

Online Discussion Threads: An Exercise in Civil Discourse

Deborah McCuin

Mount Marty University

Abstract: *The intent of this research project was to address a perceived lack of capacity to address controversial topics or differences of perspective with civil discourse when engaged in learning in an online graduate course. Using carefully designed discussion prompts, students were asked to post, respond and reflect on their own research projects and those of their classmates in small professional learning communities. With the desired skills having been specifically taught in multiple modalities, these written artifacts were graded with posted rubrics and feedback was distributed individually to students. Over the course of three classes taken in three semesters, student scores were tracked and recorded. The preliminary results, as analyzed here, do not show significant growth in depth of analysis or clarity of response. While student overall scores tended to be in the 80-90% range, the feedback distributed to students still reflected the need for specificity, meaningfulness of responses, and analytical depth. The researcher continues to wonder whether this is a reflection of the students' lack of ability or lack of willingness to say the difficult things necessary to be a critical friend in a professional learning community. The researcher proposes to continue to read and develop additional data collection tools and teaching devices that will provide better opportunity to impact the development of this critical capacity to speak with integrity and honesty in the effort to help colleagues collaborate effectively toward the goal of greater teaching effectiveness and student learning outcomes in their own classrooms.*

Key Words: civil discourse, online discussion threads, professional learning communities, discussion grading rubrics, critical friend

Given the tenor of the verbal jousting that occurs in an election year, combined with the current manner of interaction between political persons and the media, the concept of *civil discourse* has become an increasing concern. In my work at the university level, I engage in dialogue and coursework with students ranging from incoming freshman for initial registration to graduate students in their final reflective seminar. In all of these interactions, I have wondered what role the concept of *civil discourse* could or should play in their university education.

As a professor working predominantly with graduate teacher education students, the majority of my work takes place in the realm of hybrid education. An important part of both the in-person and the electronic portions of each class include the concept of discussion. For the sake of definition, this researcher considers discussion to be a give and take of information around a prescribed subject, intended to deepen and broaden all levels of thinking on the content. This could

range from simple sharing of thoughts on previously unknown or poorly understood subject matter to the application, evaluation, or creation of new concepts based on deepened understandings of the discussion.

Civil discourse, according to Your Dictionary (n.d.), is defined as “an engagement in conversation intended to enhance understanding” (<https://www.yourdictionary.com/civil-discourse#wiktionary>, n.d.). It involves honest and constructive dialogue with the purpose of improving public interest or understanding while enabling self-regulation and respect for the differing opinions of others engaged in the conversation (Leskes, 2011). The concept of levels of thinking stems originally from Bloom’s seminal work (1956), and is updated to include the new range of verbs that include application, analysis, evaluation and creation as its highest levels of skill acquisition (Armstrong, n.d.). Evidence of these skills, along with the concepts of depth of knowledge, attributed to Forehand (2005) have become integral to the train of thought this researcher is engaged in during the creation and course of this research study.

The graduate program at my university includes two program outcomes whose acquisition can be strongly impacted through the use of face to face discussion and online discussion threads. These are stated as such:

- Evaluate and improve professional credentials through intensive discussion and professional collaboration.
- Use analytical reflection to appraise meaning and value of data driven teaching practice, leading to improved outcomes and self-renewal.

Some of the feedback that I receive from students regarding the use of discussion threads, however, includes comments like “can you make sure they post prior to the deadline so I don’t have to wait around until midnight to post my response” and “I don’t want to challenge her thinking because I don’t know her specific situation.” These comments indicate an unwillingness to engage in civil discourse that precludes student mastery of multiple program outcomes. Additionally, it indicates an apparent lack of confidence and autonomy in being able to resolve simple issues with civic engagement such as standing up for something that impacts one’s self negatively and engaging in a conversation that will involve a difference of opinion or viewpoint. I wondered if there were some opportunities for learning that could be both expected and measured with regard to teaching and improving civil discourse.

As I considered this further, I thought that this might be concluded at the intersection of evidence acquired from actual participation in creating a discussion post (showing evidence of a level of depth in verbal description, organization, clarity and specificity), and through tracking the personal connection, depth of analysis, and value of response, as displayed in the discussion thread responses within professional learning communities. I wondered if this, combined with student reflection regarding one’s own capability and growth in professional collaboration situations, might provide some insight and in fact gains in the willingness and capability to successfully engage in civil discourse around topics within the program of study.

As I continued to consider the student behaviors and feedback surrounding the use of discussion threads, what became evident is that much of the aversion to working in professional development activities that require increased communication and collaboration is caused by lack of confidence in one’s thoughts, whether professional or personal, being accepted by others in the group. This was evidenced in feedback from previous students in their anecdotal reflections as they exited the program. The question for me, then, became: *in what ways might the creation of discussion post and response rubrics increase the quality of each participant’s written work and ultimately impact his or her capability in professional collaboration?*

METHOD

The research intervention described below was created in response to the question of how to increase graduate students' confidence and quality of analytical response to online discussion threads while responding within the parameters of civil discourse. To do so, such expectations must be established and determined, as well as a way to measure the change in students' confidence and the depth of their critical analysis during the time of data collection. These elements and the data collection tools will be discussed in the following section.

The sample population for this study included all eight members of a cohort of graduate students in a Master of Education program. The membership of this cohort remained constant over the two-year program and they were able to be taught and measured with the discussion rubrics throughout three courses taught by the same instructor during data collection. These students were initially instructed in the value of feedback through a critical moment conversation as described in Parker Palmer's "Good Talk about Good Teaching" (Palmer, 1993). These conversations were modeled and practiced in the initial course of the program and in many subsequent courses. The instructions for a valuable and meaningful discussion thread post were given (Appendix A) along with a grading rubric (Appendix B) in the first online research practicum course, followed the next week with the instructions (Appendix C) and rubric for a valuable discussion thread response (Appendix B). The particular discussion prompts were worded to allow students to engage in a depth of shared information that would allow for deep analytical and personal responses (Appendix D). Students were then reminded of these instructions and rubrics prior to each remaining discussion thread prompt. The final discussion prompt in each course includes the opportunity to reflect on one's own work and engagement in the online course interactions. It is measured through a reflection rubric (Appendix E). In total, there were six online posts and six sets of online responses, with one to three responses in each set, that were included in the data collection. Additionally, there were three discussion reflections at the end of each course. The scores of the students' posts and responses were displayed in a table in order to show change over time (Appendix F).

Reliability was established through the explicit teaching of discussion post and response expectations in both written and video-recorded format, as well as consistent application of grading and feedback rubrics. These were applied by the researcher in each course and for each discussion thread from which discussion data was collected. Validity was established through the specific creation of the rubrics for use in this study. These rubrics were designed to provide simple access to main points of the concept of civil discourse to be learned in a way that produced easily discerned feedback that could be interpreted by instructor and student alike for self-improvement or teachable moments.

The hope of this study is that as students progress through the graduate program, they develop increasing mastery of the program outcomes set forth through the foundational program documents. These program outcomes include specifically that students will learn to:

- Evaluate and improve professional credentials through intensive discussion and professional collaboration.
- Use analytical reflection to appraise meaning and value of data driven teaching practice, leading to improved outcomes and self-renewal.

It is hoped that the collection of data as described above will provide some forms of evidence that these outcomes have been achieved.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research study is to evaluate whether concepts of capable engagement through civil discourse, as well as the depth of analysis and reflectiveness can be impacted through intentional teaching and grading of online discussion threads in a hybrid graduate program in education. The specific teaching of parameters and rubrics for five out of six discussion posts, responses, and two of the three final reflections have been accomplished and preliminary data collected. The results and discussion that follow will be divided into sections regarding the discussion post itself, that of the response to classmates' posts, and the final reflection.

DISCUSSION POSTS

Student in this graduate program participated in three courses in which they implemented research of their own design in their classrooms. These students were familiar with one another through three to six previous hybrid courses. In the research course used for this data collection, the delivery was online, thus discussion threads and an online system or workshopping and revision on the research study's written parts were the only contact students had with one another. In each course, the same two discussion prompts were designed to establish specific information regarding the data collection and the findings from the research study of each student. These two prompts were:

1. Discussion 1 – Data Collection - Your PLC has been set up for encouragement and support. Please talk in this thread about your proposal. What are you seeking to address with this study? Tell about the data collection process here - how was/is the baseline collection? What are your interventions like, what are you looking forward to, expecting, afraid of, dreading . . . Respond to each person's input in this group forum in a meaningful way. What connections can you make? What are you curious about? Can you think of any suggestions or helpful hints based on your experience?
2. Discussion 2 – Findings - As you look at your data, write down the nature of what the results say to you. For instance, what is the mean and range of your quantitative data? Any differences between sub groups, like gender, ethnicity, economic status? What did the participants say in their qualitative data? How can you collect and group by similar responses to create themes? What themes do you see in your own field notes? What changes do you see over time? What questions do you have about the results or the process? Is something missing? How can you display it most effectively? What does the data seem to say when you compare or combine the different tools - field notes compared to student words, compared to quantitative data? Cut and paste some sample visuals into the posts and get feedback from your PLC.

On each post, students were graded with a 10 point rubric seeking to determine the thoroughness of the background description, the organization, fluency, clarity and specificity of the narrative, and the students expectations at the study's completion. As of this date, scores have been collected, the mean found, and preliminary results are revealed in Table 1.

Table 1

Average Discussion Post Scores and % of Students Receiving Feedback in Each Area of Concern

Discussion 1	Discussion 2	Discussion 3	Discussion 4	Discussion 5	Discussion 6
9.38	9.00	9.38	9.69	8.38	Still to be collected
Specificity 37.5%	Specificity 25%	Hopes 25%	Specificity 12.5%	Specificity 62.5%	
Organization 12.5%	Organization 12.5%		Organization 12.5%	Background 50%	
Background 12.5%	Background 12.5%				
	Hopes 12.5%				

Within this cohort of learners, there is no clear evidence of improvement due to the explicit teaching and grading of the discussion posts. In fact, Discussion 5, the first discussion of the current semester, shows a clear drop in specificity and background of the discussion post narrative. While students show relatively strong scores overall, it appears that they require the continual reminder to be clear and explicit in their articulation within their community of colleagues. The most common feedback concern was to improve specificity in their post, followed by providing a clear background of what their research study was about. Why is this? Does this indicate a resistance or even fear of sharing their personal work? Was it more indicative of lack of achievement or apathy?

DISCUSSION RESPONSES

Likewise, data was collected regarding students’ responses to the discussion posts of their classmates. These were graded on a 10 point scale with specific feedback provided to the student from areas of concern on the rubric. Table 2 shows the average score per discussion as well as the specific feedback areas that were given to students, based on the rubric grading.

Table 2

Averaged Discussion Response Scores and % of Students Receiving Feedback in Each Area of Concern

Discussion 1	Discussion 2	Discussion 3	Discussion 4	Discussion 5	Discussion 6
8.88	8.50	9.06	7.92	7.36	Still to be collected
Value of Response 50.00%	Value of Response 25.00%	Analysis 4.16%	Encouragement 4.16%	Value of Response 64.00%	
Encouragement 8.33%	Encouragement 8.33%	Connections 33.00%	Connections 64.00%	Encouragement 8.33%	
Analysis 8.33%	Analysis 33.00%			Analysis 12.50%	
	Connections 25.00%			Connections 25%	

What seems evident is that students did not show significant growth in any of the areas of the rubric. Giving valuable responses to classmates was given as feedback in 50% of cases in the first discussion and in 64% in the fifth discussion. The need for providing encouragement was cited 8.33 % of the time in the first and second discussions and again in the fifth discussion, thereby showing no real growth in attainment of the skill. The question that remains is the cause of this lack of improvement in areas that are clear on the rubric and given in specific feedback to students. Does this indicate lack of achievement or lack of initiative? Does it indicate something deeper, such as a fear or inability to critique a peer’s work with honesty and specificity?

REFLECTIONS

Reflections were written at the end of each of the three classes in which original research was implemented. The reflection was in response to the following prompt:

What are your biggest take-aways from this study? After all the exchange of ideas and your careful look at the data you collected, what did you find? What are the implications and drawbacks of your research?

Take an opportunity to thank each PLC member for the specific feedback they gave you that was helpful. What will YOU take away as a result of what they shared with the group?

In order to show integrity, a depth of analysis and a sense of reflectiveness and self-evaluation grounded in data, a 12 point rubric was used to determine attainment of the skills. In this case, data is still being collected, as the final reflection will not be submitted until the end of the current semester. Table 3 shows the data collected to date.

Table 3

Averages of Data Collected and % of Students Receiving Feedback in Each Area

Reflection 1	Reflection 2	Reflection 3
9.75 / 12	10.00 / 12	Still to be collected
Integrity 25.00%	Integrity 12.50%	Integrity
Depth of Knowledge 50.00%	Depth of Knowledge 37.50%	Depth of Knowledge
Grounded 62.50%	Grounded 37.50%	Grounded
Usefulness of Research	Usefulness of Research 12.50%	Usefulness of Research

As in the prior two data collection areas, the student reflections showed relatively good scores overall. There does seem to be a strong sense of improvement between course one and two, as evidenced by the reduction in student need for feedback in the areas of integrity, depth of knowledge and grounding their narrative in data. I wonder if this ability to be honest and forthright in their reflections is due to the fact that it is focused toward one’s self, rather than to someone else? I wonder if the issue of giving critical feedback to one’s self is less daunting than giving it to a peer?

LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This cohort was a small one separated by location, thus causing mini-groups to develop that stayed in contact both in and outside of class. This likely played some role in the development of stronger alliances between some group members than others, which could have played out in their interaction with one another. Additionally, my anecdotal reflection as the researcher is that this cohort seemed to lack the professionalism and collegiality that has been typically represented by in-service teachers, when compared with other cohorts from previous years in this same program. It might be helpful to go back and score previous cohorts' discussion threads with the newly devised rubrics to compare this intuition.

I believe that this research has not resolved the issue of gaining confidence and capability in producing civil discourse with peers and professional colleagues within the context of an online discussion thread. There is still much to be learned about how to say something with integrity, and how to critique someone's work with the intent of helping her improve her effectiveness or outcomes. I believe that this preliminary research study will advise the creation of a better way to teach and collect feedback on the development of these skills for teachers working in professional teaching communities. I wonder whether embedding more opportunities to teach and practice giving and receiving critical feedback in the hybrid classroom, in order to gain confidence working face-to-face in a professional teaching community, would impact the online skill acquisition positively.

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Note: This is a preliminary look at what will become a full literature review section for a more comprehensive research study that will stem from this initial thinking and pilot set of data collected from the current cohort.

Appendix A

DISCUSSION POST LESSON

* Weekly Objective: Students will apply the lesson from last week to their first discussion thread this week as they post some valuable thoughts about the data collection process to be read by their PLC. There is an element of vulnerability and community involved in the initial sharing of information, as you determine what would be helpful to someone else to discuss and what kind of feedback you might need help with in return.

* MMC Values: Hospitality, Community, Life-long learning

* Assignment: In your classroom, you will be working on your data gathering and your intervention for your research study. You will also enter your first PLC discussion thread this week.

* Explanation: Don't forget to enter dialogue with your PLC this week. I'd like you to really focus on being a helpful critical friend this semester. Your feedback can help your colleagues to get the most out of their intervention study. Here are the things I look for in your discussion **posts**:

1. Completeness of background description you are sharing.
2. Organization and fluency of post.
3. Clarity and specificity when sharing.
4. Expectations, hopes, fears.

Please enter the discussion below, answering the prompt with a new thread. This is due by Sunday night.

Appendix B

Discussion Post Structure	
Background Description	Thoroughly covers all background information so that members of your PLC group can develop informed and relevant discussions regarding your action research plan.
Organization and Fluency	When responding to the discussion prompts, the information is well organized and presented to your peers. The language usage should be professional and be reflective of your education level.
Clarity and Specificity	Discussion posts should be clear and concise. There should be no ambiguity reflected in your post. The posts need to be specific and relevant to the discussion prompt.
Expectations, Hopes and Fears	Expectations need to be genuine. Hopes and fears are there for your PLC to assist. In accordance with the rest, they should be worded professionally yet convey your current understandings.

Discussion Response	
Connections	When responding to a PLC's post, make connections between yourself and their study specific to their post. PLC's are there to assist one another, thus they must show they understand what the researcher is seeking.
Comprehension and Analyzation	PLC members need to take the time to read the discussion post. Responses need to show comprehension of the subject material. The discussion should be highly analyzed to assist in any areas that may need evaluation.
Value	Responses to any discussion posts need to reflect the previous components to be of value to the original author. The goal of each response is to help one another. Responses without value to the original author defeat the purpose of responding to one another.
Encouragement and Support	Encouragement and support need to be genuine and pertinent. It needs to be constructive yet presented in a beneficial way. Once again, our communities operate on mutual understanding and growth. It is all too easy to give criticism and can be difficult to receive it, so take care to be gentle and helpful in the phrasing.

Appendix C

DISCUSSION RESPONSE LESSON

* Weekly Objective: Students will work to comprehend and analyze one another's data collection explanations and give valuable and worthwhile feedback, according to the required elements of the PLC discussion rubric.

* MMC Value: Hospitality, Community, Life-long learning

* Assignment: Continue working on your Intervention and Data Collection according to your methodology timeline. Also, please go back into last week's discussion - this time read and post a response to each member of your PLC.

* Explanation: We are truly working on the connection and growth that is made possible when professionals with expertise in our field give quality feedback on our stated issues and concerns. As a critical friend, you are being asked to do just this: to make connections, spend some time comprehending and analyzing what you are reading, giving feedback that will be helpful and valuable to the author, and giving encouragement and support. When you are responding to a post, I am looking for these things in your response:

1. Personal connection to what they are sharing - how does it fit with your experience, study, coursework, research, etc.

2. Critique or weakness finding - helpfulness of suggestions - it is not just about saying "yay, looks great." It is about challenging and pushing for excellence. What ideas do you have that can support and enhance the study you are reading about? What looks great is part of that, but also questions you might have, or sharing a new thought you had and pushing someone to go further.

3. Critical analysis - how well do you understand what the person is sharing? Is your analysis thorough, correct, complete?

4. Courtesy of response. You can say what you mean in a kind and supportive way.

Be sure to consider this as a rubric for discussion responses as you interact with your classmates. Respond to each person's input in this group forum in a meaningful way. What connections can you make? What are you curious about? Can you think of any suggestions or helpful hints based on your experience? Please do this by Sunday night.

Appendix D

Discussion 1 Prompt:

Data Collection

Your PLC has been set up for encouragement and support. Please talk in this thread about your proposal. What are you seeking to address with this study? Tell about the data collection process here - how was/is the baseline collection? What are your interventions like, what are you looking forward to, expecting, afraid of, dreading . . . Respond to each person's input in this group forum in a meaningful way. What connections can you make? What are you curious about? Can you think of any suggestions or helpful hints based on your experience?

Discussion 2 Prompt:

Findings

As you look at your data, write down the nature of what the results say to you. For instance, what is the mean and range of your quantitative data? Any differences between sub groups, like gender, ethnicity, economic status? What did the participants say in their qualitative data? How can you collect and group by similar responses to create themes? What themes do you see in your own field notes? What changes do you see over time? What questions do you have about the results or the process? Is something missing? How can you display it most effectively? What does the data seem to say when you compare or combine the different tools - field notes compared to student words, compared to quantitative data? Cut and paste some sample visuals into the posts and get feedback from your PLC.

Then respond to each person's post in your PLC - what might you see with your objective eyes that they might have missed? Give some encouragement and some helpful feedback to get them to notice all that the data is saying (or not saying).

Discussion 3 Prompt:

Reflection

What are your biggest take-aways from this study? After all the exchange of ideas and your careful look at the data you collected, what did you find? What are the implications and drawbacks of your research?

Take an opportunity to thank each PLC member for the specific feedback they gave you that was helpful. What will YOU take away as a result of what they shared with the group?

Appendix E

Final Reflection - 3 pt scale for each section	
Integrity	Integrity of response – courage of the honesty of interpretation of learning and ownership of what worked and didn't work
Depth of Analysis	Points for these levels of description (Webb, 2005) 1 - skills and concepts (level 2) – recognizes, demonstrates, provides examples, defines, applies 2 - strategic thinking and reasoning (level 3) – plans and reasons, evaluates, explores, critiques, questions, argues 3 - Metacognition – reflective thinking (level 4) – multifaceted thinking about our thinking, designs, takes risks, synthesizes multiple resources, modifies, creates concrete tangible products, organizes
Grounded in data evidence	Reflection cites own research findings as evidence of the assertions and implications being made
Usefulness of reflection	Student showed understanding of the value of the research/collaboration/data collected and applied that to his/her teaching effectiveness moving forward

Appendix F

RAW DATA

Discussion posts

Discussion Posts						
Participant	Disc 1	Disc 2	Disc 3	Disc 4	Disc 5	Disc 6
1	10	10	7.5 h	10	9 s	
2	10	8 o	10	10	10	
3	10	10	10	10	10	
4	8 os	8 s	10	7.5	4 bos	
5	10	10	10	10	8 bs	
6	9 s	8 h	7.5 h	10	10	
7	9 s	10	10	10	8 bs	
8	9 b	8 bs	10	10	8 bs	
Mean	9.38	9.00	9.38	9.69	8.38	

Discussion responses to PLC members – averaged for each discussion post						
Participant	Resp 1	Resp 2	Resp 3	Resp 4	Resp 5	Resp 6
1	9.3 cv	8.7 a	8.3 ca	6.7 ca	6 av	
2	10	9.3 av	10	9.2 c	10	
3	9.7 v	8.7 ac	10	8.3 c	9 v	
4	7.7 av	8.7 av	9.2 c	10	3 ave	
5	9 v	6.7 cev	8.3 c	7.5 ce	10	
6	7.7 ve	8 cv	9.2 c	7.5 c	9 c	
7	10	8.7 cav	9.2 c	6.7 ca	4 cav	
8	8 av	9.3 c	8.3 c	7.5 c	8 va	
Mean	8.88	8.50	9.06	7.92	7.36	

Reflective analysis of research studies			
Participant	Reflection 1	Reflection 2	Reflection 3
1	10 g	10 dg	
2	12	12	
3	8 ig	10 g	
4	6 igd	4 idgu	
5	9 dg	0 (none)	
6	12	12	
7	10 gd	12	
8	11 d	10 d	
Mean	9.75 / 12	10 / 12	