Graduate Students’ Perceptions of the Benefits and Drawbacks of Online Discussion Tools

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ABSTRACT

With an increase in the number of online classes being taught at the university level, professors are exploring ways to create collaboration in the online environment. One such strategy is through using online discussion tools. The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore students’ beliefs about the benefits of using a variety of discussion tools in online classes. In analyzing students’ responses to four open-ended questions, five key themes emerged that highlighted four benefits and one drawback to the use of online discussion tools. Online discussions helped build relationships, led to students hearing others’ perspectives and feeling their perspectives were respected, led to students reflecting on the content and developing a deeper understanding, and helped groups coordinate projects and manage teamwork. In contrast, online discussions did not allow the same authenticity of dialogue in face-to-face discussions.

KEYWORDS
Blogs, Collaboration, Discussion Boards, Online Discussion, Social Interaction, Social Presence, Wikis

INTRODUCTION

Online education is a well-established practice across institutions of higher education. According to the Grade Level, 2014 report, a survey conducted by the Babson Survey Research Group, 70.8% of Chief Academic Officers agree that online education is crucial to the long-range strategy of their institutions (Allen & Seaman, 2015). Although online education is becoming widely accepted, concerns remain regarding several components, including student retention and achievement of learning outcomes.

The flexibility of the online format is appealing to students, many of whom are working full-time jobs. However, there is frequently hesitation on the part of students and professors based on prior negative experiences with online classes. Among students, there is a fear of having to spend...
hours reading off of a computer screen without understanding the content and without receiving support from classmates or the instructor. Among professors, there is a concern of not being able to engage students. One strategy that can alleviate these fears is the use of online discussion tools to help students reflect on the content, show their understanding, ask questions, and engage with other classmates and the instructor.

The purpose of this study is to examine students’ perspectives on the effectiveness of online discussions and the benefits they perceive from using online interactive tools. Specifically, this study posed the following three research questions:

- What are students’ beliefs about the effectiveness of online discussions?
- What are students’ beliefs about the limitations of online discussions?
- What benefits do students perceive as a result of participating in online discussions?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Interaction in Online Courses

Research has shown that participation in online courses can result in improved social relationships among students (Jonassen & Kwon, 2001). Han and Hill (2007) concluded that discussion groups limited in size that take advantage of differing modalities of communication while also including encouragement from the instructor led to effective online discussions.

With constructivist learning theory as its foundation, the Community of Inquiry model examines the establishment of meaningful online experiences through social interactions (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). Researchers have found a connection between social interaction and students’ perceived satisfaction and learning in online courses (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Richardson & Swan, 2003; Swan & Shih, 2005). Related to social interaction in online courses, helping students develop a shared group identity is critical (Rogers & Lea, 2005). In addition, providing students in online courses the opportunity to manage group interactions without interference from the instructor also helps develop this identity. Having a shared identity enables the group to persist in resolving challenges that arise, develop needed social skills, and experience a sense of ownership in group processes (Kagan, 2009).

Palloff and Pratt (2007) identified key factors that led to an effective online course environment. Many of these key factors revolved around social interaction opportunities. These elements included: active interactions with other course participants about the content, peer comments that support collaborative learning, discussions and questions that led to developing a shared understanding of the course content, student-to-student sharing of resources, and peer feedback that provided positive support as well as critical evaluation.

Effectiveness of Online Discussion

Prior research has clearly established the need to thoughtfully and intentionally plan online discussion opportunities for students. A lack of planning can lead to discussions that are ineffective in helping students process course content, reflect on key learning, and engage with classmates (Nash, 2011). Nash’s findings are supported by a study done by Landry, Griffeth, and Hartman (2006) who found that students rated online discussions as less beneficial than other functions of their courses. Therefore, in planning online discussions, instructors must move beyond simply offering a discussion topic and a space for responses (Andresen, 2009). Online discussions often require a great deal of effort and time on the part of both the student and the instructor. If the discussions are not of high quality, they can be counterproductive for both (Rollag, 2010).

In an analysis of the use of online asynchronous discussions, Nash (2011) recommends that instructors create discussion topics that are clearly related to course goals, develop assessment
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