Peer Interactions: Extending Pedagogical Deliberations into the Virtual Hallway

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this article was to evaluate a specifically designed digital learning peer-interactive strategy through an e-collaborative web project for reflective engagement with each other and associated academic materials. Data was taken from one semester of participation in an e-collaboration assessing student peer discussions in politics from two introductory American politics classes across two geographic regions of the country. Significant findings reveal that the interactive discussion forums in this e-collaboration engaged students in an academically reflective peer-student and peer-content interactions over the entire semester. The implications of this study are immense, in that a carefully designed digital learning strategy, an e-collaboration, does extend peer deliberative discussions into the virtual hallway, enhancing student deliberative performance. This is one that can be used to complement a variety of disciplines and is a concern to researchers, educators, and universities.

KEYWORDS

Deliberation, Digital Learning Strategy, Digital Learning, Online Communities, Reflectivity of Discussions, Technology-Enhanced Learning

INTRODUCTION

With the popularity and advancement in this virtual age, educators seek course creations that extend student pedagogical leaning into the digital hallway. One such means is with the use of a carefully designed web project, an e-collaboration, offered through a thoughtfully constructed asynchronous online platform, where student interact and learn together through peer student and student content interactions online. An e-collaboration using interactive forums where peers deliberate with each other allowing them the time to read, reflect and post in a time and space of their choosing, have the potential to transform the landscape of higher education by expanding thoughtfully constructed student discussions across the globe. Peer student instruction as an instructional method has been recognized as having a positive impact on learning as early as 1916 when John Dewey referred to interaction as the defining component of the educational process occurring when the student transforms the information passed to them from another, and constructs it into knowledge with personal application and belief (Dewey, 1916).

Peer interaction as a pedagogical ideal is pivotal in online settings as the back-and-forth dialogue among peers facilitate learning through interaction. Researchers have observed that in online environments much like face-to-face classes, learning occurs through an egalitarian process in which participants generate, challenge, reflect upon, and defend ideas, thereby constructing meaning through these exchanges (Rountree, 1995). In other words, web-based technologies facilitate creative
collaboration among active participants who co-produce content (Lee & McLoughlin, 2007), with learning derived as a product of students’ interaction (Dehler & Parras-Hernandez, 1998).

Peer learning online is supported with several studies confirming that retention rates are on par between online and face- to- face courses, with no significant differences in their course outcomes (Wladis et al., 2015; Bolsen, 2016; Farinella et al., 2000; Kim & Bonk, 2006; Pape, 2010). Peer student interactive learning through online e-collaborations have the potential to improve student learning processes inconsequential of time zones. Researchers issue a call for more research with statistically significant results and methods employed for digital learning platforms that improve students’ learning performances. With proof of academically robust peer student interactive deliberations, the arena of online education expands globally and provides a means for higher student performance (Jankowski et al., 2004; Karlsson, 2010; Kies et al., 2010; Stanley et al., 2004; Wright, 2007). This research answers that call. An e-collaboration that is used in this study was first designed in 2008 with the pedagogical intent to complement traditional discussions in political science classes, on similar issues across regions through the use of a virtual space for undergraduates enrolled in Introduction to American Politics courses on different campuses. Each semester, different professors were involved in the ongoing project, sometimes as many as six, participating in the semester-long project that centered on discussion forums. Each semester of participation a new website was created for each set of participating classes. The URL has been from a ning.com site, typically called, americanpoliticalsspring2012.ning.com. For this study, one semester of online peer-student interactions and peer-academic interactions in discussion forums are investigated in a project complementing a face-to-face American Politics course from two campuses across two-time zones. This web space was accessible only to those students who had signed human subject consent forms. On this collaborative web site, students would post and respond asynchronously, to a weekly asked instructor question. The pedagogical goals in using peer interaction were to increase student interaction and participation, reinforce lessons, hold students accountable for their views, develop better understanding of points of view, improve communication and analytical skills, articulate points, openness to all, build civility, tolerance, critical thinking, deepen a sense of identity and expand a sense of online community. Findings reveal that in this specifically designed e-collaborative web space students learn from each other through various forms of interactions that invigorate the peer deliberative education processes among students across geographic regions of the country. The pedagogical impact of these significant findings abound in that an e-collaboration used for peer student engagement is a powerful use of a web-based digital learning strategy beneficial to any discipline.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Web based technologies in education have swelled with the popularity of online education which has been exponential themselves (Chawinga, 2016; Echendu, 2016), several studies citing close to seven million higher education students taking at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Means et al., 2014). Alongside studies confirming that retention rates were on par between both modalities, that is online and face- to- face courses, with no significant differences in their learning outcomes (Wladis et al., 2015; Bolsen, 2016; Bernard et al., 2004; Jahng, et al., 2007; Sitzmann et al., 2006). With the growth of online learning, peer based learning strategies, in the form of peer student and peer content interactions are a standard pedagogical practice. Peer discussion pedagogies are associated with high levels meaningful learning and academic performance occurring in any modality (Anderson, 2003; Meyer, 2003; Conrad & Donaldson, 2004). Online digital learning strategies through peer discussions are also deemed to promote positive civic knowledge, attitudes, and/or behaviors across these two forms, peer student and peer content interactions (Botsch & Botsch 2012; Pollock & Wilson 2002; Delli et al., 1996; Galston 2007).
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