Chapter 6
Advancing Social Presence, Community, and Cognition Through Online Discussions

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ABSTRACT

Discussions are an essential component of online learning and an ingredient in establishing learner and instructor presence. Online discussions are generally considered key to student success, but they can be challenging to design and facilitate effectively. Engaging discussions show learners’ presence, provide a means for students to make external what they are working through cognitively, and facilitate community and connections among students and faculty. This chapter presents multiple tool and format options that designers and instructors can select from to effectively prepare for and facilitate discussion activities that promote social presence. It offers strategies for facilitation and assessment of student participation in online discussions and recommendations for writing discussion questions and structuring discussion activities to enhance social comfort and meaningful interactions in online learning experiences.

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INTRODUCTION

Discussions are often regarded as essential in online courses, as they show a learner’s presence, serve as the spaces that provide students with opportunities to voice their thoughts and ideas about course topics, and foster connections among students and instructors (Dennen, 2008). Social presence is “the degree to which a person is perceived as a ‘real person’ in mediated communication” (Gunawardena, 1995, p. 151), and higher levels of social presence are linked to higher levels of academic performance (Joksimović et al., 2015). Thus, a well-designed and facilitated discussion that recognizes and builds up a learner’s, as well as an instructor’s, social presence can be a fruitful and meaningful aspect of an online course. Indeed, research has shown that student participation in discussions is key to learner success in online courses, with higher quantities of posts (i.e., student contributions to an online discussion) and time spent in discussion linked with higher student performance (Cheng et al., 2011; Dalelio, 2013; Goggins & Xing, 2016; Thomas, 2013).

When viewing online discussions through a social presence lens, it becomes apparent how effective discussions enable learners to join their unique voices to the landscape of expressions within the framework of courses or other learning spaces. Discussions used in instructional activities promote online communities of inquiry, with interactions serving to advance learner social presence (Garrison, 2007; Heckman & Annabi, 2006; Pelz, 2004). Furthermore, student overall satisfaction with their learning experiences can also be impacted by their levels of perceived social presence (Richardson & Swan, 2003).

Threaded forums on discussion boards, for example, can provide avenues for student-student and student-instructor interactions. A common online discussion activity is for students to write an initial post to answer one or more instructor-provided discussion questions and then reply to classmates so that the discussion can be further deepened. Ideally, these discussions create opportunities for students to relate their prior experiences and understandings with course concepts and attempt to express their newly integrated knowledge through their text-based messages. While such a discussion activity has potential to engender meaningful, community-building engagement with course content and the class community, overuse of the post once then reply to others format may induce shallow postings for the sake of meeting the minimum posting requirements, contributing little value to student learning (Dennen, 2008; Reisetter & Boris, 2004).

Effectiveness of online course discussions can also be reduced when attention is not sufficiently directed toward the building of both instructor and student presence. Elegant course design, clear instructions, sufficient availability, and timely responses
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