

# Evaluation of Instructor Knowledge on Structuring and Facilitating Effective Online Discourse

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## Abstract

This study starts with the premise that in an online environment, meaningful discourse drives student learning. Specifically, the contribution of instructor knowledge on structuring and facilitating online discourse and “meaningful” online discourse. Findings from 57 university instructors indicate that instructors need a clearer working definition of “meaningful” online discourse and instructors need to be trained that “meaningful” online discourse does not only occur between themselves and their students’ but can occur between student and student and with course content (i.e. online experts, online guests, etc.).

## Introduction

As online courses become a driving force in delivering course content to students around the country in higher education institutions, many such courses do not meet student or instructor expectations (Carnevale, D., 2000; Carr, S., 2000; Hara, N. & Kling, R., 1999; Inman, E. & Kerwin, M., 1999). The most successful online course experiences for students and instructors depend on the expertise and dedication of a well-prepared online instructor (Ko & Rossen, 1998). Administrators often put pressure on faculty to participate in distance learning and other technology related endeavors and some administrators make the decision to place courses online and faculty are told they will be teaching an online class either one semester prior to doing so or they are told the very semester they are expected to teach it online with little to no professional development in how to do so. Support during the actual process of either developing course materials and/or teaching online is also little to nonexistent. What many online instructors soon find out, whether trained or not, is that online communication, specifically between the instructor and students and between student and student often cause course management issues in an online course because the most significant difference between the online classroom and the traditional classroom environment is communication in the online classroom is primarily through the written word (KCC, 2005).

In a typical online course, much communication revolves around emails and announcements about upcoming due dates and events; overview of the upcoming week's projects and deadlines; assessing student progress in the course, and providing continued encouragement to students, addressing technical problems; and clarifying projects. Communication normally occurs between students primarily via email regarding course material and due dates, group work, and personal issues. Additionally, some students also communicate on discussion boards and in virtual classrooms. Often online instructors come to the realization that this type of communication between the instructor and students and among students themselves, while necessary to manage the course, is not true "meaningful" discourse and does not drive learning. Without adequate training, online instructors often search for help in trying to find a way to remedy the problem but often give up because of the lack of professional development. In addition, online instructors can become frustrated personally with themselves and eventually refuse to teach online again, if they have that option, because they become tired of trying to

improve learning through a full range of media and instructional technology without any support. For those online instructors who do not completely give up, they often reach out to seasoned online instructors to serve as a mentor who can provide support and guidance.

### **Theoretical Framework: *Dialogue/Discourse and Constructivism Explained***

Dixon defines dialogue as,

" . . . a special kind of talk--that affirms the person-to-person relationship between discussants and which acknowledges their collective right and intellectual capacity to make sense of the world. Therefore, it is not talk that is "one way," such as a sales pitch, a directive, or a lecture; rather it involves mutuality and jointness. I do not want to suggest that dialogue is without emotion and passion or that it is without confrontation and challenge. It involves both, but within bounds that affirm the legitimacy of others' perspectives" (1996, p. 24).

The type of dialogue Dixon refers to is often lacking in many traditional course structures. In traditional face-to face classes today, the objectivist view of learning is still alive and well. This view of learning assumes that knowledge can be imparted from teacher to learner through instruction. In distance learning the metaphor of the student being an empty vessel waiting to be filled with knowledge is often used. Teaching and research driven by the objectivist philosophy discourages different views, beliefs, understandings, experiences and "meaningful" dialogue of individuals within the classroom. Students are expected to attend class, listen to lectures, take exams, and complete assignments. Although lectures may be effective in some situations and for some learning styles, their dominance neglects diverse student needs and differences in learning styles (Twigg, 1994). "Current research, though sketchy and preliminary, strongly suggests that college students are generally active, sensing, visual, sequential learners; as opposed to reflective, intuitive, verbal, global learners. Roughly translated, most college students receive instruction by the traditional lecture method, while their learning styles are incompatible with that delivery mode. In short, a disconnect between teaching style and learning style. It is akin to teaching the blind with pictures and teaching the deaf with the spoken word" (SOSU, 2005).

Constructivism which is a theory of learning founded on the premise that, by reflecting on our experiences, we construct our own understanding of the world. In essence, constructivist believes that everyone generates their own "rules" and "mental models," which help us make sense of our experiences. (Joyce & Weil, 1996). Constructivist teaching activities do not simply provide learners with information to memorize for an exam but rather encourage learners to connect that knowledge with preexisting mental models (Novak, 1995). This is quite different than the objectivist philosophy. Constructivist believe in helping learners integrate new ideas into their own familiar model by grounding activities in everyday contexts thus allowing learning to occur through multiple perspectives and encouraging learner collaboration (Jonassen, 1994; Willis, 2000; Montgomery, 1995).

### **Dialogue/Discourse and “Meaningful” Discourse Defined**

A synonym often used in online contexts rather than the word dialogue is discourse. **Discourse** is defined by *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (2005) as;

- Verbal expression in speech or writing,
- Verbal exchange; conversation,
- A formal, lengthy discussion of a subject, either written or spoken, and
- Archaic. The process or power of reasoning.”

In addition, the word “**meaningful**” (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 2005) is defined as;

- Having meaning, function, or purpose,
- Fraught with meaning; significant”.

A definition of “meaningful” online discourse that adopts the constructivist theory of learning follows.

“Meaningful” online discourse is discourse that has meaning, function and/or purpose and engages others in verbal expression (speech or writing) and is open to inquiry and multiple perspectives.

## **Online Discourse and Multiple Perspectives**

Today, the need for constructivist learning strategies is acknowledged in online learning research, including those reported by Monteith and Smith (2001, 119), Hughes and Daykin (2002, p. 217), Sims (2003, p. 88), and Alexander et al (2003, p. 41.). The constructivist views support and encourages learner participation in structured online discussions, collaborative online activities, online assessment, interactive course material, and the changing role of the teacher from a “sage-on-on-the-stage” to a “guide-on-the-side.” Discourse and interaction are two important aspects in online courses. However, upon examination of the literature, online learning is more aligned with the objectivists or traditional teaching style (i.e. lectures) rather than with the constructivist learning style. Instructors spend most of their time uploading their course lecture notes, structuring the course so students can read a textbook followed by reading the instructor’s notes and taking exams, rather than creating opportunities for “meaningful” discourse. With this realization, several questions come to mind about online discourse and traditional notions of teaching in a distance learning environment versus structuring “meaningful” online discourse and constructivism notions of teaching in a distance learning environment which prompted this study.

## **Method**

### **The Case: Context and Setting**

This study was conducted over a period of four weeks at a public affairs university. The University offers more than 150 undergraduate and 43 graduate academic programs and is located in the state’s third largest city. The university serves urban and rural environments.

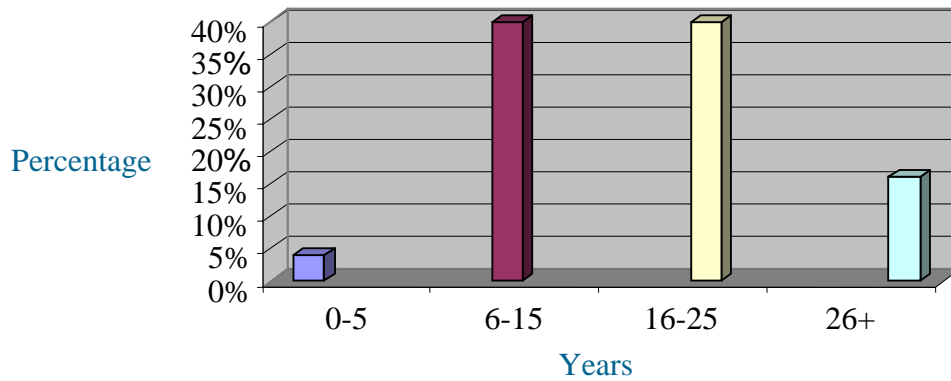
### **Participants**

Seventy-one instructors were included in the total population. These included 37 males and 34 females. A 61% response rate occurred originally. A follow-up one week after surveys were due increased the overall response rate to 81%. Overall, 26 males and 31 females responded. The average respondent was between the ages of 40 to 50 years old. Respondent’s teaching experience ranged from 4 to 37 years.

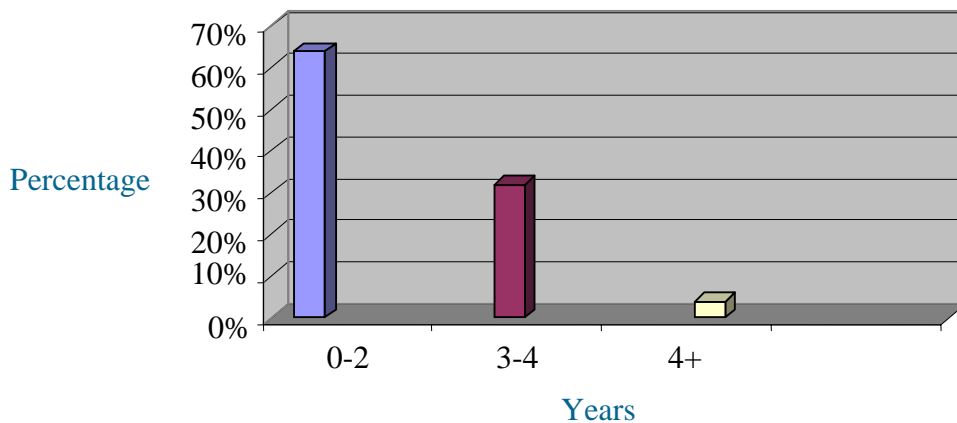
Table 1 shows respondent teaching experience in a traditional face-to-face environment, and Table 2 exhibits respondent experience in teaching online.

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**Table 1: Participant Experience Teaching Face-to-Face**



**Table 2: Participant Experience Teaching Online**



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Respondents also indicated that the average number of credit hours taught in a traditional face-to-face classroom was nine hours. Respondents indicated that the average number of credit hours taught online was three hours. They further indicated that the average number of undergraduate students enrolled in a given section was 26 compared to the average number of

graduate students enrolled in a given section was 15. Respondents further indicated that the average number of online students enrolled in a section was 13.

### *Procedures, Data Collection Methods, and Data Analysis Procedures*

An open-ended, cross-sectional survey was created about online discourse and “meaningful” online discourse after the problem was identified. The names of instructors who teach online were obtained. Writing the survey items occurred next followed by the construction of the questionnaire. The validity of the survey was conducted by:

1. Having each question read for technical accuracy by three outside participants;
2. Reading each question for clarity to avoid any ambiguity and/or confusion by three outside participants; and,
3. By checking for technical accuracy and content accuracy as per commonly used terms in distance learning by two outside participants.

A cover letter was prepared and the survey was sent out with the cover letter to the entire population. Surveys were returned by email and through campus mail. A follow-up letter was sent a few days after the time limit by email with the survey attached again. Marginal tabulations were used to analyze the survey data.

### *Researcher Bias*

After having designed an online course with support given through Continuing Education’s instructional designers, I believed that faculty would be able to define online discourse and “meaningful” online discourse. Additionally, I assumed that faculty would be able to provide one or two good examples of what “meaningful online discourse” is. Lastly, I assumed that instructors “intuitively” or through “professional training” would understand the importance of “meaningful” online discourse in their courses. My findings did not support these assumptions.

## **Findings**

Table 3 reports participant responses to the open-ended questions that were created for the survey. No words were predefined for the participants in an effort to gain an understanding on

what online instructors knowledge really is about online discourse and “meaningful” online discourse. Respondents of the open-ended survey questions indicated on the survey that they knew that online discourse was “online discussion that occurred between instructor and student/s.” However, 48% of respondents identified that they knew nothing about “meaningful” online discourse. Thirty-two percent of the respondents identified that “meaningful” online discourse was related to “instructor/student discussions.”

**Table 3: Results of Open-Ended Survey Questions**

Survey Open-Ended Questions and Responses	Response (Percentage)
<b>How do you define online discourse?</b>	
Online Discussion or online communication.	44%
“Discussion” or “Communication” between the instructor and student.	28%
Strictly technology (i.e. mediated, electronic, or computer-mediated).	12%
Did not know.	16%
<b>How do you define “meaningful” online discourse?</b>	
Did not know.	44%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ “Mediated online communication with students; one-on-one communication;”</li> <li>○ “Where essential conceptual development is advanced.”</li> <li>○ “Meaningful: sustentative, engaging, stimulating, thoughtful;”</li> <li>○ “Communication that expands coursework; i.e. student’s interests.”</li> </ul>	56%
<b>Examples provided of what online discourse is:</b>	
Did not know.	4%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ “Email.”</li> <li>○ “Blackboard discussions.”</li> <li>○ “Discussion between professor and student over course material.”</li> </ul>	96%
<b>Examples provided of what “meaningful” online discourse is:</b>	
Did not know; could not provide an example.	60%
“Everything is meaningful; I do not participate in non-meaningful discourse.” Note: No examples provided.	1%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ “Email.”</li> <li>○ “Clarification of homework grade.”</li> <li>○ “Chat rooms.”</li> </ul>	39%



**Table 3: continued.**

<b>Are there other types of discourse other than “meaningful” that take place in an online course; and if so, provide an example:</b>	
Did not know; could not provide an example.	20%
Unsure.	55%
Yes.	25%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ “Social Visits (8% responded)</li> <li>○ “Emails” (63% responded)”</li> <li>○ “Routine Pleasantries” (29% responded)</li> </ul>	<p>8%</p> <p>63%</p> <p>29%</p>
<b>Do you believe there is a difference in online discourse and “meaningful” online discourse?</b>	
No.	48%
Yes.	32%
Did not know.	20%
<b>Have you been trained in how to conduct “meaningful” online discourse; and if so, was it formally or through your own interest? If formally, please explain specifics.</b>	
No.	80%
Yes; through formal education	20%
<b>If you were not trained in how to conduct “meaningful” online discourse do you believe training would be beneficial before teaching an online course?</b>	
Yes.	32%
No.	40%
Did not know.	28%
<b>Do you believe online discourse is necessary for the online course to be successful as viewed by the instructor? Explain.</b>	
Yes.	24%
No.	68%
Did not know.	8%
<i>Note: No further explanations were given.</i>	

**Table 3: continued.**

<b>Do you believe “meaningful” online discourse is necessary for the online course to be successful as viewed by the instructor? Explain.</b>	
Yes.	24%
No.	68%
Did not know. <i>Note: No further explanations were given.</i>	8%
<b>Do you believe online discourse is necessary for the online course to be successful as viewed by the student? Explain.</b>	
Yes.	44%
No.	40%
Did not know. <i>Note: No further explanations were given.</i>	16%
<b>Is there a difference between facilitating “face-to-face discourse versus online discourse. Explain.</b>	
Yes.	32%
No.	60%
Did not know. <i>Note: No further explanations were given.</i>	8%
<b>Is there a difference between facilitating “face-to-face discourse versus “meaningful” online discourse? Explain.</b>	
Yes.	24%
No.	60%
Did not know. <i>Note: No further explanations were given.</i>	16%

Respondents were asked one concluding question and that was, “From your own personal experience please describe how you facilitate “meaningful” online discourse and the type of online environment that is conducive to such facilitation.” Respondents provided the following examples as how to facilitate “meaningful” online discourse:

- “Technology must be user friendly and work.”

- “Respond back to emails so students don’t complain.”
- “I try and respond back to questions thoroughly.”
- “In any environment, it is up to the individual to ask questions. It is up to the student to take the initiative to do so.”
- “I encourage students to participate.”
- “I respond back to them.”

## Conclusions

This study examines instructor knowledge on structuring and facilitating online discourse and “meaningful” online discourse. Having completed the study, I found that faculty were able to define discourse but were not so readily able to define “meaningful” discourse beyond the typical response of “mediated online communication,” “one-on-one communication,” “engaging,” “stimulating,” or the word “meaningful” itself. Examples of online discourse were primarily defined as “email,” or “Blackboard discussions” or “discussions between the professor and student.” Participants, 60%, did not know and could not provide an actual example of what “meaningful” online discourse was; however 39% believe it was “clarification of homework grades.” Overall, faculty had a difficult time distinguishing between what is online discourse and what is “meaningful” online discourse by either defining either or by providing an actual example of either. With the 80% of the overall participants having taught a minimum of 6-25 years in a traditional face-to-face classroom, the findings of this study indicated also that even “intuitively” or through “professional training” as a traditional face-to-face instructor they did not understand the importance of “meaningful online discourse. In reviewing and analyzing the data, this case study indicates that the following recommendations should be considered to ensure “meaningful” online discourse is implemented in distance learning courses:

- The field of distance learning needs a clear working definition of what “meaningful” online discourse is, to include discourse that is:
  - Course management related;
  - Content related;

- Social interactions related;
- Trainers/Instructional designers need to make sure that instructors who will/are teaching online (either web-supported or completely) understand what “meaningful” online discourse is because many instructors (i.e. faculty, lecturers, per-course, etc.) are not exposed to everyday “jargon” in the distance learning field.
- Trainers/Instructional designers need to help online instructors create one or two good questions, as an example of how to elicit “meaningful” online discourse that could be used as a template for creating their own.
- Online instructors need to know how “meaningful” online discourse will benefit *themselves* and their *students* in an effort to aid in student learning and retention and to gain buy-in from instructors in an effort to spend the much needed time it takes to create this type of environment...
- Online instructors need to be trained that “meaningful” online discourse does not only occur between themselves and their students’ but can occur between:
  - student and student; and,
  - Course content (i.e. online experts, online guests, etc.)
- Replicate Survey to gain a better understanding of what online instructors knowledge is to ensure and promote quality online courses.

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