

Disadvantages of Collaborative Online Discussion and the Advantages of Sociability, Fun and Cliques for Online Learning

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The literature surrounding online learning often suggests that collaborative pedagogies are useful practices, especially in relation to both more engaged constructivist learning and, perhaps more obviously, ensuring evidence of participation and attendance (ANTA 1998). This approach coupled with the advantages of low bandwidth and convenience of text based online discussion technologies, means that this is often the most favoured method of collaboration online.

Collaborative pedagogies are partially popularized in online learning environments because text based online discussion technologies are often available as a software package that requires very little bandwidth and are relatively cheap and easy for students to access technically. This does not mean that teachers are only interested in the technical convenience aspects of online discussion; to some extent class discussions and group work online replicate and even extend the best elements of face to face classrooms, in getting students to rework and integrate their learning by communicating and building on it through peer to peer and student to student interaction (McLoughlan 1999).

Online discussion is also promoted as having the additional advantage of being more democratic than face to face discussion, allowing all participants, even the shy, less verbally articulate, slight of voice and perhaps more considered or slower respondents, equal access to having their words displayed or "heard."

Ensuring regular and class wide participation online, much of the literature suggests that online discussion or conferencing becomes a course requirement or an assessable task (Harasim, Hiltz, Teles & Turoff 1995). This can mean that the teacher or conference or discussion facilitator encourages students to respond as much as possible in overtly presented text based ways in order to receive a grade for participation in the course.

Among other things this can result in, what one of my graduate students called the "burden of participation online." She meant by this that, unlike face to face courses where discussion was often also valued but perhaps was only graded on attendance rather than individual responses, there was an expectation or imperative online that all students respond perhaps both in quality and quantity in order to achieve a good result. This in her mind has a number of disadvantages the most obvious to her, as a student, was the additional unexpected burden that the online discussion became in a course that she originally enrolled in because, she thought it was more convenient as it did not require attendance at classes and the lecture.

Out of an online discussion of this notion of the burden of participation in a workshop on online discussion and assessment, additional disadvantages that were mentioned in the general body of responses, listed here without priority were:

1. Because of the convenience of 24/7 access students who wish to keep up with other students' responses and the general activity of the course, instead of more convenient it became less convenient because there was a need to access every day or evening and then perhaps respond immediately in order not to waste the connection, rather than just attend one class discussion a week.
2. Although a minimum number of responses or posts were required there was no maximum number and it was not clear what was a sufficient for a Distinction in responding.
3. Time consuming referencing of responses to online or other sources was not generally a feature of face to face discussion, but online it became a natural way of providing evidence of research and support for arguments.
4. Apart from the grades there was a lot more work for what might be consider [sic] of similar educational benefit to the more immediate discussion face to face.
5. Some online discussion messages seem to fall on deaf ears as there are either no response from the students or the lecturer or very few responses by comparison to other messages.
6. Collaborative projects online can result in uneven distribution of workload even though the actual

submission of the outcome may mean all get given the same grade.

7. In group project often individual research interests are abandoned in order to pursue the most likely best generalized but not excellent result under the circumstances of a diversity of interests and abilities and the constraints of time and internet communication.
8. In order to survive students can eventually give up reading all messages left especially those that are too long .
9. Often excellent responses that contain many links to additional informative and well researched material are avoided or links are not visited or read because the work required becomes too overpowering.
10. Students learn that short concise messages are more likely to be responded to which can lead to a more superficial discussion.
11. Referenced responses can be a way of making a message more concise but also leads to superficial responses that make their point by creating a link to some other material without sufficient exposition of the argument avoiding reflective opportunities which might deepen their own and other students' learning; there is no acknowledgement that some students are learning by merely reading and not responding to the discussion.
12. Some discussion, become 'artificial discussions' because they are mandatory where messages are just added without reference to previous points made, or as an alternative acknowledgement and encouragement and agreement is posted to indicate participation or a response but no actual information is exchanged, developed or more fully investigated or probed.
13. There is a sense that because everything is displayed on a semi permanent basis that instead of the course being more democratic and open to alternative perspectives there is a higher level at which the content is managed or moderated by the lecturer or teacher or moderator.
14. Self directed learning becomes illusory in fully collaborative online environments as group and participation imperatives take up so much of the course time online.
15. Because of the range of other work family and other commitments and because of differences in technical ability, technical access and ease and enthusiasm for using online discussion and written English, students vary in the level of participation and commitment to online despite their knowledge and capability in the area of content that the course covers.
16. One feature that was evident across a range of online discussions was that despite the claims for democratic and universal access to responding a

common outcome was that no matter how large or small an online discussion was there often emerged a core group of regular respondents who maintained contact with each other and seemed very able to follow and respond to each other's messages. This often involved a more personal and social content to messages left, to the extent that quite a bit of discussion was devoted to the obvious enjoyment of making light hearted observations about inconsistencies or consistencies in previous messages and comments on the other respondents personal perspectives on issues. Much of this could be referred to as "in jokes" from a group that got to know each other well at least online. This appeared to those who were not within this core group to be a "clique" that often seemed to [sic] difficult to enter the discussion with because their history of responses disadvantaged those who did not have that history together.

These are selected edits of some of the responses to a wide-ranging but particular online discussion. The points made are listed in summary here and are not to be assumed to be generalisable to all online collaborative discussion. They may used to hypothesize appropriate online discussion that might justify the workload or be similar in workload to face to face discussion, but it is not the intention here to answer all the issues raised in the above points. However the last point made seemed in a contradictory way to partially alleviate some of the burdensome aspects that were raised in the earlier points.

The notion in the last point is that for at least some students the online environment eventually does not or immediately does not present the same sort of burden or disadvantages that many students notice. For the cliques that form it is apparent that online discussion is a very rewarding and engaging place that they take some ownership in, to the point that their banter and jokes and personal references seem to indicate that they are returning regularly with a strong interest in each other and the discussion in question. This last point became the basis for some follow up in a more focused way in the same workshop, which perhaps surprisingly generated some thought provoking additional disadvantages for lecturers and teachers, not just students, in online discussion.

The follow up was more of a discussion of whether the sociability between some students really worked well in online discussion mode and whether this made for a self generating, less burdensome sense of the online environment. Why this occurred and whether a teacher or lecturer could generalize this activity to more students was really the starting point of what was a shift, to a discussion of the new roles that the teacher or lecturer must take up to facilitate a strong online discussion environment. This discussion focused on the role of sociability in learning and where, if any, responsibility lay for generating that sociability. In particular, is it a task that a facilitator or participants should or could be expected to fulfil, or is sociability something that cannot be affected and artificially generated but is best left to develop naturally.

The role of the online teacher and lecturer is clearly different from that of the face to face teacher or lecturer. There is a question of what is important, the content of the course or the sociability between students that will generate a strong sense of a learning community. Much of the literature on difference between the two roles focuses on the need for the teacher or lecturer to take on more of a facilitator role in the online environment (Curtis and Lawson 2001).

There seem to be a number of imperatives driving this shift, including the need to have the students learn through more active participation, the need for the teacher or lecturer to step away from the more traditional “sage on the stage role” and into the less familiar role of “guide on the side.” But in addition the imperative for group based collaboration that rests with students indicates that there still is an imperative for the teacher to not only advise on content but also encourage a social environment that can generate the types of interactions that the cliques in online discussion seem to be able to generate.

Stephen Downes suggests that in communities of practice the content and the sociability are integrated, but he also suggests that there is a problem with having the facilitator attempt to force the development of more what he calls informal learning. As he says:

Informal learning is informal, so don't try to structure it with roles and behaviours. Second, informal learning is not separate, but rather, integrated into day-to-day activities. The learning is a part of and a natural outgrowth of other activities. Putting it into a nice formalized box somewhere separate from everything else simply ruins it. (Downes 2001)

There is a reassuring sense here that the lecturer or teacher online must return to content as a way of generating good informal approaches to the content. This is not a return to the teacher on the stage being the font of knowledge but the teacher being willing to work with the content in a way that allows for social and informal discussion as a mechanism for building a community of interest in the content or as I have called it, to build a sense of online sociability. The level of informality and “fun” are, I believe, an antidote to what students perceive are burdensome aspects of online participation. However I think Downes’s expectation is that there is an integration of the social with the content does not alleviate the responsibility of the lecturer to focus some attention on sociability as well as content. For example the content has to engage with the personal lives and sensibilities of the students, the content has to be “fun” or interesting in ways that are meaningful to the community that is discussing them.

An alternative to Downes’s perspective is that the content is already a given in an online course and hopefully the lecturer is sufficiently familiar with the content that their real focus needs to be the sense of sociability. What might be more useful is a way for contributions to become less burdensome because it is a requirement for students that they start with informal ways of dealing with the content, perhaps through games or icebreakers or

ungraded activities that have little consequence in terms of assessments or in how they are presented but have consequences for forming relationships with content and each other online.

This is not really a return to the notion that the lecturer or teacher has only to be a content expert but there needs to be a way of generating an interest in the content of the course that for online students is personally engaging, fun and has a history of meaningful interactions common to the participants. What it means is that to reduce the burden of online participation lecturers might have to consciously build in or integrate the element of informality and sociability in online learning.

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