

CREATING MEANINGFUL ONLINE DISCUSSIONS*

Mary Harris-John

This work is produced by OpenStax-CNX and licensed under the
Creative Commons Attribution License 2.0[†]

Abstract

As educators in higher education, we face many challenges, but probably none like that of teaching online. While institutions of higher education have enjoyed a long history of traditional teaching and learning, the realities of providing an environment tailored to the needs and interests of today's adult learners is a very real and timely issue. Many institutions have pursued online instruction as a means of competing in today's marketplace, while addressing the unique needs of the current generation of degree-seeking adults who have family, community, and work commitments – in other words, whose time is highly structured and virtually controlled by a wide variety of factors. Thus, Web-supported instruction is becoming much more commonplace in colleges and universities (Lindner, Dooley & Murphy, 2001). Web-based courses are being used increasingly by instructors to optimize the delivery of instruction and instructional materials. These include: Web pages, chat rooms, discussion groups, e-mail, animation, streaming video, etc.



NOTE: This module has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and sanctioned by the National Council of the Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a scholarly contribution to the knowledge base in educational administration.

Building Virtual Communities

The concept of the “virtual community” is becoming an increasing influence in our daily lives, as adult learners enter the online environment (Rehm, 2000). Napier, Wallace, and Waters (2001) conducted a study with graduate students enrolled in online courses, and found that successful collaboration occurred when there was instructor support, when classmates and instructors became acquainted with each other, when effective communication was established, and when trust was developed. Likewise, Northrup, Lee, and Burgess (2002) found that students in online courses rely on the conversations and collaborations among their peers and instructors to help form and maintain the online learning community. In addition, the support provided by students’ peers and instructors has been identified as a key attribute in the success of online learning.

*Version 1.1: Dec 6, 2006 11:49 am -0600

[†]<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>

In my own online teaching experiences, I have found that one of the greatest challenges in developing an online community lies in getting students involved with the instructor and other students to a greater degree than they might be with the course content. Students who engage only (or to a greater degree) with the content of the course are missing a lot in terms of the rich discussions that most likely would have occurred in the traditional classroom. Discussions provide opportunities for higher-level thinking, for evaluation of alternative points of view, and for bonding with others who share similar interests. Collaborative group work involves a considerable amount of discussion and interaction among group members in order for them to fully enter the lives of others, listen, be listened to, and reach consensus (Smith, 2005). This human connection to other learners, and to the instructor, appears to have a positive effect on not only what and how much is learned, but also reinforces learning through the process of collaborative interactions. I believe it is the responsibility of the course instructor to provide as many opportunities as possible for interactive discussions and relevant group projects and assignments, the results of which can be shared with all students in the course. One's thinking becomes much more broad and open when the perspectives of others are taken into account.

Rovai (2001) defines four aspects of community: 1) spirit (feeling of group identity); 2) trust (feeling of safety and support); 3) interaction (task-related and socio-emotional); and 4) learning (the construction of shared knowledge). Building a sense of community at the start of a new course lays the foundation for both student and instructor success. According to Stepich and Ertmer (2003), building a sense of community in an online course is "essential to supporting students' learning in the online environment." This sense of community, of "belonging" to the course and the class, carries over into the discussions that ensue as part of the assignments. A sense of community brings "life" and ownership to the postings, which can otherwise be bland and lifeless. So critical is this creation of a sense of community, that Palloff & Pratt (1999) assert that without relationships with others in online courses, it is unlikely that students will master the course goals (p. 115). In online courses, students share more than just course content; they "feel" the tone of the postings of their colleagues and search for common experiences among their peers as they engage in collaborative learning. Consider the following example from Stepich and Ertmer (2003) of a conversation between two students in the same online course:

Amy: Nice to see others with career changes. I'm reinventing my life and find HRD to be a fascinating place to be in. I lived in Paris, France for 7 years, Rome, Italy for 1 year, and the rest of the time in good 'ole Chicago. I've traveled to all seven continents so I'm always happy to talk travel. . .

Lin: Hi, Amy! I enjoy traveling a lot too! I came to US in fall 1999 to pursue my graduate studies and ever since then, my husband and I have been exploring the states of America! This winter break we were just back from our trip to Texas. We just did a counting and found that we have literally put our feet (which means not counting the states you fly over) on 16 states! Cheers to more fun trips!

Amy: Hi Lin, nice to meet you, hope you had a good visit when you were in Texas. Good thing it takes awhile to finish a degree. . . you still have 36 States to go. I never had the opportunity to visit China, but it is definitely on my list! Look forward to working with you this semester. (p. 36)

This type of exchange between two students who have never met suggests the beginning of a positive relationship, which will be enhanced by the sharing of mutual ideas and new learning.

"Weaving" To Create Meaningful Discussions

The modes of communication that we utilize in online courses include mainly e-mail, discussion boards, and chat rooms. Since instructors and students usually cannot see one another, the tone of our online "voices," as well as the content of our messages, becomes critical to learning. I have speculated that some students are reticent to "speak" in online discussions until they feel comfortable enough to do so, and I have observed in my own courses that many students tend to connect closely with only one or two others in the class, versus the larger group. This suggests to me that in the case of online discussions, there may be safety in smaller numbers. Many students also tend to wait and read others' postings and the comments made to them by their peers and the instructor before they venture out into the discussion arena.

The instructor's toolkit includes artful wordsmithing through the conversations carried on via the discussion board. How well students learn from discussions (which take the place of in-class exchanges) depends on the contributions of other students in the course, as well as how skillfully the instructor "weaves" together

the thoughts and ideas expressed throughout the threaded discussions.

“Weaving” involves a single reply to several students based on the topic as well as the relationships created by students’ postings, and it affords the instructor the opportunity to influence and guide the direction of the discussions, as well as get to know the students better. Weaving also involves summarizing main points proposed at a certain point in the discussion, as well as posing some pertinent questions (Salmon, 2003).

The style of postings varies by academic discipline and level of the learner, but also by the skill of the instructor. The tone of postings can be warm and reinforcing, or terse and clinical depending on the style and content of the replies. As students post their responses to discussions in the online course, the instructor plays a very important role in guiding the discussion by knowing when and how to respond. It is rather an art knowing when and how to participate in the discussion.

Students need to know at the outset of the course exactly what is expected of them in their discussion board postings (i.e., staying on topic, rules of responding to others in a respectful, collegial manner, quality and quantity of postings, the use of citations, academic honesty, etc.). The instructor can ascertain after just a few students’ initial postings whether the discussion is addressing the central issues expected. A well-placed and nicely-worded question or comment from the instructor can get a meandering discussion back on track.

Students will often offer unexpected elements in a discussion, and when it is insightful and relevant to the course, the instructor has a golden opportunity to recognize the student’s contribution, which can result in subsequent postings by that student and by those who had been feeling a bit more timid about posting responses. This may actually encourage them to participate. Instructors can encounter these “teachable moments” even in the online discussion environment, and should seize the opportunity to ask questions, and “weave” together students’ ideas, making connections with other students’ postings. By doing so, the instructor encourages students to expand on their own comments and make connections to others’ ideas. By the use of weaving, the instructor invites students to say more on a topic, points out specific issues to other students, and tries to find commonalities among several postings.

In course discussions, there is usually a flurry of posts as students excitedly discover the course system and look for particular group members. The numbers of posts, however, may decrease through lack of encouragement. With effective responding and the use of weaving techniques, the instructor can continually engage the students. Students, as well as instructors, can become leaders in helping everyone in an online course to fully and effectively participate in discussions by reinforcing course content, and offering positive support for those who seem reticent about posting in discussion forums (McSporran & Young, 2002).

The following is an actual example of the use of the weaving technique for facilitating effective online discussions. It came from a graduate course in educational leadership, one of the required courses in the Master’s degree program for the principalship at my current university. The first assignment had a dual purpose: first, to allow students to become familiar with others in the course; and second, to open a dialogue about leadership and the principal. Students were to share their perspectives and beliefs about leadership and vision, interview their mentors, and share their perspectives. (The names are fictitious.)

Topic: 1 – Principal Leadership - Date: May 26 3:42 PM

Subject: Assignment 1–Principal Leadership

Author: Richard

However disappointed I have been this year because my job did not turn out to be what I thought it was going to be, I have managed to grow tremendously as a future administrator. This opportunity has been afforded me because of my job flexibility and willingness to hunt for extra things to take on. Teachers were bringing students to my attention that they felt needed extra help, and I would help those students, but more importantly I helped the teachers, too. It became apparent to myself and the administration that I was going to be a great service to them in bringing about the change they desired.

Topic: 1 - Principal Leadership - Date: May 26 7:20 PM

Subject: A1 – Principal Leadership

Author: Jeffrey

My mentor said that his vision of leadership and his actual job have become almost completely data driven with the effects of No Child Left Behind. He looks to his key teachers for ideas about curriculum and teaching. He lets them respond with their thoughts and ideas and then continues to develop a vision.

Hopefully, the staff and students will gain an ownership of the vision. I'm not sure I want to be this 'driven' by numbers and statistics when I become a principal, although I know they are important.

Topic: 1 – Principal Leadership - Date: May 27 4:15 PM

Subject: A1- response to Jeffrey

Author: Kelley

Your mentor seems very experienced and professional. Also, very realistic about the aspects of public education. Both of you mention getting to know your key staff members. Your administrator inferred some behaviors that I believe are very important for a principal. Those include: modeling behavior, encouraging a positive learning environment, and following through. Often I have felt my previous administrator did not display this behavior. Many times I was left feeling nothing but frustration!

Topic: 1 – Principal Leadership - Date: May 29 12:05 PM

Subject: Re: Jeffrey's A1

Author: Jo Marie

Jeff, I agree that it takes multiple people to develop a school vision. I think I disagree with your mentor about vision being mostly data driven as a result of NCLB. A lot of factors have to be taken into consideration when developing a vision for a school. Data is good to prove the need, but you must also consider the demographic area and needs of your students and staff as well.

Topic: 1 – Principal Leadership - Date: May 29 8:22 PM

Subject: My response – A1

Author: Allen

Well, I think the principal's leadership starts with a vision. I mean, it's not his or her own personal vision – I think it needs to be developed by a group of stakeholders from the school. But, when Richard talked about making change happen for the teachers, shouldn't a vision already be in place to help guide the decisions and actions of the principals and teachers? I'm not sure where data fits into the picture...

INSTRUCTOR'S WEAVING OF RESPONSES (to briefly summarize each student's ideas):

Topic: 1 – Principal Leadership - Date: May 30 5:30 pm

Subject: Leadership and Vision

Author: INSTRUCTOR

Dear Richard, Jeffrey, Kelley, Jo Marie, and Allen: Thank you for your initial postings to Assignment 1 on "Principal Leadership." We certainly have a nice variety of thoughts and ideas, which I'm sure comes from all of our varied backgrounds! All of you have basically addressed how the Principal's leadership can affect the school, the teachers, and the students. Richard mentioned how he has been able to assist teachers with specific student learning issues (which is exactly what a principal does); Jeffrey, Jo Marie, and Allen focused on the all-important concept of vision; and Kelley spoke of a positive learning environment as well as the Principal being the model for certain behaviors. If we could all focus on the idea of creating a shared VISION for a moment, how would each of you define the role of the Principal in shaping the vision for the school community? When you each post your response, please be concise, responding in 1 or 2 sentences. I look forward to reading your responses!

Topic: 1 – Principal Leadership - Date: June 2 11:22 AM

Subject: Leadership and Vision

Author: Kelley

I think the Principal observes the total school community, gathers members representative of each stakeholder group, and charges the group with writing the school's vision statement.

Topic: 1 – Principal Leadership - Date: June 2 7:32 PM

Subject: Leadership and Vision

Author: Jo Marie

The Principal's role in shaping the vision for a school is to prioritize goals that have been established by the faculty.

Topic: 1 – Principal Leadership - Date: June 3 6:35 AM

Subject: Leadership and Vision

Author: Richard

I think the principal shapes the vision for the school by getting input from every teacher, and from the PTA (parents' group), and then summarizing this information into a short, clear statement.

Topic: 1 – Principal Leadership - Date: June 3 4:59 PM

Subject: Leadership and Vision

Author: Jeffrey

The principal should find out what the overall district vision is, and then adapt it to his/her particular school to meet its needs.

Topic: 1 – Principal Leadership - Date: June 3 11:10 PM

Subject: Leadership and Vision

Author: Allen

The vision for the school doesn't belong to only the principal; it should represent the values and beliefs and goals of all the stakeholders in the school.

INSTRUCTOR'S WEAVING OF RESPONSES (to achieve consensus and guide students toward the next assignment):

Topic: 1 – Principal Leadership - Date: June 4 10:35 AM

Subject: Leadership and Vision

Author: INSTRUCTOR

Again, Jeffrey, Allen, Kelley, Jo Marie, and Richard, thank you for your concise responses! Let's see if we can pull together some common ideas about the Principal's role in the shaping the vision for a school. Our key terms from your responses seem to be: stakeholders, goals, input, needs, beliefs, and values. Now, as a group, your next task is to WRITE A VISION STATEMENT that all of you can agree with, and post it to the VISION discussion area, as outlined in Assignment 2.

The students' initial postings appeared to be rather scattered; some may not have understood the exact purpose of the assignment, while others may have feared opening themselves up by posting personal ideas to a group of people unknown to them. By weaving specific parts of the students' comments together, the instructor accomplished three tasks: first, comments were categorized by summarizing student ideas; secondly, six common elements were identified to direct students to the next assignment; and lastly, respect and appreciation for all of the students and their ideas by using their names and thanking them was modeled as the students were guided to a defined task. The use of such a technique in course discussions does require the instructor to take an active role in the online conversation, while it keeps students focused not only on course content, but on the contributions of others and the process of collaborative learning.

Summary

In the advent of Web-based courses, programs, and degrees, an instructor's skillful use of "weaving" techniques can enhance the quality of online discussions, making both course content and collaboration more meaningful for students. It can be the difference between mere words on a screen and the lively collaboration among learners and instructors who are connected by technology, but disconnected by geography. In the hands of an artful instructor, the use of techniques like the weaving of discussions can result in a positive learning environment, the nurturing of a community of learners, a higher rate of retention in online courses, and a feeling of satisfaction that although the classroom has become virtual, not that much has really changed.

References

Lindner, J. R., Dooley, K. E., & Murphy, T. H. (2001). Differences in competencies between doctoral students on-campus and at a distance. *American Journal of Distance Education*, 15(2), 25-40.

McSporran, M. & Young, S. (2002). Community building: Facilitating successful online courses. Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education (AACE): Norfolk, VA.

Napier, W. & Waters, L. (2001). Building a team collaboration in the virtual classroom. Paper presented at the 24th National Convention of the Association for Educational Communications and Technology, November 8-12, 2001, Atlanta, GA.

Northrup, P., Lee, R., & Burgess, V. (2002). Learner perceptions of online interaction. Paper presented at the 14th World Conference on Educational Multimedia, Hypermedia & Telecommunications, June 24-29, 2002, Denver, CO.

Palloff, R. M. & Pratt, K. (1999). *Lessons from the cyberspace classroom: Realities of online teaching*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Rehm, M. L. (2000). An aesthetic approach to virtual community. *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal*, 29(2), 153-72.

Rovai, A. P. (2001). Building classroom community at a distance: A case study. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 49(4), 33-48.

Salmon, G. (2000). *E-Moderating: The key to teaching and learning online* (2nd ed.). Kogan Page Limited: London.

Smith, R. O. (2005). Working with difference in online collaborative groups. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 55(3), 182-199.

Stepich, D. A. & Ertmer, P. A. (2003). Building community as a critical element of online course design. *Educational Technology*, 43(5), 33-43.