

## Using Online Discussion Boards for Senior Internships

Amy R. Hurd  
Brent A. Beggs  
Daniel J. Elkins

School of Kinesiology and Recreation  
Illinois State University

### Abstract

Senior internships in parks and recreation are an opportunity to put classroom knowledge to practice. However, this is likely the first time students are in a learning environment without the immediate support of faculty and peers. To alleviate this issue, online discussion boards were used to connect interns who were located across the country. Fifteen students were given six topics to discuss throughout their 12 week internship. Each topic had a minimum of two questions for students to answer pertaining to their agency and then responding to posts made by other students. The online discussion boards were designed to produce three outcomes including: provide exposure to a variety of agency approaches during the internship, provide students exposure to all topical areas, and provide students with a sense of community. The discussion allowed students to get the perspectives of 14 other agencies and students, required they address six topical areas rather than three as had been a previous practice, and the students gained valuable knowledge by both learning from and teaching their peers through a much needed support system.

KEYWORDS: *Asynchronous discussion boards, learning communities, internships*

### Introduction

Internships serve as culminating experiences for undergraduate students and an opportunity to put classroom knowledge into practice. During on-campus classes, students have access to faculty to help guide them through projects, and peers with

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Address correspondence to Amy R. Hurd, Ph.D., CPRP, Professor, School of Kinesiology & Recreation, Illinois State University, Campus Box 5121, Normal, IL 61790, arhurd@ilstu.edu

whom to discuss class issues. The internship however, is an off-campus experience where these usual support systems for students may be lacking. Typically, internships require written reports and status updates as a way of communicating issues, concerns, and successes. Asynchronous discussion boards, also called online discussion boards, offer an alternative to these reports and papers and can play a valuable role in the learning process during the internship. Online discussion boards are discussions that occur between students but do not occur at the same time. Students submit postings on a topic and other individuals can respond to that post and/or other student comments. It is a means to interacting with others without having to be online at the same time. The learning activity discussed here focuses on using online discussion boards to replace traditional reports and papers while enhancing collaborative learning among senior interns.

Online discussion boards can change how a course is delivered and how students learn. They have been used as a pedagogical technique to solve case studies with pre-service teachers (Hsu, 2004), as an unmonitored forum for group work (Robinson, 2011), and as a monitored environment for topical discussions, among others. There are both strengths and weaknesses to using online discussion boards to enhance learning. They have “great potential for fostering collaborative learning among distance learners who are separated in time and space” (Fung, 2004, p. 136), and they can be just as beneficial as being physically in the same classroom (Franceschi, Lee, Zanakis, & Hinds, 2009). A concern of many instructors is that students lose the learning potential by not interacting with their classmates, which is relatively impossible during an internship. However, effective learning occurs when the students are engaged in learner-to-learner interaction regardless of whether that occurs in the traditional classroom or online (Cox & Cox, 2008). A primary reason online discussion boards were implemented into the internship was the desire to augment understanding of other agencies and to enhance critical thinking. Black (2005) and Gee (2007) agreed that online discussion boards allow the course to be less instructor-driven and more student-driven, which facilitates inquiry, discovery, creativity, and enhances the use of critical thinking skills. As instructors this is a primary concern for the internship that often serves as a culminating experience for undergraduates.

Some negative aspects of online discussion board use have been reported. For example, in a study on the involvement, interaction and quality of discussion, deBruyn (2004) found student participation was unequal and varied in terms of quality of discussion contributions. Also, some students only read what others posted. These students are referred to as “lurkers”—people who read others’ posts, but do not contribute. Lurkers can have an adverse affect because others in the group do not want the lurkers to benefit from the discussion without contributing (Littlejohn & Pegler, 2007). Conversely, a large number of posts can keep some students from reading them thoroughly (Kay, 2006). Although studies have identified these problems, they may be effectively addressed through active and frequent monitoring of the discussion boards, directly linking discussions to student outcomes and learning objectives, and helping students understand the benefits of online discussion boards and their role in making this a beneficial learning activity for the students.

## **Description of Learning Activity**

Students completing a culminating internship experience in recreation and park administration at Illinois State University were participants in the online discussion board. The types of agencies where students interned included park districts, parks and recreation departments, resorts, event planning agencies, professional sport organizations, and private health clubs. The online discussion board was implemented by the university internship supervisor in the summer 2010 and spring 2011 semesters and consisted of 15 students participating in each online discussion board through Blackboard during their 12-week internship.

Traditionally, students completing their culminating internship for this academic program were required to prepare papers addressing various topics related to the internship agency and the experience of the student. Topics, originally derived from NRPA Accreditation Standards, included areas related to professional issues, delivery systems, program and event planning, administration and management, facility development, and risk management. In writing these papers, students were required to describe how elements within a topical area applied to their agency. Students wrote three of these papers during the internship, with each focused on a specific topic. Feedback received from students, both during and after the internship, indicated that the papers were very helpful in better understanding their agency and the topic. However, students also indicated that they knew other agencies may be different and wanted to know more about other students' experiences.

The online discussion board was designed taking student concerns into consideration. Instead of writing three papers on the topical areas, as had been done in the past, interns were required to answer specific questions about the topic areas on a discussion board. Students were required not only to answer questions about how the topic was addressed in their agency, but they were also required to read and respond to previous posts by other students or the instructor. Interns were required to participate in the discussion once per week for 12 weeks. Each week, the university internship supervisor posted a discussion question on Blackboard related to the topic areas. The instructor would briefly describe a topic and then ask questions about how that topic applied to a students' internship agency.

For instance, done week, the following questions were posted by the university internship supervisor:

What procedures does your agency utilize in the orientation and training of employees? How is this similar or different than what you learned in class? How are the procedures of your agency similar or different than other interns? What are the positives and negatives associated with the procedures utilized by your agency?

The first student to respond would answer the question. Students would respond, one by one, to previous posts and questions. Although interns were only required to communicate once to each discussion, they typically posted multiple times to each topic. Key areas of discussion were the differences and similarities between agencies and student experiences and deliberations about the best way to handle issues and

concerns related to the topic areas. Students were also required to utilize terminology and classroom concepts in their responses. Weekly discussion posts were worth 15 points each, which accounted for 18% of the final internship grade. Students were graded on the depth of information provided by their agency, the utilization of classroom concepts, and inclusion of other intern experiences in their responses.

### **Desired Outcomes for Learners**

Implementing online discussion boards into the internship experience was done so with three outcomes in mind: Provide exposure to a variety of agency approaches during the internship, provide students exposure to all topical areas, and provide students with a sense of community.

#### **Provide Exposure to a Variety of Agency Approaches During the Internship**

A desired outcome was to allow students exposure to a variety of agency approaches to the topical areas in the online discussion. By viewing posts of other interns, students were able to learn a multitude of methods to approach agency issues. For example, when an intern responded to the aforementioned question regarding orientation and training, not only did the student learn more about the policies and procedures of his/her agency, but he/she also learned that other agencies approach orientation and training similarly or differently. The end result is that the intern was exposed to orientation and training procedures of 15 agencies.

Online discussions surpassed instructor expectations. Students were considering the approach of their agency, the approach of other agencies, and ultimately, the best practice for a situation or problem. Formal and informal student feedback indicated that students valued the opportunity to see what their peers were experiencing at other agencies. Developing a well-grounded understanding of the topic, which occurred in this situation, is congruent with Lange's (2000) research that suggested an online discussion board produces "increasingly sound, well-grounded, and valid understanding of topics or issue" (p. 24). This outcome also allows students to get multiple points of view allowing for a broader scope of learning (Singh, 2004). The multiple perspectives gained from online discussions help students apply theories and practices and reinforces the students own knowledge base which helps build self-confidence in their abilities (Hsu, 2004).

#### **Provide Students Exposure to All Topical Areas**

Weekly discussions required students to address all six of the topical areas (rather than three topical areas of their choosing, which was protocol during the traditional paper format). Topic areas were broken down in greater detail over the 12-week activity and each topic area had two weekly questions associated with it. Requiring students to address all six topics from two different perspectives meant interns were exposed to a broader range of topics, and in great depth.

#### **Provide students with a sense of community**

The most beneficial factor of successful online discussions is the sense of community that develops among the participants (Alavi & Dufner, 2005). Learning communities

are supportive atmospheres where learning is gained through structuring, generating, and analyzing discussions and collaboration (Carlen & Jobring, 2005). The in-depth, ongoing conversations online illustrated the value students placed on communicating with their fellow interns. Student comments on a formal evaluation conducted at the conclusion of the internship indicated as such. The following excerpts are from an open-ended question where students were asked to share what they liked most about the assignments:

The best part of the internship assignments was doing the online discussions. It was very helpful to share ideas and see what my classmates were experiencing. I also loved that we were able to chat back and forth with each other.

I learned so much just from seeing how other agencies handled situations. But I really valued the opportunity to bounce ideas off the other interns. I felt like we went through this as a group.

It was good to try out some of the things we learned in the classroom, but hearing what everyone else was doing really helped. I realized we all had issues to deal with and we could actually help each other out!

It is important to keep in mind that these conversations were not required and that students were simply required to post one time each week. The fact that students posted multiple times and discussed topics between themselves was one of the most surprising and welcoming outcomes of this activity. Informal student feedback during the internship and formal feedback at the conclusion of the internship, indicated that students placed a high value on participating in the online discussion board and the ability to engage with other interns. Multiple students reported that they felt as if they were part of something bigger and that they were part of a group going through the experience together.

### **Recommendations**

Online discussion boards can greatly enhance the learning experience for students during off-campus internships. Based on lessons learned from the online discussions from this learning activity, the following are suggestions for implementing online discussion boards into internship courses:

- It is recommended that faculty supervisors invest time and thought into designing questions or threads that allow for, and encourage, in-depth discussion. When developing questions or threads, it is important to choose topics that are interesting and imperative to word them in such a way that students must give detail in their responses.
- Design items so there is no necessarily right or wrong answer, which could help facilitate additional student-directed discussion and debate.

- Establish requirements for the minimum number of posts students should make to avoid the issue of lurkers.
- Faculty must consistently monitor the discussions and provide guidance as needed. Students need to know the faculty member is involved.
- Keep the number of students on each discussion board to no more than 15 so that discussion threads do not become overwhelming. This may mean grouping students together based on type of internship agency and the instructor monitoring more than one discussion board.
- Keep in mind that a learning community will not automatically develop. Community building takes time and is influenced by student participation. Students will become more comfortable with the discussion board if the instructor starts with simple questions or tasks and then increases the complexity (Courtney & King, 2009).

Online discussion boards can have a positive impact on the culminating internship experience. By being an active member in discussion board conversations, students become part of a learning community and reap the benefits associated with it. Online discussion boards provide a support system for interns and allow each intern to both teach their peers and learn from them. They have been a solid means to reducing the feelings of isolation as students put their academic preparation to work in a professional setting.

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