some students like the challenge of experimenting with new software and new styles of online communication. Others are more wary. These attitudes may persist throughout the semester, resulting in the online forum becoming a unique subgroup within the whole class. A "two classes in one" phenomenon can occur in which the atmosphere of the classroom and forum diverge due to the evolution of two slightly different subcultures of students: those skilled in and enthusiastic about the discussion board, and those more comfortable with the in-person classroom.

CREATING STRUCTURE AND RULES

Providing students with clear guidelines about posting can help insure productive discussions. Without such guidelines, many students, especially those new to discussion boards, may be unsure and sometimes confused about what the instructor wants them to do. What constitutes a "good" post will depend on the individual instructor's goals. Different instructions may expect different kinds of posts in the forums for their courses, so these expectations need to be made clear to the students. Some issues to consider include the following:

- If posts result in a grade or extra credit, what exactly constitutes a worthy post? For example, how long should it be?
- Should a post involve a statement, an opinion, an analysis of some kind? Can students simply ask a question about course material, or do they need to provide some background to the question?
- Are socializing, simple "chit-chat," or discussions unrelated to course content permissible?

- Should practical questions about the course (exam dates, course requirements, etc) be placed in the discussion board?
- Do the students need to be careful about spelling and grammar, or is more informal writing permissible?
- Does the instructor want to specifically encourage students to talk to each other, rather than direct comments and questions to the instructor?
- Because people sometimes act out online, should students specifically be reminded to be helpful and friendly to each other?

Privacy and confidentiality

Another issue that deserves special consideration is the privacy level of the discussion board. A firm group boundary tends to enhance the development of cohesion, trust, and open discussion, so the instructor needs to evaluate, especially in small classes, whether the board should and can be accessed by people outside the course. How might outsiders who gain access to the group be detected, and removed if necessary? Because people sometimes perceive more privacy in a discussion board than actually exits, the instructor might want to inform students about the realities of who can and cannot gain access to the group.

Might students discuss people outside of the class? In courses that contain material that applies to the students' lives—especially psychology and related disciplines—they may want to talk about friends, roommates, and family. The perception of privacy as well as the disinhibition that occurs online might magnify this temptation.

The anonymity and confidentiality of people outside the course needs to be protected, especially given the fact that a discussion board, unlike in-person conversations, is a semi-permanent record that people can read, analyze, save, print, and forward to others. The instructor needs to inform students about what people can and cannot be discussed—and how specifically the anonymity and confidentiality of people can be protected, for example, by not mentioning specific names or identifying information. In most cases, the instructor should explicitly discourage gossiping that has no academic purpose, which will be tempting to some students in an online environment.

Creating different rooms

Many discussion board systems allow the creation of a collection of boards, each one being a different "room" that might serve a specific purpose. The instructor might use this feature to facilitate and organize different types of interactions within the class. Rooms can be devoted to discussions of particular readings, topics, or assignments. Separate rooms can be created for smaller work groups within the class.

A "Practical Q&A" room may enable students to ask questions about course requirements and activities—for example, exam dates, details about assignments, text readings. In classes in which I assign bonus points for participating in academic discussions about course content, this Q&A room enables me to separate out practical questions for which bonus points are not awarded.

Setting up an area for socializing may encourage students to spend more time in the online environment for the course, especially if students also have the opportunity to socialize with the instructor in this more casual atmosphere. The instructor may see opportunities to stir up an interesting educational discussion, which then can be carried over to the academic discussion board. In general, "social energy" generated in the casual atmosphere can spread throughout the online environment for the course.

The instructor may choose to set up an area for playing a game of some sort, ideally one that's educational in nature and enhances the course. In my group dynamics class, we play "word association" in which anyone is free to post in the title of a message a single word that is an association to the word appearing in the title of the message preceding it. Students enjoy the game, which also serves as a kind of social barometer revealing interesting aspects of the group's dynamics.

FACILITATING STRATEGIES

Sage on stage and the Socratic method

Students tend to carry into the forum the "sage on stage" notion of a typical classroom setting—that is, the teacher stands at the front of the room and at the hub of the dialogue, with students directing almost all comments and questions to the instructor. In my discussion boards for my classes, I try to steer clear of this style of interacting with students. Not only do I believe in the educational value of students actively sharing ideas with each other, but I also want to avoid spending many hours typing in answers to numerous questions arising from a need to passively absorb information from an authority figure, which is an all too common attitude in our educational system as well as on the Internet.

The techniques for stimulating an online discussion are similar to those used during an in-person class. In Socratic fashion, the instructor may encourage students to reflect on their ideas and questions, providing just enough information to get them thinking about deeper or broader answers. The instructor may encourage other students to respond to a question or idea from their classmate, especially if it is a question that, much to the instructor's dismay, is something already discussed in class, perhaps at great length, so it is safe to assume other students know the answer. Reminding students about that discussion can facilitate the dialogue. Rather than directly providing information, the instructor can post a link to a website that contains information related to a student's question or comment, then ask the student to report back to the group about what they learned from that site.

The Socratic method stands as one of the most challenging teaching strategies, requiring quick thinking and concisely directive questions. The good news is that it is easier to execute online. Due to the asynchronous quality of communication within an online forum, the instructor is not on the spot to immediately and accurately facilitate the discussion. There is more than sufficient time to ponder an effective way to mediate with Socratic wisdom.

Encouraging discussions

A message board discussion, like any discussion, ebbs and flows, sometimes in predictable patterns, sometimes not. At the beginning of the semester, instructors may find themselves clicking into the various discussion boards for their classes ("making the rounds," as I like to call it), looking for posts, but none appear. Students tend to be overwhelmed during those few two weeks. It may take some time before they feel able to participate.

Silence tends to breed silence. Not many students want to be the very first to post. The instructor might help by offering a few inviting, even humorous prompts—for example, "Hey where is everyone?," or "Come on in, the water is fine!" or "Tap . . . Tap . . . . Is this thing working?"

Most of the time I allow students to bring up whatever topics they wish to discuss. That unstructured atmosphere may make some students uneasy, but I like to leave the door open for whatever might be on their minds, even if it's a topic that's not directly related to the course material. Sometimes I seed the discussion board by creating a new thread pointing to an issue left over from class that needs further exploration or clarification, or I create the new thread if the online group needs a stimulus to help it out of a sluggish period.

Once a productive discussion among students starts rolling, the instructor can simply sit back and follow along, deciding when, how, and if any facilitation is needed. The instructor will be tempted to offer corrections when students present mistaken information, or when they ask difficult questions, but I sometimes allow these discussions to unfold on their own without interfering, allowing the opportunity for students to work through the challenges with each other. Because they may wonder whether I'm following the discussion, I eventually will post a simple encouraging comment such as "Good discussion!"—perhaps adding a question or thought to promote its continuation. If mistaken ideas persist and grow, I'll intervene. When a student raises an important question, the instructor can flag that post as "unread" (a feature offered in many software systems) in order to keep track of whether other students offer an adequate reply. If not, the instructor can respond to the question.

Students have different reactions to online text discussions. Some may be frustrated by the tedium of having to type everything they want to say, feeling a face-to-face discussion is easier and more thorough. Those with superior writing skills have a communicative advantage. They may not be the same students who have the verbal advantage in the classroom. Those who are ignored or interrupted during class discussion may have a stronger voice in the discussion board. Those who dominate an in-person meeting may lose some of their influence online. The group dynamics in cyberspace may be very different than in-person. Encouraged by the instructor, a straightforward and empathic discussion of these issues may help students adapt to the forum and to each other.

To reply or not to reply

When students post a message and receive no response, they may feel reluctant to post again. No one likes to be ignored, especially if it happens several times in a row, the student is shy and sensitive, or in any way students feel they are taking a risk by posing a question or suggesting an idea. Getting no reply in a message board is one type of "black hole experience" in cyberspace.[1] It stirs up insecurities, anxiety, projections, and transference reactions, often discouraging the person from posting again.

The instructor may intervene by replying to the student, but when? Because it can take several days for another students to respond, the instructor's

premature interjection might preclude that opportunity for students to talk to each other—or it might bias the ensuing replies from students. The instructor might adopt the strategy of waiting several days before replying to student who needs a reply, perhaps marking the student's post as "unread" as a reminder to return to it later.

Changing message titles

The forum may be filled with bursts of activity just before and after an exam, when assignments are due, when students feel confused about something in the course, or when something interesting or controversial comes up in class. Students may post more messages as well as longer, more complex messages that address a variety of issues. If message titles are ambiguous and threads migrate to new issues that no longer relate to the original message title, the instructor might change the title of the thread or create new threads with new titles that help highlight and organize the different issues at hand.

Using quoted text

When replying to someone's post that contain several important ideas, instructors can cut and paste two or three key sentences from their messages into my message, with my comments interjected between the quotes. This keyboarding technique can lead to an interesting interweaving, multi-layered dialogue.

Quiet spells may follow spurts of activity. I find that posts typically die down for a few days, then pick up again. Complete silence for a week or more may indicate a group that's dying out completely. The instructor needs to do some active facilitating online and in class to revive it.

Emailing students privately

To stimulate activity in the forum, the instructor can privately email a handful of students who typically do participate in class discussions, or usually have good ideas, in order to encourage them to post. I let these students know that I'm "counting" on them to share their thoughts and questions, and to get some discussion going. This strategy seems to work well, both in stimulating online and in-class discussions. These students often feel flattered. Contacting people via a new communication pathway—as in e-mailing someone whom you rarely or never emailed before—may feel like a special communication to them, as if you are attempting to connect on a different level.

Modeling texttalk

The absence of face-to-face cues has a major impact on how people communicate in discussion boards. You can't see other people's faces or hear them speak. All those subtle voice and body language cues are lost, which makes the nuances of communicating more difficult. But humans are creative beings. Over the years people online have developed all sorts of innovative strategies for expressing themselves through typed text—what I like to call expressive or creative keyboarding.[2] These techniques include:

- *Parenthetical expressions* that convey body language or subvocal thoughts and feelings (sigh, feeling unsure here)
- *Voice accentuation* via the use of caps, asterisks, and other keyboard characters in order to place vocal *EMPHASIS* on a particular word or phrase
- *Trailers* to indicate a pause in thinking . . . or a transition in one's stream of thought . . .
- *Emoticons* like the smiley : -) winky ;-) and frown : -(which are seemingly simple character sets that nevertheless capture very subtle nuances of meaning and emotion
- *LOL*, the acronym for "laughing out loud," which serves as a handy tool for responding to something funny.

These techniques enable a lively conversation that simulate a face-to-face dialogue. Some students may not be aware of such techniques, so the instructor might model how they can be used effectively. Of course, instructors who prefer that students develop their skills in traditional grammar and composition might need to discourage TextTalk, which will be tempting to those students experienced in casual online conversation.

THE DISINHIBITION EFFECT

People say and do things in cyberspace that they wouldn't ordinarily say or do in the in-person world. Without having to deal with a face-to-face encounter, they become more uninhibited, express themselves more openly—a phenomenon that has been called the "online disinhibition effect."[3] Sometimes people share personal issues about themselves or express an opinion that otherwise they would keep to them-

selves. However, the disinhibition effect is not always so benign. People are rude, critical, angry, even threatening. The disinhibition may indicate an attempt to understand and explore oneself, to work through ideas and personal issues—or it simply turns into a blind catharsis, an acting out of needs and wishes without any personal growth at all. In some cases the ambiguity of text communication results in transference reactions in which people project their own expectations, wishes, and anxieties onto the ambiguous figure sitting at the other end of the online connection. They misperceive that figure as being like some significant person in their lives.

Moderate levels of disinhibition tend to be common in educational discussion boards. Students tend to ask questions and express opinions that don't come up in class. They tend to engage in more honest exchanges with each other and more freely describe personal experiences related to the course material. Some students may be more willing to debate the instructor, including students who otherwise are very quiet in class. Students who are shy in-person may especially benefit from this disinhibition effect.

Insensitive and hostile remarks also may surface. Instructors might decide to explicitly state in the rules for the discussion board that helpful and friendly behavior is expected. The disinhibition effect might be explained to them. The instructor's early intervention when interpersonal frictions surface can help prevent the eruption of blatant conflict. For this reason, instructors should probably not leave their message boards unattended for long periods of time.

If the instructor has set a deadline for posting in order to earn points, the flurry of activity occurring just prior to the deadline may include posts involving self-disclosures and emotional content, often induced by the stress associated with the end of the semester and by the fact that students feel more uninhibited with each other. The instructor may need to pay special attention to these posts, which means setting a deadline that enables the instructor to devote time to the discussion board on those days.

Outside the discussion board, in private email or in-person, the instructor might need to mediate and help clarify the situation when hostile transference reactions and other conflicts occur among students. A student's transference reaction to the instructor can help the instructor understand that student's behavior in the course.

Modified and anonymous posts

Some discussion board software systems include a feature that allows students to modify or delete their messages after posting them. Besides being able to correct composition errors or unclear writing, students also appreciate the chance to modify or delete the opinions, ideas, and feelings they express. I recommend the "24 Hour Rule" to students: If you feel any discomfort about a message you're about to post, don't post it right away. Save it in a separate file. Wait a day, then read it again to decide it you want to post, modify, or delete it. "Sleeping on it" and rereading the message with the psychological perspective of a new day can make a big difference.

Some discussion board software systems also allow anonymous posts. Giving students complete anonymity may intensify the disinhibition effect, resulting in words better left unsaid. I find that students very infrequently post anonymously—and when they do, their candid remarks tends to be valuable rather than deviant. Anonymity can help some reluctant students say something that needs to be said.

The disinhibition effect also may lead to obtuse, confused, and vague questions—questions with obvious answers, that were already answered many times before, or require a book-length reply. It would be understandable for an instructor to feel annoyed when many of these questions start surfacing. On the other hand, they do give the instructor a glimpse into what's happening, or not happening, in the minds of some students.

INTEGRATING THE CLASSROOM AND DISCUSSION BOARD

Because the discussion board and classroom feel like different environments involving different styles of communicating, the two may become dissociated from each other. What is said in one domain may not be said in the other. Although topics discussed in the classroom may easily carry over into the discussion board, the reverse isn't always true. Students may experience the forum as a separate entity, a subgroup of the class, something not connected to the course. What is said there stays there. The disinhibiting effect of text communication may lead students to express ideas and opinions online that they actively refrain from bringing to class.

The instructor may need to make special efforts to integrate the online discussions into the classroom. The instructor might mention important issues that came up in the discussion board, perhaps referring to the people who were involved in that discussion and encouraging students to continue the dialogue.

While online students may discuss topics that were covered in class many days or even weeks

earlier. Ideas and questions have been lingering in their minds, the material is just beginning to sink in, or perhaps students simply are responding to old posts. Bringing these discussions back into the classroom may feel like an awkward digression or regression. A better strategy might involve facilitating these dialogues only in the forum, resulting in a compilation of asynchronous discussions that stretch across the developmental history of the course, ideally culminating in an overlapping and synthesis of ideas that may not be possible in classroom teaching, which typically follows a more linear temporal path.

Sometimes the discussion board evolves into a subconscious voicing of problems actively avoided in class—for example, differences of opinions or personal conflicts among students. The instructor might be able to help students work through these issues in the forum, or via private e-mail, allowing the beneficial effects to seep into the classroom without openly discussing them in class or in-person. The best approach is to head off this type of dissociation before it becomes too deeply entrenched. Online and face-to-face, the instructor can address potential problems before they escalate. In fact, the disinhibited manifestation of these problems in the discussion board can serve as diagnostic opportunity for early detection and intervention.

Under ideal conditions, in-class and online discussions will complement and enrich each other.

Students will recognize the pros and cons of each environment. They will learn to maximize the advantages and minimize the disadvantages of each. When the group moves fluidly from one realm to the other—when both environments combined give expression to a wider range of ideas and voices—then the class has succeeded in extending itself into cyberspace.

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