Chapter IV

Expanding the Classroom: Using Online Discussion Forums in College and Professional Development Courses

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Abstract

Traditional classroom environments can benefit from using asynchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC) such as an online discussion group (Yahoo! Groups). An online discussion group can “expand the classroom” in a number of ways, such as allowing for student and instructor interaction throughout the week at times convenient to all participants, shifting learning from a teacher-oriented to a network-oriented, collaborative learning environment, and providing rapid teacher feedback to homework that lets students immediately apply what they have learned. This chapter offers concrete advice on techniques to best use online discussion groups in a variety of class types and sizes, and warns of potential pitfalls to be aware of when using them. Evolving functions of
Yahoo! Groups and other asynchronous online formats that can further complement the learning experience outside the classroom are also examined.

Introduction

Much of the current research on information and communication technologies (ICTs) in educational settings concentrates primarily on distance learning situations or comparisons of the pedagogical effectiveness of distance learning with face-to-face (FTF), in-class learning. Although online distance learning is obviously an area of growing importance for educators, today most college students and adults taking professional development courses still attend classes, even as they use an increasing variety of ICT tools outside (and sometimes inside) the classroom. It is important for instructors in all areas to understand how best to use some of these ICT tools to create a richer, more engaging learning experience for students.

This chapter will examine asynchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC), specifically an online discussion group (Yahoo! Groups) in graduate-level writing and communication classes, and how the discussion groups improved the learning environment in five major ways. An online discussion group can “expand the classroom” in the following ways:

- participation with students and instructors can take place throughout the week and at times convenient to all participants;
- rapid feedback through the discussion group lets students apply what they have learned immediately;
- students can compare their work to that of their classmates when assignments are posted to the group;
- learning shifts from a teacher-oriented to a network-oriented, collaborative learning approach as students offer advice and information to fellow students; and
- students who are intimidated about speaking out in class have a less threatening way to participate in discussions.

Using asynchronous online discussion groups can be integrated into a variety of courses of relatively small class sizes as another tool to encourage learning. I have used these groups in graduate classes such as website publishing, organizational publications, online journalism, digital communication, and feature...
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