Motivators of Student Contribution in Peer-Facilitated Online Discussion Environments: Additional Findings from Three Case Studies

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ABSTRACT

Online discussion forums are increasingly being utilized to provide a means for student-to-student interaction in e-learning environments. There is comparatively little research that examines peer-facilitated asynchronous online discussions compared to instructor-facilitated ones. This paper reports three studies on the motivators of student contribution in online discussions conducted within the context of peer-facilitation. These three studies involved the following samples: (a) full-time undergraduates (n = 47), (b) full-time graduates (n = 41), and (c) working adults in corporate settings (n = 62). Cross-comparison of the three studies revealed six major motivators: discussion topic, performance-linked incentive, personal gain, social capital, enjoyment, and response from other participants. Interestingly and contrary to expectations, the most common motivator was not performance-linked incentive such as marks for contribution but (a) the type of discussion topic followed by (b) the types of responses from other participants. Further analyses revealed that more graduate students reported being motivated by personal gain motives compared to undergraduates and working adults, and fewer undergraduates reported being motivated by the enjoyment of the discussion compared to graduates and working adults. More undergraduate and graduate students reported being motivated by marks compared to working adults. Synthesizing the findings of this study and those reported in other previous studies produces a more updated and comprehensive understanding of what motivates students to contribute in peer-facilitated online discussions. Implications of the findings are discussed.

Keywords: Motivators, Online Discussion, Peer-Facilitation, Student Contribution, Student Participation

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INTRODUCTION

Recent theories in education and the learning sciences favor a slant to the social constructivist epistemology. Integral to the idea of social constructivist is the notion of discussions which provides students a means to exchange viewpoints and help build multiple perspectives. Although discussions can occur in face-to-face learning environments, such discussions are typically limited by class time.

The use of social technology such as asynchronous online discussion forums (e.g., Yahoo Group, Google Group), however, can enable students to extend their discussion outside the boundaries of their classrooms, without the need for students to log on simultaneously at the same time (Cheung & Hew, 2006). A necessary condition for a discussion to occur in a forum is for it to contain a sizeable number of messages contributed by students (Mazzolini & Maddison, 2003). However, many researchers found that students tend to contribute two or less postings each in online discussions (e.g., Cheung & Hew, 2004, 2005; Guzdial, 1997; Hewitt & Teplovs, 1999; Wan & Johnson, 1994).

If this is the case, then a direct implication for the use of online discussion is: how does one motivate students to contribute their comments or opinions? There is a growing body of educational research that interrogates this very question. Examples include Dennen’s (2005) work on participation marks, Xie, DeBacker, and Ferguson’s (2006) work on intrinsic motivation, Murphy and Coleman’s (2004) work on the technical aspects of the discussion, and Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, and Archer’s (2001) work on instructor facilitation strategies, among others.

Addressing the role of motivators of student contribution in asynchronous online discussions is also the thrust of my research. However, unlike many other studies, this article examines student contribution in online discussions from the context of peer-facilitation. There is comparatively little research that examines peer-facilitated online discussions compared to instructor-facilitated ones (Baran & Correia, 2009; Hara, Bonk, & Angeli, 2000; Hew, Cheung, & Ng, 2010; Zhu, 1998).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The role of an online facilitator is traditionally fulfilled by the instructor. While instructors may play an important role in facilitating online asynchronous discussion, not all researchers agree that this might be the best choice. First, not all instructors are able to dedicate the time and energy to facilitate the discussions (Correia & Baran, 2010). Second, a discussion that is instructor-facilitated may result in instructor-centered discussion (Light, Nesbitt, Light, & White, 2000), and limit students’ participation and voice (Zhao & McDougall, 2005).

One possible strategy to circumvent these concerns is to use students or peers to facilitate the discussion. A limited number of researchers have begun to examine the use of peer-facilitation (e.g., Correia & Davis, 2007; Hew et al., 2010; Rourke & Anderson, 2002). The findings of these studies have found that students generally feel more comfortable to vocalise their views, brainstorm ideas, and challenge each other’s ideas in a peer-facilitated discussion environment. In the following section, I briefly summarize findings from these previous studies on what motivates students to contribute in peer-facilitated online discussion forums.

Overall, findings from previous research suggested that students are motivated to contribute in peer-facilitated discussions when one or more of the following elements are present: (a) a sense of familiarity with one another, (b) mutual obligation to help one another, (c) when they have knowledge about the certain topic or when the topic is interesting, (d) when the peer facilitator demonstrates certain attributes, and (e) when certain facilitation techniques are used.

Sense of Familiarity

Peer-facilitation is based on lateral relationships (Hew et al., 2010). In lateral relationships, fa-
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