The Use of Asynchronous Discussion: Creating a Text of Talk

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Abstract

Asynchronous discussion allows students to read and respond "out-of-time." This form of online discussion, as experienced in a college literacy course, creates a text of talk that has the potential to be reflective given the freedom participants have in their response time. However, students often struggle with reflection. Instructors need to structure discussion online so that it becomes a forum for communication as well as critical thinking. They also need to view writing online as both process (discussion) and product (document to be assessed).

Twenty years. That is the time difference that separates the research findings by Durkin (1978-1979) and Pressley (1998). Yet the results are the same. Durkin in 1978 initially reported that teachers did not teach students to comprehend, yet these same students were tested on comprehensio n skills they were expected to acquire. Twenty years elapse, and Pressley comes to the same conclusion after observing fourth and fifth graders. The only difference in variables seems to be the tests on comprehension themselves. Are Durkin's findings still relevant today? Another five years have passed since the last study, so it may be difficult to say. However, after reading the chapter, it seems that Pressley still seems to think so (Farstrup & Samuels, 2002, p. 303). [Referring to instruction in reading comprehension during an asynchronous discussion, this quote is a student's partial response to the question "Are Durkin's findings still relevant today? Explain."]

As an instructor at a rural four year college, I have taught online graduate literacy courses in both elementary and secondary teacher education programs for 6 years. My courses rely heavily upon students' discussion online, and I am interested in the use of asychronous or out-of-time discussion. Because I teach literacy and focus on the English language arts, I am especially interested in this type of online discussion that allows students to read and respond at any time and create a text of talk or a written product of their discussion. Literature that looks at asynchronous discussion as a viable form of discussion or as the creation of a text of talk is scarce. Therefore, this article shares my experiences with asynchronous discussion and embeds them within the context of current teaching and assessment.

In an online course that utilizes asynchronous discussion, students have a password to access the course site on the Internet. Within the course is a structure for asynchronous discussion allowing students to post questions and responses to colleagues, as well as to read what has been posted, as often as they wish. Such postings may be structured by the course instructor as to quantity and quality. For example, in the checklist I have created (see appendix), students were required to meet specific criteria as to quality of response. They were also required to respond at least five times, with three of those times an informal response and two, a reflective response.

An informal response is defined as language in a conversational tone that may be sharing or describing an experience rather than answering the question and making connections to the text, responding positively to a peer's "talk," or asking a question. Figure 1 is an example of a nonreflective, informal response.

During an online discussion for a course on children's literature, a student responded informally to the question, "Compare contemporary realistic fiction and historical fiction. How are they similar? How are they different?" (see Figure 1). This student responded to other students positively. He also described an experience and, while making a point, meandered and did not critically analyze the difference between the two book genres. His response lacked any reflection and its conversational tone would relegate it to the status of an informal response.

A reflective response involves critical thinking and focuses on what students in the classroom may have learned. Such a response also considers possibilities and results in a deeper understanding of the issue. The reflective piece in Figure 2 responded to the question, "Aside from a well-constructed plot, convincing characterization, a worthwhile theme and an appropriate style, what other considerations must guide the evaluation of a well-written fantasy?" This student also positively responded to a colleague. However, she made a connection to the text and, while she shared a classroom experience, she built on that experience by focusing on what her students may have learned.

I require that all five responses occur over a period of 6 days or more. I have found this structuring of time frame to be vital; otherwise, some students post all their responses the day before class, and it is unlikely anyone will read them. I liken this to coming to class when everyone else has left the room.

I have found it possible to mandate a quantity of "talk" through specific assignment criteria noted in the checklist, (see appendix) such as five responses over a minimum of 6 days. However, the facilitation of students' reflective talk has proven to be more difficult.

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------------------------------------------------------------------
Current Forum: Chapter 10: Historical Fiction and MacLeod (E-Reserve: Modern Models
in Historical Fiction") Read 23 times
Date: Wed Nov 19, 2003 9:02 pm
Author: XXXXXX
Subject: Re: Question 1
------------------------------------------------------------------
The responses I've read so far to this question, from Corey and Linda, have been very
informative. You have both done a very good job in distinguishing between
contemporary realistic fiction and historical fiction.
My reasoning behind coming up with this question had to do with a book report that one
of my daughters was working on a couple of months ago. Her teacher had assigned a
"realistic fiction" book report, and my daughter asked me to help her choose a book. To
make a long story short, we picked out three books. They all fit under the "realistic" and
"fiction" categories, but two of them happened to deal with events that happened in the
past. After choosing the books, I did caution my daughter about asking her teacher
which, if any, of the books she could use. As it turns out, the teacher wanted the class to
use "contemporary realistic fiction" books. Before reading the two chapters (9 and 10) of
our text, I was unclear about the distinction between these two genres and, since the
teacher didn't specify, wanted to make sure my daughter had all of her bases covered. I
have found it difficult, at times, being a parent who also happens to be a teacher. I try to
help my children as much as I can, but I also offer the caveat that the way I do things
might be a little different than what their teachers might want them to do, so they should
always defer to what their teacher says. After all, I'm not the one handing out their
grades.
------------------------------------------------------------------
------------------------------------------------------------------
Current Thread Detail:
Question 1 Wed Nov 12, 2003 9:02 pm
Re: Question 1 Sat Nov 15, 2003 11:27 am
Re: Question 1 Sat Nov 15, 2003 2:29 pm
Re: Question 1 Sat Nov 15, 2003 6:57 pm
Re: Question 1 Sun Nov 16, 2003 7:35 pm
Re: Question 1 Tues Nov 18, 2003 11:16 pm
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Figure 1. Example of a nonreflective, informal response.

Over the past 6 years, I have solicited feedback regarding asynchronous discussion in the form of brief surveys given to my students in the online courses I have taught. These are graduate education students, most of whom are practicing teachers. A total of 92 graduate students were surveyed and responded over six semesters. An overwhelming 95% of the students responded positively to the use of asynchronous discussion as a forum for discussion. Although they believed that the criteria to my assessment of their online talk "was very clear and helpful" and "they were evaluated fairly," I am still seeking ways to enhance their reflection and thoughtful responses. Throughout this paper, my students' feedback will be included to support concepts integral to my premise that asynchronous discussion is a viable forum for discussion, especially in facilitating critical thinking skills.

Discussion or "purposeful conversation in which several individuals participate" (Dejnozka & Kapel, 1991, p. 179) has long been a component of learning and understanding. With the advent of computer technology, discussion has also become a major component in online education. Faigley (1992) defined this online "talk" as a hybrid with elements of both written and spoken language. Such discussion may be in real time, as in a "chat room" where students engage in synchronous discussion, or it may be through the use of a "bulletin board," as in asynchronous discussion where students are able to post questions and responses at any time.

Current Forum: Chapter 7: Modern Fantasy and articles (Barron and Rockman)
Read 35 times
Date: Wed November 3, 2004 12:10 am
Author: XXXXX
Subject: Re: Question 3

Mary, I agree with your response to Meghan's question. I too feel that one of the most important considerations is whether or not the author makes the fantasy believable. As Huck cited in our reading, "We call our individual fantasies dreams, but when we dream as a society, or human race, it becomes the sum total of all our hopes. Fantasy touches our deepest feelings...it speaks to the best and most hopeful parts of ourselves..." (308).
Huck also cites that, "...imagination...permits us to give credence to alternative realities" (308). The more believable an author makes a fantasy, the more connections to life a reader will be able to make. Many of you may recall my experiences with the fantasy, Tuck Everlasting from previous classes, but I feel it is worth mentioning again here. Babbitt's story of everlasting life allows children to really explore what the reality of such a concept is by using their imaginations. I was very excited at how well my 5th graders responded to this idea and were able to discuss the pros and cons of this concept passionately in class discussions (during a mock trial of Mae Tuck) and in their written work. The connections that the students were able to make was in fact due to the wonderful imagery that the author used in her writing to help make the story feel real to the reader.

Current Thread Detail:
Question 3 Wed Nov 3, 2004 12 :10 pm
Re: Question 3 Thurs Nov 4, 2004 10:41 am
Re: Question 3 Thurs Nov 4, 2004 9:24 pm
Re: Question 3 Fri Nov 5, 2004 11:04 pm
Re: Question 3 Sat Nov 6, 2004 7:52 am
Re: Question 3 Sun Nov 7, 2004 9:41 am
Re: Question 3 Sun Nov 7, 2004 10:11 am
Re: Question 3 Sun Nov 7, 2004 3:44 pm
Re: Question 3 Tues Nov 9, 2004 5:12 pm
Re: Question 3 Tues Nov 9, 2004 7:33 pm
Re: Question 3 Thurs Nov 10, 2004 10:11 pm
Re: Question 3 Sat Nov 12, 2004 4:21 pm
Re: Question 3 Sat Nov 12, 2004 7:52 pm

Figure 2. Example of a reflective response.

Asynchronous discussion allows for reflective thought and "talk," components valued in effective discussion. These same components make asynchronous discussion more viable than synchronous discussion in fostering higher order thinking, social construction of meaning, and reflection (Collison, Elbaum, Haavind, & Tinker, 2000; Davidson-Shivers, Tanner, & Muilenberg, 2000; Lapadat, 2000).

The literature on reflection within online discussion in the domain of online teaching is scarce. In one study, Lehman, Warfield, Palm, and Wood (2001) examined the online discussion forum in an attempt to help elementary mathematics teachers develop their teaching in ways consistent with reform. Online discussion was found to help them reflect on their own teaching. It also allowed them to see how and what other teachers do and to make connections to their own teaching and understanding of classroom practice.

From data collected through the survey, I found that all of my students agreed. One responded that online discussion "allowed me to hear everyone's ideas. This would never have been possible during a regular class period." Another noted that online discussion "was effectively used because we had time to explore the course information with others, seeing their points of view and hearing other's ideas."

Reflection requires that teachers "look behind our professional facades, and examine our less confident practitioner selves" (Burge, Laroque, & Boak, 2000, p. 84). Reflecting on our practice means observing how we did what we did (analytical), questioning our assumptions, considering new ideas, and determining how well we did what we did (evaluative; see Cowan, 1998). One of the reasons that reflection, although highly touted in professional development, may not be valued or practiced is that it challenges us and may cause discomfort and uncertainty, resulting in what Schon called "restructuring" (1983, p. 35) of what we believe, know, and do.

Burge et al. (2000) conducted a reflective analysis of their personal online professional development enacted completely through online discussions. They found it to be very challenging because "being online meant being on the line, that is, worrying about less-than-perfect participation and feeling susceptible to reduced self-esteem and critical judgments from peers" (p. 95). However, inquiry and reflection may serve as a way to move from defensive reactions and personal positions toward an inner exploration of why these views are held.

In an attempt to place asynchronous discussion within the context of my current literacy teaching and assessment, I will explore this form of discussion with a focus on (a) language and learning from a social constructivist perspective, (b) its use as a forum for communication and critical thinking, and (c) writing online as both process (discussion) and product (document to be assessed).

Language and Learning from a Social Constructivist Perspective

The pedagogical rationale for discussion is best understood from the social constructivist perspective. Oliver and Naidu (1996) claimed that explaining, elaborating, and defending one's position forces learners to integrate and elaborate on knowledge in ways that facilitate higher order learning. Embedded in the social constructivist perspective is the concept that thinking processes and the growth of knowledge result from both personal interactions in social contexts and the appropriation of socially constructed knowledge (Bruffee, 1993; Moll & Greenberg, 1990). This perspective argues that knowledge is created by the individual in an attempt to bring meaning to new information, as well as to integrate this knowledge with the individual's prior experience. Students are then viewed

as participants in the construction of meaning through their interactions with others, with such interactions mediated through spoken and written language. The classroom may be seen as a sociocultural system in which language plays a vital role. In particular, discussion among students on specific knowledge has the potential to motivate inquiry and to create a learning context in which collaborative meaning making occurs (Mason, 1998; Pontecorvo, 1990).

Dialogue and discourse, talk that is oral or written, occurs in the social constructivist classroom and has many voices. It is this concept of "multivoice" (Bakhtin, 1981) that characterizes such a classroom. This concept of "multivoice" was noted by my students who appreciated the ability of online discussion as a way for everyone's voice to be heard. "The struggle between different conceptual systems – the speaker's and the listener's – creates new elements and an understanding that differs from what the conversants had before" (Dysthe, 1996, p. 390). If dialogue were to be considered as purposeful online discussion, then the speaker would become the writer, the listener the reader, and due to the number of participants, online discussion would become "multivoiced."

Mason's (1998) descriptive study of the role of oral and written discourse investigated large and small group discussion to determine if the sharing of information resulted in a greater understanding of content. Results indicated that the sharing of what participants knew through discussion helped to activate important thought processes. My students agreed, with one responding "at first, I struggled with it (discussion online). But before long, I was very comfortable. It was a wonderful way to explore new ideas."

Mason concluded that both oral and written discourse were "important pedagogical strategies to be promoted for knowledge construction and reconstruction in the classroom" (p. 384). Again my students agreed. Through the use of asynchronous discussion, one noted "I got to 'hear' everyone else's view and ideas. Questions and responses were posed that I never would have even considered." Another said, "I thought it provided insights and a great way to hear of other teachers' actual hands-on practice."

Traditionally used as a tool for thinking and socially negotiating meaning, discussion has become a major online strategy that continues to facilitate the social construction of meaning. Because asynchronous discussion is the online environment that may be best suited to the human interactions so essential to learning (Feenberg, 2001), it will be explored as a forum for communication and critical thinking.

The Use of Asynchronous Discussion

Good discussion, whether in class or online, requires teachers "to facilitate the engagement of students in a dialogical process that produces increasingly sound, well grounded, and valid understanding of a topic or issue" (Lang, 2000, p. 24). As noted earlier, good discussion also moves from a sharing or descriptive content to one of reflection and critical thinking.

Critical thinking may be considered "self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrective thinking" (Scriven & Paul, 2004). It entails careful observation of what is read, heard, or observed followed by a thoughtful, organized analysis that results in a logical, reasoned response.

Davidson-Shivers et al. (2000) examined how graduate students participated in both synchronous and asynchronous discussion. They found that, although students enjoyed both forms of online discussion, asynchronous discussion provided an opportunity for

them to give reflective, thoughtful responses to posed questions and to provide insightful reaction to others' opinions and ideas.

Comparing asynchronous and synchronous discussion, Bhattacharaya (1999) also found that learners preferred asynchronous discussion because it gave them an opportunity to read and craft responses and to reflect and be better able to think critically before responding. My students agreed, with one declaring "I like the asynchronous discussion because it gave me time to really consider the material and think about my response." Another stated, "I like this style of discussion more than a 'chat' session. I found myself thinking deeply about my responses and responding more from both my experience and my own knowledge."

Discussion is more than crafted responses, and asynchronous discussion has the capacity to allow for both informal and formal or reflective talk. The latter follows a set of established criteria, and in my courses is focused on what I term "finished reflective pieces." However, because discussion is a form of communication, informal talk should also be allowed. For example, the informal talk in Figure 3 responded to the online question, "How do you/will you promote the use of nonfiction in the classroom?"

Although this response does not critically answer the question, it allows peers to share their expertise and experiences within the framework of an asynchronous discussion. This type of response does receive some credit because it documents the student's presence and participation online. It also provides a greater range of online talk.

I require students to respond at least three times in an informal manner, including some sharing of information or experiences, asking of questions, or simply noting how they appreciated what someone else had said. Some other examples of such talk include the following. One student noted online, after exploring a specific Web site a peer had posted, "This is really a great website! I couldn't believe all the information available. It will be very useful. Thanks for sharing it."

Another student responded to a peer's talk about the importance of teaching to students' needs, especially those for whom English is a second language (ESL):

> Jodi's sensitivity and awareness of issues regarding ESL students are to be highly commended. There are so many strategies and concepts that ESL teachers would love to share with their colleagues. By cooperating and forming partnerships with ESL teachers and having them share their expertise in the teaching of ESL, teachers can greatly benefit from their newly acquired knowledge and in the process help their students who come from different linguistic backgrounds.

Although clear and supportive, this is still an informal, uncritical response. It does not note specific examples of ESL strategies and concepts and fails to analyze how the partnership's ESL teachers form with other teachers may benefit each. Compare this response to the response in Figure 4. In a children's literature course, while discussing contemporary realistic fiction, specifically survival stories, a student validated a peer's response but also asked a question that raised the discussion to a level beyond sharing.

In this reflective response, the writer took the class from a point they knew ("survival is basic instinct") and challenged them with a thought-provoking question. She analyzed the concept of survival and considered new possibilities.

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Current Forum: Chapter 11: Nonfiction, Chapter 12: Biography, and Giblin ("Ask the
Author", "Issue to Consider") Read 28 times
Date: Mon Dec 1, 2003 8:56 pm
Author: XXXXXXX
Subject: Re: Chapter 11 Question 1
-------------------------------------------------------------------
Wendy, in regards to your request for non-fiction titles for the fourth grade level, I have
a few suggestions. I teach fourth grade, but my concentration is in social studies.
However, I recently discovered that the "Magic School Bus" series now consists of
chapter books, some dealing with the science curriculum in fourth grade. Two topics
that come to mind are electricity and magnetism. They are leveled at 3rd grade which
is excellent because we all know that at each grade level, we have readers at above,
on-level, and below level.
In addition, I recommend a catalog I use to order non-fiction from school called
Sundance. There are several options available at varying levels. I hope this helps.
-------------------------------------------------------------------
-------------------------------------------------------------------
Current Thread Detail:
Chapter 11 Question 1 Mon Dec 1, 2003 8:56 pm
Re: Chapter 11 Question 1 Fri Dec 5, 2003 6:48 pm
Re: Chapter 11 Question 1 Sat Dec 6, 2003 9:47 am
Re: Chapter 11 Question 1 Sat Dec 6, 2003 11:06 am
Re: Chapter 11 Question 1 Sat Dec 6, 2003 8:04 pm
Re: Chapter 11 Question 1 Sat Dec 6, 2003 8:47 pm
Re: Chapter 11 Question 1 Sat Dec 6, 2003 9:18 pm
Re: Chapter 11 Question 1 Sun Dec 7, 2003 1:18 pm
Re: Chapter 11 Question 1 Sun Dec 7, 2003 4:28 pm
Re: Chapter 11 Question 1 Sun Dec 7, 2003 7:56 pm
Re: Chapter 11 Question 1 Fri Dec 12, 2003 9:04 pm
Re: Chapter 11 Question 1 Sat Dec 13, 2003 9:39 am
Re: Chapter 11 Question 1 Sat Dec 13, 2003 4:19 pm
Re: Chapter 11 Question 1 Sat Dec 13, 2003 7:02 pm
Re: Chapter 11 Question 1 Sat Dec 13, 2003 7:37 pm
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Figure 3. Example of informal talk.

Another example of online talk that exhibits attributes of critical thinking is the response to the question "What is schema theory? Explain why it is important to the reading process?" (see Figure 4). This student responds to a peer with some positive feedback. She then continues to build on the concept of schema theory, making specific connections to the text and analyzing the issue clearly from the point of view of the classroom teacher. Her language is professional, yet accessible and provides some general guidelines for other teachers.

Current Forum: Chapter Five Discussion: Building the Background Knowledge of Students Read 18 times
Date Tues Oct 19, 2004 11:11 am
Author: XXXXXXXX
Subject: Re: Question 1-Schema theory

You did an excellent job of explaining what schema theory is. I like the way that chapter five discusses schema as a "mental blueprint." As each child acquires new information, this knowledge is organized by linking this new information with previously learned knowledge. This shows just how important building prior knowledge is for all people. In order to gain new knowledge, students must build on the knowledge they already have. If there is no knowledge to be used as a basis, it is up to teachers to supply this new knowledge.

In chapter five, the importance of "connecting the intent of words to what is already stored in one's schemata (eye to brain)" was called real reading. In thinking about this, I realized how true this was for all students. By simply seeing or saying words, the students will not be truly taking in new knowledge. Instead, students must connect these words with their own mental blueprint or things they already know. This takes learning from a surface level to a more engaging, reflective level.

Encouraging students to tap into their prior knowledge and helping them build knowledge if it is lacking, is essential if we expect students to be successful with reading. Schemata allows students to experience success in the content areas if it is organized in a way that allows them to access previous experiences easily. This is where teachers must step in. In order for students to organize schemata, teachers must build on what students already know and provide information for those students who have limited experiences.

Current Thread Detail:
Question 1-Schema theory Tues Oct 19 2004 11:11 am
Re: Question 1-Schema theory Wed Oct 20, 2004 7:15 am
Re: Question 1-Schema theory Fri Oct 22, 2004 4:24 pm
Re: Question 1-Schema theory Sat Oct 21, 2004 10:28 am
Re: Question 1-Schema theory Sat Oct 21, 2004 1:56 pm
Re: Question 1-Schema theory Sun Oct 22, 2004 7:46 pm

Figure 4. Example of reflective response.

I have found that one of the main benefits of asynchronous discussion lies in the fact that this forum for talk may be used at the students' convenience – any time, any place. Another benefit is the time possible for students to reflect and compose a response. Time for reflection has the potential for more critical and thoughtful responses. The text of talk, as documented online, indicates that increased student participation and a written record are other benefits for the class, as well as the instructor. One of my students stated, "It's easier to express your ideas online. I don't think people are as willing to talk face to face." This reaction to the use of asynchronous discussion indicates that writing may allow some students to take more risks and be more expressive than talking with peers in a traditional classroom.

However, the increasing shift from the traditional classroom to an online format poses enormous challenges to both instructors and learners.

The concept of the classroom where students meet to interact with other learners and the instructor no longer exists. The instructor can no longer 'look' around the room to see if students are attending to the material, bored, or confused. (Misanchuk, Anderson, Craner, Eddy, & Smith, 2000, p. 300)

In fact, the natural social outlet of the classroom where learners engage with peers is replaced by the computer screen. If a student does not actively participate in the online discussion, he does not exist. Therefore, student participation is vital not only for the sharing of ideas and reflection, but also for validation of each student's membership in the classroom community.

Also inherent in this isolation is the need for self-motivation. My students were very aware of this, stating, "Self-monitoring challenges me because when I am home, I tend not to think of school until one or two days before class." Another student discussed her difficulty at times in understanding what was being asked and even discussed. She noted, "But after I would reread the text, the question and discussion would make more sense." A third student said, "I had to motivate myself to get on the computer all the time," adding, "It made me grow as a person."

Through my own experiences and through feedback received from my students, I have found other disadvantages of asynchronous discussion. These may include

- An initial adjustment to discussion online.
- Difficulty in discussion closure.
- Heavier student and instructor workload.
- Lack of face-to-face contact.

This latter concern seemed especially important to my students. One said she was challenged by "the lack of personal contact and the opportunity to get immediate feedback as compared to traditional classroom discussion."

Klemm (2000) noted several more disadvantages: Students may not realize the purpose or the importance of online discussion; students do not know what constitutes "good input," and their talk is trivial, shallow, or repetitive. In my courses, students also complained about the repetition inherent in asynchronous discussion. One noted, "At the beginning of the course, I really enjoyed the online discussion because it gave me a chance to read and share my ideas and also to hear others. As class went on, it got old, and things were being said over and over again."

Klemm (2000) stated that, as in oral discussion, a few people may dominate the discussion. I have found that, because my requirements are specific and because students may skim or skip responses, domination of the discussion by a few is not a problem. Klemm also mentioned that some students may "lurk," meaning they only read but do not contribute. Unfortunately, students may believe they are participating because they are reading others' responses, but without responding, they are effectively walking past the classroom and only looking in. My students felt this lack of response sharply, and one lamented "I personally was disappointed because very few people responded to me."

In an attempt to resolve some of these problems, I have begun to share good models of reflective talk, as well as a checklist (see appendix) to create clearer expectations. I have also required more questions and more open-ended questions to be posted by the students facilitating the discussion. For example, with a class of 10 students, five or six questions for each discussion are adequate. However, when the class size increases to 15

or more students, I have found that at least 10 questions are needed. Examples of questions from the graduate literacy course, Foundations of Developmental Reading, include the following:

- "How does the assertion made by the Commission on Adolescent Literacy of the International Reading Association contrast with how adolescents are currently taught?"
- "Discuss the importance of Gray's research concerning content area reading in middle and high school."
- "What qualities do metacognitvely sophisticated readers possess?"
- "Why is constructivism the theoretical perspective taken in this chapter?"

To help online instructors create and sustain quality discussion, Collison et al. (2000) offered insights into negotiating discussion through an asynchronous format. They said that by writing their thoughts participants in the discussion are more aware of the need for clarity and reflection. I discovered just this in my experience with asynchronous discussion. I found that students tend to write more formally because they are acutely aware that their written responses will be read by both the instructor and their peers. Also, they are able to reread and, consequently, revise their own work for clarity in communication.

To have a successful discussion, the instructor must not only build a community online, supporting a culture of respect, but a reasoned discourse must be cultivated. Such a discourse needs to support the cognitive, using feelings and opinions as a foundation. One of the most common concerns my students had with asynchronous discussion was that "classmates would do their required postings and that's it. The purpose was for the discussion but it was very dry." Another noted, "At times, the responses were difficult to write, especially when the discussion became mundane." However, this type of discussion may be due to the topic or writer knowledge and experience rather than the forum for discussion.

Rourke and Anderson (2002) stated that asynchronous discussion allows students to consider others' contributions and to compose responses that are appropriate and coherent. Research supports this act of encoding and communicating ideas through computer technology, which forces cognitive processing and a coherence directly aligned with effective communication (Daley, 2002; Feenberg, 1998; Logan, 1995). In fact, Lapadat (2000) investigated the idea that asynchronous online discussion may be well suited to fostering critical thinking, social construction of meaning, and shifts in perspective. After teaching four online courses in three different versions and topics and analyzing the results of a discourse analysis of the discussions, Lapadat's findings supported her original ideas about the unique potential of online discussion-based courses as learning environments.

However, other studies (Harrington & Hathaway, 1998; McLoughlin & Luca, 2000) reported that most online discussion consists of sharing and comparing information, with little evidence of critical analysis or higher order thinking. Such findings serve to remind us that it is not the technology itself but the manner in which it is applied that is most critical. As teaching and learning become more dependent upon computer technology, educators must consider how to facilitate effective online discussion.

Writing Online as Process and Product

The goal of academic discussion is usually to engage students in a conversation that enhances their understanding of an idea. In asynchronous discussion, this goal may be extended to include a well-written critical response. Edelson (1998) noted that online discussion relies increasingly upon students' literacy skills, specifically their writing. As an instructor in three graduate literacy programs, I believe that my students' literacy skills, including writing, should be a focus of the course, and this focus on writing skills may be turned to an advantage for all students through the use of asynchronous discussion. For example, the use of asynchronous discussion that allows for time to write may encourage those students who are less confident writers. Students are aware of the social context of a discussion group and perceive other participants as peers (Hrabe, Adamy, Milman, Washington, & Howard, 1998). Therefore, student writing often improves because the writer anticipates that it will be read and responded to by peers. This improvement is in both mechanics and content. Peer and instructor expectations may provide internal motivation for participation as well as good writing, although instructor expectations may be made more concrete through modeling and assessment criteria of the discussion.

Because online discussion has elements of both written and spoken language (Faigley, 1992), it may be viewed as both discussion (process) and a document to be assessed (product). The challenge for educators lies in facilitating and assessing what is being communicated and how such communication is composed. Before online talk can be assessed, however, educators must have a clear sense of the differences and similarities between oral and online discussion.

Hewitt (2000) conducted research exploring the influence of oral and computer-mediated talk on writing in a composition class. Despite many educators' beliefs that computer-mediated-communication (CMC) influences writing positively (Faigley, 1992; Lafer, 1996; Tuman, 1992), she found little empirical evidence that CMC is better than oral talk for either communication or influencing writing. In an attempt to determine whether CMC did influence writing, Hewitt developed a comparative analysis of peer talk occurring in both oral and CMC environments.

In her study of interactive oral and computer-mediated talk, Hewitt (2000) considered the similarities between the two. She found that both online and oral discussion allowed response to the utterances of others, engaged students in the open-endedness of oral talk, and were both dependent upon context. As in written language, CMC tended to be closed and finite, but also could be reread, revised, and proofread before posting. I have found that in allowing students time to reflect before writing, this rereading, proofreading, and revision is especially effective in the format of asynchronous discussion.

Although Hewitt's study found that participants in both environments talked about their writing, the talk had different qualities, dependent upon the media. Her conclusion, "that the medium shapes the talk" (p. 266), revealed that "oral talk was more contextually focused on abstract, global idea development, whereas CMC-generated talk was more focused on concrete writing issues and group management" (p. 266). She believed that, due to the loss of visual and aural clues, one of the roles of online discussion in CMC was to manage the discussion and attempt, through referential language, to provide such clues.

Because my online discussions are structured by specific questions, management and visual or aural clues do not seem to be a problem. These student-generated questions are derived from the readings and edited by the instructor. They provide referential language

and a context as well as a specific content focus. For example, the response in Figure 5 gives a thoughtful and critical look at questioning ("What should teachers keep in mind when asking questions for reading comprehension?")

Current Forum: Chapter Six Discussion: Assisting Comprehension
Read 20 times
Date: Wed Oct 29, 2003 8:17 pm
Author: XXXXXXXX
Subject: Re: Question three

Questioning is an important tool for teachers and is a necessary skill for students. In a process-oriented approach to comprehension, teachers can model through examples and guidance how to ask questions and how to answer them. Students who generate their own questions have a deeper understanding of the material and learn to think about their own thinking (metacognition).
The act of generating questions helps aid in comprehension as the student has to organize their thoughts about the subject and put it in his or her own words. Higher-level questions can be modeled and encouraged as students are asked to use information in a new situation or to break down and classify information. Relating to the affective domain also helps in comprehension as students are asked how do you feel about or how does this make you feel? Teachers can model that it is important to accept more than one answer to a question and to ask for answers to why questions. Questioning at increasing cognitive levels and the sharing of different points of view helps to relate knowledge to the lives of our students.

Current Thread Detail:
Question three Wed Oct 29, 2003 8:17 pm Re: Question three Wed Oct 29, 2003 10:08 pm Re: Question three Thurs Oct 30, 2003 7:02 am Re: Question three Thurs Oct 30, 2003 9:55 pm Re: Question three Sat Nov 1, 2003 10:38 am Re: Question three Sat Nov 1, 2003 1:34 pm
Re: Question three Sat Nov 1, 2003 1:56 pm
Re: Question three Sun Nov 2, 2003 5:34 pm Re: Question three Sun Nov 2, 2003 8:33 pm

Figure 5. Example of a thoughtful response.

This writer focused on the relevant concepts in questioning and related them thoughtfully to applications for both teachers and students. Her use of educational terms and her move from general to specific indicates a clear understanding of the issue that was communicated in her writing.

Although students are able to participate in asynchronous discussion outside of specific time and place, freeing them to consider and compose more complete responses, Hewitt believed the end result may lack the "immediacy of oral conversation" (p. 283). Peer talk may be posted but never receive a response. Due to this lack of an interactive environment, the self-generation of ideas suffers. Hewitt (2000) suggested that software that organizes talk by subject matter may help to "unthread the multivocal tapestry" (p. 284) she found frustrating for so many students.

During asynchronous discussion, while one individual responds to another's comment, the computer may keep posting others' comments. Therefore, participants in this type of discussion do not need to take turns. This "multiple-threaded discussion" (LaGrandeur, 1997, p. 19), similar to what Hewitt found so frustrating for her students, erases power structures because it is able to go beyond the limits set for traditional oral discussion. LaGrandeur (1997) considered what may happen when a machine, teachers, and students are all "spliced" into one system and noted that traditional approaches are no longer valid. However, as students become more computer literate and more familiar with nontraditional approaches such as asynchronous discussion, the challenges of the "multi-threaded discussion" and the "multivocal tapestry" may diminish.

Because written discourse has the potential to promote and support thinking and the construction of knowledge (Emig, 1977; Langer & Applebee, 1987), asynchronous discussion is especially powerful in allowing students to construct new shared knowledge. Lacking visual and aural clues, explicitness (such as a framework based on content questions) is required for effective written communication, and the very nature of writing as an active process makes it an effective tool for shaping and sharing thoughts. Gaddis, Napierkowski, Guzman, and Muth (2000) found that online discussion created an increased awareness of students' writing. Their text of talk served as a forum for discussion but also provided a document for reference and assessment. The visible evidence of a script that provides evidence of sharing, reasoning, and arguing in group discussion enables students to understand that knowledge is socially and culturally constructed.

Conclusion

Because thinking processes and the growth of knowledge result from social interactions, as well as socially constructed knowledge (Bruffee, 1993; Moll & Greenberg, 1990), the social constructivist perspective provides a pedagogical rationale for discussion. Specifically, student discussion has the potential to motivate inquiry and create a learning context in which collaborative meaning making occurs (Mason, 1998; Pontecorvo, 1990).

My own experiences with asynchronous discussion have helped me to understand this more clearly because I have found that such discussion provides a text of talk offering a documentation of students' reflections and scaffolding. My students brought their experiences as writers, students, and teachers to the discussion and created a learning context centered around their ideas, their knowledge, and the specific topics discussed.

Asynchronous discussion as opposed to synchronous discussion is often preferred by students (Bhattacharaya, 1999; Davidson-Shivers et al., 2000) because the former provides an opportunity for them to read, reflect, and then respond. In addition to this opportunity for reflection before responding, I have considered other key differences between in-class (traditional) discussion and asynchronous discussion. A major component of the latter, as noted earlier, is the documentation of student talk. This "text of talk" provides instructors the unique opportunity to assess what has been written and students the unique opportunity to read what they, as well as their peers, have written as many times as they wish.

In the traditional classroom, discussion is often dominated by the instructor or a few students. The nature of asynchronous discussion allows all voices to be heard because (a) students are usually required to respond and their participation can be easily documented and (b) those who may be intimidated by speaking in front of their peers or those who need more response time are more easily able to participate.

Such an online format seems to provide a safety net for many students. They are able to be more expressive due to the nature of this out-of-time discussion, and many may take more risks with their talk because they are physically distanced from their listeners.

One concern I have with the use of asynchronous discussion is how to facilitate and assess students' critical thinking. There is often a lack of reflective talk and, in turn, too much shallow or repetitive talk. A number of studies (Collison et al., 2000; Lapadat, 2000; Rourke & Anderson, 2002) offer insights into negotiating thoughtful, reflective discussion. A main argument proposes that, by writing their thoughts, participants in the discussion are more aware of the need for clarity and reflection. Other studies (Harrington & Hathaway, 1998; McLoughlin & Luca, 2000), however, report that online discussion consists of little evidence of critical thinking. My own experience with asynchronous discussion has seen both types of student discussion, prompting me to believe even more in the importance of structure and facilitation when using such a forum. Good discussion should engage students in collaborative meaning making, but the challenge lies with the instructor to facilitate this. Some recommendations offered from my own experience for thoughtful, reflective asynchronous discussion include the following:

- Specific guidelines, checklists, and rubrics regarding acceptable responses.
- Modeling of what constitutes a "reflective piece."
- Well-designed open-ended questions and topics to provide a context for the discussion and to help students stay centered. (I have students create them, and I approve them, usually editing or adding something.)
- Requirement of specific connections made to the readings. (In this way, I am able to get students to pay attention to important people and ideas noted in the text and journal articles.)
- Private note to students who are inappropriate or off topic with their talk.
- Summary or wrap up of the discussion by the instructor or students.
- Accountability. (I assign one quarter to one fifth of students' total grade to their responses online.)

With clear instructor expectations and facilitation of the discussion, online talk has the potential to grow from shallow and sharing to thoughtful and reflective.

Finally, I have considered the challenges of using asynchronous discussion. I believe one of the major challenges is the increased workload for the instructor. Instructors must initially learn the computer program that structures the online discussion. Then they must monitor students' responses. They must assess students' responses, and finally, they must be constantly available to answer questions or clarify assignments.

One of the primary ways in which I have attempted to lighten this workload is to expect and require a high level of responsibility from my students. Specifically, I require them to monitor the online discussion. At the beginning of the course, I have students in a small group select a topic that is aligned with related readings. That group is then responsible for the online questions, monitoring and facilitating the discussion, and crafting a final wrap-up when the discussion has finished. I do not add my voice to the discussion because I have found that when I do all students turn to me and neglect the talk of their peers. I do, however, formally monitor the discussion in three ways:

1. Ensure that the questions are appropriately answered.
2. Take note of the key ideas and concerns that arise from the discussion.
3. Assess each student's online talk according to the checklist (appendix).

As for being constantly available, a concept that seems to have arisen with students' use of email at any time of the day, I inform my students early in the semester that I will respond to their questions within 1 week. If they need an earlier response, they may call me by phone during my office hours. This strategy seems to alleviate their concerns, as well as their expectations for immediate responses.

Another challenge of asynchronous discussion is the need for student participation. Because we do not meet weekly in real time, I expect all students to regularly participate in the online discussion. Their failure to do so is reflected in an assessment of their online talk, whether through lack of responses, lack of reflective responses, or lack of adherence to the timeframe given to responses. (Students usually have 10 to 12 days to respond at least five times, and those responses must span at least a 6-day period.) Since I have incorporated this structure, most students are motivated to participate fully.

As we move into the 21st century, technology plays an increasing role in our lives. It provides educators with more options and possibilities even as we continue to expect quality work from our students. The challenge lies within us – what do we let go and what do we hold fast? Whether or not the traditional (same time/same place) classroom endures, online discussion and other nontraditional approaches to teaching and learning will persist and probably increase. We have an opportunity, through the use of asynchronous discussion, to move our students forward – in technology, in critical thinking, and in modeling the use of nontraditional approaches to teaching and learning.

If asynchronous discussion is used well, that is, if it can become a forum for a sharing of ideas and a scaffolding of students' knowledge as any good discussion should, it has the capacity to increase the quantity and quality of students' online interactions, and it has the potential to improve their discussion, their writing, and their thinking.

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