

A comparison of undergraduate student experiences of assessed versus non-assessed participation in online asynchronous discussion groups: Lessons from a cross disciplinary study in health and sociology

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This paper discusses a pilot study investigating perceptions from undergraduate students enrolled in units in which asynchronous online discussion boards were utilised formatively or linked to summative assessment. Of the influences that determine level of student engagement in online discussions, one key factor is whether discussions are assessed. Whilst assessing student discussions does motivate participation, this approach is not always valued by students as they are critical of the value of asynchronous discussion boards to their learning. The type of postings can be an influencing factor in student engagement, with effective facilitation, clear purpose and group participation perceived to be important. Students also viewed discussion boards as a platform in which peer engagement and information sharing occurred. Students who were enrolled in a unit in which discussion postings were assessed demonstrated emerging critical thinking skills. Students strongly indicated discussion boards must be fit-for-purpose and integrated into the curriculum regardless of whether they are assessed or not.

Keywords: assessment, discussion boards, asynchronous, student, engagement, higher education

Introduction

Communication tools such as discussion boards form an integral part of online learning systems and therefore are extensively used in higher education, particularly in an asynchronous context (Anderson 2009) as they provide a means for students to communicate and learn collaboratively. In many instances, these discussion boards are linked to assessment to facilitate engagement and promote development of critical thinking (Johnson and Johnson 1986). However, there is also a role for discussion boards as a formative learning tool. Student satisfaction about studying online has been well researched (Horzani, 2015; Lander 2014; Ladyshevsky 2013; Liaw 2008; Bouhnik and Marcus, 2006) with engagement often posed as difficult to achieve across the student cohort. As stated by Gregory (2015) discussion boards can be a collaborative learning tool, particularly for off campus students, and students usually participate when they are linked to assessment. Less evident in the literature is the student perspective of participation in asynchronous discussion groups that are non-assessed compared to perspectives on assessed discussion boards.

According to Du et al (2008) active engagement with others promotes meaningful learning and in an online environment, the topic of discussion is important in determining the impact. Disengagement with asynchronous discussion boards may be related to facilitation (Northover 2002), with instructor facilitation preferred to student facilitation (Hew 2015). Students respond well to feedback in any learning and teaching paradigm and so instructor facilitation drives learning quality and student satisfaction in an online course (Ladyshevsky 2013). Disengagement may be related to the

ambiguous nature of discussion postings and the limited ability of students to construct knowledge through online discussion (Lander 2014) but once students are engaged they should be able to perceive the value of online discussion boards. The greater the level of student engagement, the higher the perceived value of asynchronous discussions (Northover 2005, Pena-Shaff et al 2005)

Pena-Shaff et al (2005) reported student attitudes to online discussions ranged from enthusiastic to hostile and that some students perceived the asynchronous discussions as a chore lacking either substance or meaning. These authors also reported that some students rebelled against the assessment incentive, which they viewed as burdensome, with some students exhibiting resentment at forced participation. Clear purpose of a discussion board is essential for engagement (Gregory 2015) with identifiable student outcomes (Steen 2015). As a result, discussion boards are often linked to assessment. This paper reports on a pilot study investigating student perceptions of online discussion boards utilised as a key assessment item or formative learning tool.

Methodology

Undergraduate students studying in one of four units in sociology or health science were invited to participate by completing an anonymous online questionnaire. Two units utilised discussion boards as an assessment task in the unit, (10% of the overall assessment was determined by discussion board participation), with clear assessment criteria provided to the students. In the other two units, discussion boards were used as online communication tools for formative feedback purposes. Respondents were recruited by email with two reminders sent at two-week intervals. The survey questions were designed to elicit both quantitative and qualitative data. The first set of questions gathered information on the factors which motivated students to engage using online discussion boards and their overall experience as learners. The second group of questions were reflective and open-ended, designed to generate descriptive data on student experiences and asked about students' proficiency and how they used discussion boards for learning. Research ethics approval was obtained for this study (H0013544).

Results

The students surveyed in this pilot study were enrolled in an undergraduate unit in health sciences or sociology in which discussion boards were utilised as either an assessment item (*assessed*) or a formative learning tool (*non-assessed*). A total of 78 students completed the questionnaire representing a small sample of the total cohort. Gender, level of education, and preferred language were similar for each group. The mean age of the assessed group was slightly older (aged over 25 years, 60%) than the non-assessed group (over 25 years, 41%). In addition, the non-assessed group were more likely to be studying part-time (81%) than the assessed group (36%) although a mixture of part-time and full-time status existed across the four units.

Just over ninety percent (94%) of students in the assessed group were comfortable using the internet before starting their course, compared to 45% of the non-assessed students. However, differences identified between the nature of the two groups were not significant and were not related to discussion board access as 92% of the assessed group (and 72% of the non-assessed group) did not encounter any barriers to access. The assessed group were more comfortable in initiating (62%) and responding (66%) to discussion posts than the non-assessed group, in which only 37% were comfortable to respond to posts with 52% expressing some comfort in initiating posts in a discussion board. Seventy per cent of students who participated in assessed online discussion boards found the discussion valuable to their learning and 41% of these respondents stated that the online discussions did assist them with the completion of other assessment tasks in the unit. Respondents who were not assessed in their discussion postings did find the postings valuable (62%), however, not as valuable in relation to their assessment tasks (26%).

In the assessed group, assessment was a motivating factor for participation according to 65%, while 33% of respondents in the non-assessed units indicated that linking assessment to discussion postings may motivate them to engage. Similarly, 56% of respondents in the assessed group indicated that discussion boards were useful to develop group engagement; however only 25% of the non-assessed group identified that this would be useful in their unit. Referencing of discussion posts was perceived similarly between the two groups with 43% in the assessed group finding referencing

of posts useful compared to 42% of respondents in the other group.

Participants in the study provided answers to open-ended questions that explored the student perspective about: the purpose of discussion boards; most and least useful discussions; suggestions for improvement; and an opportunity to comment on any other aspect of the discussion boards. The non-assessed group were more homogeneous in their responses, stating that sharing information or interaction with other students was the purpose of discussion groups. One student stated: *“To engage with the unit content as well as communicate with other members of the distance unit, while maintaining links with the unit coordinator”* and *“To share understandings and to discuss concepts being taught with peers”*. Additionally, students in the assessed group also indicated the purpose was to gain marks and enable reflection by participating in online discussion. Some students in the assessed group were critical of the discussion tool, perceiving the purpose of the discussions for assessment as inconvenient, and therefore not directly related to their learning.

Non-assessed group respondents indicated they preferred discussions that were compulsory (even if marks were not assigned) or where replies were posted. They liked the opportunity to gain or share information or be exposed to perspectives not already considered. For example, one student stated *“... there were many different views and ideas presented that helped with a better understanding of things that may have been hidden/unknown”*. Students in the assessed discussion groups commented they preferred the discussion posts that had meaning for them, including informal threads that developed from the assessable posts. One student stated: *“Discussion kept me on track, so I found the discussions broad (and) to be a benefit. All discussions were engaging once you started”*. However, over-sharing of personal information in discussion postings was not favoured by either group as this information was considered irrelevant and non-engaging. Lack of critical thinking or reasoned argument by other students was also frustrating according to respondents who were assessed on discussions. One student stated: (the least engaging were) *“...the ones which only answered the question and did not have an opinion. What’s the point?”* Referencing discussion posts was not always favoured among respondents in the assessed or non-assessed groups but non-referenced posts were also mentioned as being less engaging by students who were assessed. A number of respondents mentioned they preferred to post to a discussion board when they did not need to reference.

Students in the non-assessed groups commented that they would like more engagement by others in the discussions. Comments included making the interaction compulsory or assessing the posts or participation. One student stated: *“Assessing posts would encourage students to participate, then they would learn how valuable posting can be”*. Conversely, some respondents in the assessed group sought to make the discussion groups non-assessable items. One student stated: *“Do not make them assessments. It was a monumental fail... it was very difficult to participate and feel engaged in them, it became a hassle more than a learning tool”* and *“Don’t use them. Adult learners do not respond to them. I found the overall tone of the discussion to be fake/false designed to achieve a pass mark and nothing else”*.

Both groups indicated they would like the facilitator to guide and moderate the discussions more, and the assessed group students commented that they would like more engagement and feedback from facilitators. One student in the non-assessed group stated: *“I think discussions could benefit from the lecturer’s contributions; to steer the topics and prevent the students from discussing too many personal issues”*. One student stated: *“I would have participated more if the lecturer was involved to keep the content of the discussions on the right track”*. Respondents from the assessed group indicated would like the discussion groups to be comprised of a smaller number of students. The assessed group respondents also mentioned that technical difficulties and length of time involved to participate could be improved. One respondent stated: *“It is very time consuming trying to prepare worthwhile discussion posts compared to the amount of marks they are worth”*. The students in the assessed group focussed more on the inhibitors of discussions, citing disliking interaction, too much other work and too many discussions. A range of alternatives such as weekly quizzes, short answer questions or alternative assessment tasks such as an essay were suggested by respondents. One student stated: *“would much rather just have online quizzes or assignments for learning, online discussions are a burden”*.

Discussion

Linking assessment to online discussions motivates student engagement particularly when discussion topics are facilitated to provide effective learning experiences. This is supported by previous studies in which students do value asynchronous discussions as an integral component of their online learning and assessment (Vonderwell et al. 2008). Participating in online discussions can enhance learning but the inclusion of referencing in posts may be detrimental to intended outcomes as indicated by respondents in this study. Lander (2014) found that referencing stunted conversation and halted learning and that some students were reluctant to state a value position that may diminish their perspective and have a negative impact on their knowledge construction. Referencing of posts was somewhat favoured among students in our groups and some students in the assessed group commented they did like referencing the information in their posts. However, some students did provide unfavourable comments with respect to the need to reference as they felt it impacted negatively on the quality of their post. Referencing of posts does add academic rigour to the postings and discussion threads and so should be encouraged for effective learning and teaching practice.

Students in this pilot study, particularly in the assessed group, suggested improvements to online discussions could include facilitator guidance and feedback to students. This supports the literature in which effective facilitation has been shown to enhance the quality and satisfaction of the discussions for students (Ladyshewsky 2013). As indicated in previous studies the majority of respondents preferred a facilitator to direct the discussion, irrespective of whether the postings were assessed or not, (Hew 2015). Student perceptions indicated that discussion posts need to be engaging and fit for purpose, regardless of whether or not they are assessed. Effective facilitation, enables engagement by students.. Facilitator feedback can be scaffolded within assessed discussion boards to ensure that students are constructively building their online communication skills and knowledge effectively. This supports recent literature that indicates facilitators need to clearly indicate purpose for discussion boards and design tasks which provide constructive learning (Gregory 2015; Steen 2015). The nature of the group dynamics and motivation for participation in the online discussions will also influence student engagement (Robinson 2011). Assessment is regarded to be a key motivating factor in an online learning and teaching paradigm.

The hostile responses from some students in the assessed group were similar to the findings of Penna-Shaff et al (2005) who reported that assessment hindered participation by some students who resented being forced to participate. These authors also found there was written apprehension anxiety, which was also a finding in both assessed and non-assessed groups in this study. Comfort levels of posting to discussions was more evident in the assessed group compared to the non-assessed group, which is most likely related to experience. In addition, students in the assessed group were more likely to voice their concern about the content of their posts than those in the non-assessed group. Du et al (2008) suggested that identifying patterns in which online discussions are conducted effectively could enable improvements in collaborative learning. The differences in the patterns of engagement, willingness to participate and behaviour between assessed and non-assessed students in discussion groups, provides opportunities for re-orientating online discussions to better suit the learning needs of students. Moreover, curriculum re-design could improve student perceptions and understanding of the value of this educational tool.

The findings of this study suggest there were contributing factors that altered the student experience depending on whether discussion boards were assessed or not. Limitations of this study include different study status and ages of students, as well as the small sample size. Research into influence of discussion boards on student learning, in assessed and non-assessed groups across a range of disciplines and different undergraduate years, with a larger sample size, warrants further investigation.

Conclusion

This study found students focus on different aspects of asynchronous discussion groups depending on whether they are assessed or non-assessed. Students using online discussions that were assessed were more critical of the process, facilitator feedback and whether online discussions are a useful learning tool or a burden. The non-assessed group of students indicated the purpose of asynchronous discussions as a means of sharing information or engaging with their peers, with critical thinking being of less importance to this cohort. Online discussions, whether assessed or not, need to

have clear purpose, be authentic for engagement and enable meaningful learning. Assessing discussion postings does value add to their purpose pedagogically however effective facilitation also needs to be implemented to authenticate learning. Future studies investigating student perceptions of assessed and non-assessed asynchronous discussion boards across a wider range of disciplines and contexts are required to validate and extend the findings of this study.

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