

Threaded Discussion: A Tool for Implementing the Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education

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Introduction

Many of us have received the yearly e-mail from the faculty at Beloit College telling us about the latest freshman “mindset.” Prominent on the mindset list over the past several years has been the degree to which entering college students are utilizing technology. Most undergraduate students today have been wired their entire lives – they have grown up with “the instantaneity of hypertext, downloaded music, phones in their pockets, a library on their laptops, beamed messages and instant messaging (Prensky, 2001). These “digital natives” have grown up in an instantaneous, asynchronous world – a world that often does not square with the instruction-centered world of lecture-listen, exams, solo homework assignments, memorization of facts, and instructor-driven evaluation.

While many of us strive to make our classrooms learner-centered as opposed to instructor-centered (Barr & Tagg, 1995), we often have a difficult time utilizing the technologies that our students have come to expect. Prensky (2001) notes this disconnect, arguing, “our Digital Immigrant instructors, who speak an outdated language (that of the pre-digital age), are struggling to teach a population that speaks an entirely new language” (p. 2). One way to bridge the gap between digital native and digital immigrant and to create more learning-centered environments is through the use of powerful learning-centered technology tools available on many of our campuses (Buckley, 2002).

One transformational learning-centered technology tool is the Course Management System (CMS). CMSs, such as Blackboard and WebCT, support student learning through web-based content delivery, on-line communication tools, and assessment systems (Buckley, 2002). A recent study on the use of CMSs in the University of Wisconsin system found that faculty generally use these tools for content presentation within their courses. Fewer faculty members take advantage of the communication tools and assessment functions available in these systems (Morgan, 2003). It is the use of these on-line communication tools, however, that enables students to engage in social learning and group construction of knowledge, fostering diverse and safe conversation in a time and place that is independent of when the course actually meets (Ehrmann, 1999).

Chickering and Ehrmann (1996) outlined the ways which learning centered technology can best be used to advance the Seven Principles of Good Practice in

Undergraduate Education (Chickering & Gamson, 1989). The Seven Principles focus on: 1) encouraging contact between students and faculty; 2) developing reciprocity and cooperation among students; 3) using active learning techniques; 4) giving prompt feedback; 5) emphasizing time on task; 6) communicating high expectations; and 7) respecting diverse talents and ways of learning. On-line communication tools such as threaded discussions, have the potential to impact each of the Seven Principles, and present an opportunity for teachers to create the types of learning-centered environments that Buckley (2002), Prensky (2001), and Ehrmann (1999) espouse. Because students are already using on-line communication tools in their personal lives (discussion boards, chat-rooms, instant messaging), the technology is familiar and comfortable to them.

Threaded Discussion as a Learning Activity

A threaded discussion is an on-line conversation. Using the communication functionality of the CMS, the course instructor will generally present a main-topic for conversation, and ask students to comment (“post”) on the topic. The threaded discussion is visible to everyone within the class, so students can read and comment on both the instructors’ and their classmates’ posts. In general, threaded discussions are arranged hierarchically. Students post replies to classmates’ comments, with replies appearing below the original message. In this way, students are able to engage in both vertical (student-to-instructor) and horizontal (student-to-student) conversation. A threaded discussion is an asynchronous event – it is not time and place dependent. Students can post to the discussion board at any time and in any place where they have Internet access.

Threaded discussions may be used as part of a traditional face-to-face course to encourage conversation and engagement with the course material. Threaded discussions may also be used as part of an on-line course to provide the type of student-to-student and student-to-instructor interaction that is often missing in such formats. Threaded discussions may be set up so that the entire class can read and respond to posts, or may be broken into smaller, more intimate groups where only a subset of the class has access to the discussion. The latter format tends to work better in large classes, where the instructor wants to encourage dialogue and interaction between a smaller number of students.

Examples of Threaded Discussion in an Introductory Course

The introductory course for the Department of Recreation Management & Policy at the University of New Hampshire is titled, “Recreation and Leisure in Society” and is a course that regularly attracts between 70-80 students. The course is required for RMP majors, but also counts as a University-wide General Education requirement in the Social Sciences. As such, the course attracts a diverse group of students from around the campus, with various backgrounds, experiences, and motivations for taking the class. As a part of the course design, students are randomly assigned to 8 “virtual” groups, and these groups are named after key figures in the recreation movement (Jane Addams, Joseph Lee, Luther Gulick, Frederick Law Olmstead, Benjamin Rush, etc.). Participation in threaded discussions counts toward the students’ overall course participation grade. For the first

post, this instructor usually encourage students to introduce themselves to their group:

To get used to on-line discussion, take some time to introduce yourself to your fellow group members. Use this opportunity to talk about yourself - who you are, what your leisure/recreation interests are, why you are taking RMP 490, what your major is, or whatever you feel is of interest to your group. You should ask at least one question of at least one of your group members, and you should respond to questions that are asked of you! I will close this thread on September 10.

Generally, threaded discussion works best when it is framed around the goals of the Seven Principles – where it encourages interaction between students and instructor, interaction between students, active learning, prompt feedback, time on task, high expectations, and diverse learning styles (Chickering & Ehrmann, 1999). One way to achieve this is to set up discussions that require students to build on their classmates' knowledge and ideas. One example is a discussion topic centered on the students' group name:

Your group is named after Jane Addams, one of the leaders in the early Recreation Movement. For this post, you should do some research on who Jane Addams was. Do not use your textbook! Share your information with the group by briefly summarizing your findings and providing a citation (either a hyperlink or APA reference) to your source. Do not repeat the sources and information of previous posters in your group! The goal is to find unique information on Jane Addams. The last person to post should summarize the group's findings into a 1-paragraph biography, and post this on the main course discussion board for everyone in the class to view. I will close this thread on September 17.

Here is another example to encourage active learning and collaborative engagement in the area of leisure theory (in this case, Flow):

Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, a researcher interested in optimal leisure experiences, developed Flow Theory. For this post, refer to your readings of the book, *Into Thin Air* by John Krakauer.

The following are characteristics of the Flow experience: 1) the activity is challenging and requires skills; 2) action and awareness merge; 3) concentration of the task at hand; 4) loss of self-consciousness; 5) clear goals and feedback; 6) sense of control; 7) transformation of time; 8) autotelic experience. Use direct examples (actual quotes or passages from the book) to provide a description of 2 of the above characteristics as reported by Krakauer on the Everest expedition. Do not repeat passages or examples from previous posts in the thread – each example should be unique. At the end of the thread, your group should have identified at least 2 distinct examples

for each of the 8 states of Flow as described in [Into Thin Air](#). The last person to post should summarize the group's findings and post these on the main course discussion board for everyone in the class to view. I will close this thread on October 15.

Outcomes and Recommendations

These are just a few examples of how threaded discussion might be incorporated into an Introductory-level course. All of these examples help to implement each of the Seven Principles. Student-instructor interaction is enhanced when the instructor helps to guide discussion, encourages participation, and works to facilitate the process. Likewise, student-student interaction is enhanced when students are encouraged to read and respond to each others' work. Active learning is encouraged when students are asked to go outside the bounds of the classroom to research, engage, and make sense of the course material. Because posts are transparent for everyone to see and comment upon, students receive prompt feedback on their ideas from both the course instructor and their peers. This type of quasi-public accessibility to their work often serves as a motivator for students to ensure that what they post is of sufficient quality. When threads are framed correctly, students are responsible to both themselves and their peers. Encouraging early responses by stating that previous ideas or sources cannot be repeated in subsequent posts provides an incentive for students to manage time efficiently. Putting time limits on threads and requiring a finished product (a summary, for example) also helps to emphasize time on task. Finally, use of threaded discussion can be particularly effective for those students who are often intimidated by large classes and who choose not to actively participate verbally during class. Because of its asynchronous qualities, threaded discussion allows students to think before they speak. Threaded discussion enables students to take in information, synthesize it, and communicate their thoughts in their time and at their speed.

For all of its benefits, threaded discussion is just one tool that is available within a CMS that can help facilitate active learning. There are a number of capabilities embedded within most CMSs that can help to achieve the same goal, and as Buckley (2002) mentions, "the most powerful implementations will combine appropriate sets of tools and focus on the more-integrated teaching styles that are required for students to learn with understanding" (p. 36). For example, a course instructor might digitize course materials, such as journal articles, and audio or video files, post them on their CMS, ask students to comment on them using threaded discussion, and assess their understanding of the material through an on-line quiz. Threaded discussion by itself, while a powerful tool in its own right, can also be used in conjunction with a number of other learning-centered technologies to help students better engage their course material.

As with any tool, threaded discussion is only as good as its user. A hammer can be used to build a sturdy house, or it can be used to build a rickety one. Similarly, it is how we use on-line communication tools that enable them to live up to their promise, capable

of fostering active learning and thoughtful engagement. Using the Seven Principles as a guide when designing threaded-discussion assignments can help to ensure that the teaching methodology is meeting its intended goal.

As the Beloit College Freshman Mindset list tells us, and as we see everyday in our classes, students are coming to us expecting to be actively engaged in their learning through the use of interactive, learning-centered methodologies. They expect to be active co-producers of their education as opposed to passive recipients of knowledge. Taking advantage of the tools that our institutions offer us in this area, and understanding how to most effectively use these tools to improve student learning, can help us realize the goals and aims of the learning-centered paradigm and the Seven Principles of Good Practice in Higher Education.

References

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