

Guidelines for Online Course Moderation and Community Building from a Student's Perspective

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Abstract

This study examines students' responses to questions about how online interactions and community building should be used in online courses. Four categories and 10 suggested guidelines emerged from the data. The categories were *Student Needs*, *Instructor Behavior*, *Assignments* and *Community Building*. The top three guidelines include 1) creating an environment that allows students to share, feel safe & respected, 2) using synchronous interaction and group assignments and model interactions, and 3) asking thought-provoking/probing questions. The responses are presented by frequency within each category. Since student responses were open-ended there are numerous additional guidelines offered.

Keywords: guidelines for online courses; student moderation; community building; online interaction; online learning; student perspective

Introduction

Online courses have been around for about 20 years. According to Allen and Seaman (2013) who have been conducting research about trends in online learning "(...) in 2002, less than one half of all higher education institutions reported online education was critical to their long term strategy. That number is now close to seventy percent." (p.4) With this change, research about higher education and K-12 online learning issues has also grown. Research has been conducted about student perception of various aspects and contexts of online learning such as online learning experience in general (Jochum, 2013; Palmer, & Holt, 2008; Phelan, 2012; Safar, 2012), teacher's role (Lee, 2011), size of discussion groups (Hamann, Pollock & Wilson, 2012), assessment techniques (Jin & Peck, 2013) interactions in language classes (Çelik, 2013; Jochum, 2013) and cultural differences (Lee, 2010; Fujuan, Nabb, Aagard & Kim, 2010; Xiaojing, Shijuan, Seung-hee & Magjuka, 2010). This research provides some useful contextualized information.

The research in this article is based on student perception of what elements they think are key in providing a successful online course and in particular facilitating it and building community. Perhaps the major difference between the students in this study and others was that the topic of the course they were enrolled in was how to teach online. Students spent an entire course studying, thinking about and discussing many aspects of online teaching. They were in the business of

developing what they thought are best practices based on taking this course and on their experiences in both face-to-face and online courses.

At the end of a course about online teaching, student's perception was that instructors teachers shared their opinions about what is important for an instructor to attempt to do to make sure student needs are met, that their assignments and behavior as an instructor promote learning and they also indicate their approach and interest in community building.

Why are the elements mentioned in this article important to the business of online learning? They are important because students who are immersed in thinking about online teaching and learning can provide useful guidelines for current and future online instructors. It may be useful for instructors to conduct a self-assessment to see if they meet the standards shared by these teachers in training.

Literature Review

Examination of student's perceptions of what instructors should offer in online courses seems to be consistent in various contexts. Lu (2011) found that in a class with multi-cultural enrollment that student's perception was that instructors needed to have an affective and differentiating role along with pedagogical, managerial and technical role. In the context of examining a learning management system student perception of important aspects of online courses included online discussions, contacting instructors and receiving feedback (Palmer & Holt, 2010).

In comparing small and large group discussions both face-to-face and online Hamann, Pollock and Wilson (2012) wrote that students indicated "...online discussions to be best suited for expressing thoughts, rethinking values, and applying learned material to new issues." (p. 72). Participation in discussions is a complex process in which people can learn by communicating and interacting with each other. This process, that can occur both online and offline, depends on the actions, thoughts, feelings of belonging and maintenance of relations of all involved (Hrastinski, 2008). Hrastinski (2009) argues that online participation drives online learning and that "include[s] spending more time synthesizing and integrating ideas and concepts, and promotion of problem solving, critical and active thinking skills." (p. 79) Bender (2003) adds that online discussions allow students to share richer and deeper perspectives and the process surpasses the temporal and spatial constraints of face-to-face classes. But building online interactions is a challenging task and there is no "blueprint for building the perfect interaction." (Nuriddin, 2011, p. 32) Online teaching requires a special set of skills and attitudes from the instructor that are different from the ones expected from a classroom teacher (Rose, 2012). Mishra & Juwah (2006) write about the need for teachers to improve their ability to manage time and improve skills to facilitate online discussions as their roles, in these environments, shift "from 'sage on the stage' to 'guide on the side'." (p. 167) Regarding online interaction, the instructor needs to encourage participation and create a positive learning environment through assignments and activities that help model the interaction (Thormann, 2012). Online interaction also implies the existence of an online learning community consisting of a group of people with similar goals that communicate and develop a sense of connectedness and trust through collaboration (Du, Liu, & Brown, 2010, Thormann & Zimmerman, 2012). This communication and collaboration can be done through discussion boards which are one of the features of Course Management Systems (CMS) or Learning Management Systems (LMS). According to Rabbany, Elatia, Takaffoli, & Zaiane (2014) online asynchronous discussions play an important role in collaborative learning and promote independence by providing a fertile ground for interaction as well as much information that instructors can use to improve their work. Discussion-based online interaction is primarily text based (O'Keefe, 2008) and usually involves moderation by an instructor. However, the moderating role may be assigned to students depending on the course design and as a way for students to pay increased and sustained attention to aspects related to the performance of their new role (Wills, Leigh, & Ip, 2011; Thormann, 2008) This constitutes an experience that the Wills et al (2011) call 'Moderating role-based in distance learning'. According to these authors this type of online moderation involves:

- developing a personal style as a moderator;
- helping participants shift focus from "being a participant" to "being a learner";
- knowing how to operate flexibly when controlling the learning process;

- working with educational teams in varied learning environments;
- being knowledgeable about the design when the designer was someone else;
- understanding the importance of specific content knowledge;
- knowing how to adopt a role, if the role play needs moderation from an authentic stance, either from behind the scenes or from in front;
- understanding and communicating the rules of the role play;
- anticipating what “might go wrong” and being suitably prepared. (p.133)

Allowing students to assume the role of moderator reinforces a collaborative constructivist approach. Anderson and Garrison (1998) state that the construction of meaning is promoted by this approach because it encourages student responsibility through sharing control of learning. Online learning also depends on participation in discussions (Fidalgo, 2012; Morris, Finnegan, & Wu, 2005) and research on this subject is important to building an understanding of the online teaching and learning process.

The importance of community building was another focus of our study. According to Wells, Chang, & Maher (1990) cited by Matusov, Hayes, & Pluta (2005) a learning community is “(...)an academic community of inquiry that grounds inquiries and dilemmas emerging in their practice in an academic discourse based on considering alternatives and providing argumentation and evidence for their claims.” (p.17) The importance of building a community of learners is mentioned by Watkins (2005) and West (2010) when they wrote that student engagement, respect for diversity, intrinsic motivation, and higher learning outcomes can be encouraged and promoted by learning communities. This idea is also reinforced by Wilson, Cordry, & King (2004): “By creating a comfortable learning online community through online learning, student satisfaction with online course availability could continue to grow at an explosive and successful rate creating new opportunities for more students to participate in desired academic development.” (p.21)

This study aims to contribute to the available knowledge about strategies for online moderation and to help build a more comprehensive framework on this subject. Toward this end, guidelines are shared for effective and quality online interactions as well as community building.

Research Question

The research question was: What did graduate students who were enrolled in an online course about teaching online find most valuable about online moderation and community building?

Setting

For this study the responses given for a culminating assignment of five sections of an elective online course titled *ECOMP 6201 Online Teaching: Introduction to Design and Practice* were analyzed. The courses were taught from Fall 2012 to Fall 2013 at Lesley University in Cambridge, Massachusetts and were taken by a total of 60 students. The culminating assignment included answering four questions about moderating online discussions and community building.

The course was designed to introduce online teaching to educators. Using a constructivist approach, the pedagogy and best practices for teaching and learning online were explored. Readiness surveys about learning online and addressing needs of diverse learners were investigated. An understanding of professional standards and using various online tools were examined. Building a learning community and facilitating discussions were practiced. For some period during the course, each student served as a discussion moderator.

The questions posed for the culminating assignment addressed what students learned about moderating discussions by doing it and from observing classmates and the instructor. They were asked what their plans for discussions in their own courses would be and also their thoughts about the importance of community building (See Appendix for questions).

The first question addresses an assignment that all students were required to do during the course. Groups of two or three students were required to moderate a weekly discussion on a forum on Blackboard. The instructor modeled moderating forum discussions for the first two weeks of the

course. After that students took over the primary responsibility of moderating for the last six weeks of the course.

The students' moderator role was as follows:

- a. Focus the discussion on course content and encourage new ideas;
- b. Initiate further discussion through questions or observations;
- c. Find unifying threads and communicate them;
- d. Draw attention to opposing perspectives, different directions, or conflicting opinions and encourage debates;
- e. Summarize and post a report about the discussion by restating the ideas and controversies, as well as clarifying misconceptions. The summary serves to pull ideas together. (Thormann, Gable, Fidalgo, & Blakeslee, 2013:6)

The remaining three questions for the final assignment were based on the experiences students had during this and prior courses in addition to required readings about facilitating online discussions.

Participants

The five courses were taken by a total of 60 students representing a nationwide sample of convenience of K-12 educators in the United States, earning a Master's degree in Educational Technology. The first course was taught in the Fall of 2012 and had 14 students, while the second and third courses were taught in the Spring of 2013 and had 11 and 12 students respectively. The final two courses were taught in the Fall of 2013, one class had 12 and the other 11 students. Students had completed between four and ten online courses for their 11 course Master's degree program. The instructor, who has taught online courses since 1996, was the same for the five courses. The course was an elective within the Master's degree program.

Ethical Considerations

The researchers did not consider conducting this study until several months after the last class was completed. No changes were made to the course to accommodate this research. Thus students were not subjected to a course with an experimental design that might have affected their learning or performance in any way. No student names and/or identifying information are revealed in this study.

Data Analysis Procedure

A conventional content analysis of the students' responses to the final assignment was conducted to avoid preconceived categories. Although content analysis can be applied both in qualitative and in quantitative research (Bardin, 2009) the researchers of this article chose to focus on a qualitative content analysis because "(...) it pays attention to unique themes that illustrate the range of the meanings of the phenomenon rather than the statistical significance of the occurrence of particular texts or concepts" (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p. 2). According to these authors, this approach "(...) usually produces descriptions or typologies, along with expressions from subjects reflecting how they view the social world" (p. 2). At the same time frequencies of common student responses to confirm recurring trends and themes were also tallied.

The responses to the questions on the final assignment were submitted in three formats. Forty-three were submitted with MSWord, 16 in PowerPoint and one in Prezi. Tables 1 and 2 describe the formats and the number of pages or slides that were submitted and analyzed.

Table 1

Pages of MSWord documents submitted

	# of documents with 1, 2, 3 4 & 6 pages	Total # of pages
One page	4	4
Two pages	13	26
Three pages	20	60
Four pages	5	20
Six pages	1	6
Totals	43 documents	106 pages

Table 2

Slides of PowerPoint & Prezi submitted

	# of PowerPoint & Prezi with 4 through 11 slides	Total # of slides
4 slides	1	4
5 slides	1	5
6 slides	4	24
7 slides	4	28
8 slides	2	16
9 slides	1	9
10 slides	3	30
11 slides	1	11
Totals	17 PPT & Prezi	127 slides

Each student's assignment was read and the most frequent ideas presented were singled out and common themes across all assignments were identified. In addition, four categories emerged. Assignment length was not prescribed. As seen in Table 1 the word documents ranged from 1 to 6 pages, while the PowerPoints and one Prezi ranged from 4 to 11 slides.

The frequency of specific concepts that students wrote about ranged from one occurrence to 39. In this study specific concepts in the responses most frequently written about by the students (6 occurrences or greater) are presented. This was done in the interest of sharing the most salient aspects, providing a focus for this research and making the data more accessible.

The data is presented by frequency according to four categories that emerged which were 1. *Student Needs*, 2. *Instructor Behavior*, 3. *Assignments* and 4. *Community Building* all in the context of online discussions. As student responses were examined, the first three categories appeared as procedures to enhance online discussions. The first two addressed participants' expectations, feelings, conduct and performance. The third category which was *Assignments*, relates to how the

instructor could provide structure for discussions. The fourth category described how students learned from each other through building a community.

In addition to the frequency data, student quotes are presented to highlight some of the important themes as expressed by the students. To examine the 106 pages and 127 slides a content analysis and frequencies were most appropriate for representing student responses and sharing their wisdom and preferences. The purpose of this research was for students' responses to provide a set of guidelines for current and future instructors who teach online.

Results

The data about online discussions are presented in four categories which include *Student Needs*, *Instructor Behavior*, *Assignments and Community Building*. For each category a Figure is provided that contains the number of occurrences for each specific concept. Although some of the students' responses may appear obvious or naïve to a practiced online instructor, the researchers present what students shared. It was assumed that students were responding based on their experiences and what they perceived as relevant and important aspects of online learning. Although most of the students were seasoned K-12 teachers and had taken online courses previously, this course was the first in which they examined the pedagogy of teaching online. Students' perceptions were not filtered in presenting the data. Student quotes are provided to allow the reader to get a sense of the wide and rich variety of responses.

Regarding the first category that emerged from the students' responses (*Student Needs*) most answers were related to the fact that they need to feel safe and respected in order to share, risk and learn more in online discussions (Figure 1). One student wrote "(...) it is necessary that everyone feels safe, comfortable, and welcomed before they will fully engage, enabling them to make personal connections and grow from each other."

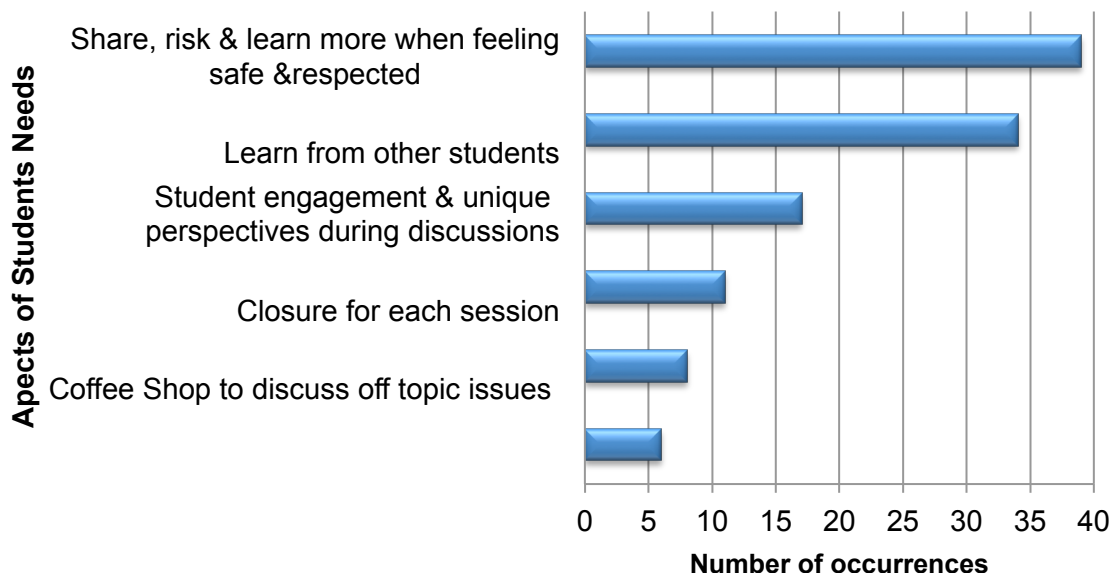


Figure 1. Student Needs in Online Discussions

As shown in Figure 1 the other most frequent aspects reported in the students' answers concerning their needs are related to wanting to learn from classmate, their engagement and unique perspective and the importance of closure in each session of the online discussions. The latter is highlighted by this student's comment "If students just do an assignment and never talk about it or discuss it as a group, then so much is lost." Regarding learning from classmates, one student wrote "I gained lots of valuable knowledge to take into my classroom, providing new ways of presenting information." Engagement and unique perspective was also underlined by another student "A major difference between students is their communication styles, observation, view points and diversity of

interests. Several students were consistently positive and I began to look forward to reading their posts.” Closure or writing and reading summaries of the weekly discussion were emphasized by a student who wrote “Having the opportunity to read and save the moderators’ summaries, not only cemented my understanding of some of the concepts and ideas, but it gave me a document to save and refer back to.” In discussing how he would set up his own course a student wrote “I will also bring some sort of closure to each discussion board activity or assignment summarizing and wrapping up the main ideas and concepts of the discussion.” Students mentioned the *Coffee Shop* and *Teacher’s Room* forums as being useful. These forums were available for the following purposes. The former was for “talking” about personal and off topic issues. The *Teacher’s Room* was a space for students and the instructor to conduct course business and clarify course related topics. One student said “The *Coffee Shop* Forum is a great way to allow students some time for casual conversation without disrupting the focus of the class.” Regarding the *Teacher’s Room* another student mentioned that it “(...) is a great way to keep housekeeping topics in their own area away from content related material.”

The second category observed (*Instructor Behavior*) produced a wide range of views regarding what is expected from the instructor in online discussions (Figure 2). Among these views the ones that stand out are related to the modeling of responses and interactions by the instructor, the need for him/her to be prepared and familiar with course materials and the need to ask thought-provoking/probing questions. One student wrote “By having Dr. Thormann [the instructor] involved in Skype discussions as well as assisting with moderator posts on the discussion board, she was able to ask questions that the class may not have asked. She also helped us to elaborate and clarify exactly what we are talking about.” The need to be prepared was also stressed by another student: “Before I even began, I realized that I had to be very knowledgeable of the assignment content. I also had to be very familiar with the content rubric in order to be consistent in grading or making suggestions.” Regarding the need to ask thought-provoking/probing questions the same student pointed out that “(...) I learned that the moderator has to ask open-ended or higher-order thinking questions. You have to ask questions that will make the students think and avoid those yes/no questions.”

Other often mentioned aspects of student responses include that moderating online discussions is time consuming and hard work and that the instructor should give timely feedback to the participants. One student said “Moderating is very time consuming, but it gave me a better understanding of what it would be like to be an online instructor.” Using online discussions as a communication and collaboration tool and sharing teaching responsibilities with students also appeared in the data. One student underscored the aspect of student responsibility by writing “But giving students more responsibility in their own learning gets them more involved and can also help create classroom community.”

Other comments related to *Instructor Behavior* concerned the need to be prepared to address diverse learners and using feedback templates. A statement from one of the students showed how the latter could help them with the future workload of providing feedback. She wrote “I would be sure to provide frequent input and formative assessments in my online class so that students don’t feel abandoned. I really like the feedback templates provided in the textbook (Thormann & Zimmerman, 2012). Utilizing those will make the task of giving timely feedback to all students less daunting, and provide a tested framework for effectively interacting with the class.” In planning for future classes that would have students with diverse learning needs, one student wrote “I would use differentiated strategies to meet individual needs, making sure I’m accommodating to a multiple of learning styles using a variety of delivery methods.”

The last aspect relates to the personal instructional style of the instructor during online discussions. Regarding this, one student mentioned “My partner and I agreed that we would be a moderator for every other post so that we could each get started for the early posters and each continue to follow up with those stragglers that posted assignments later. Then we both included our summaries of our conversations for the summary narrative of the conversations throughout the week.”

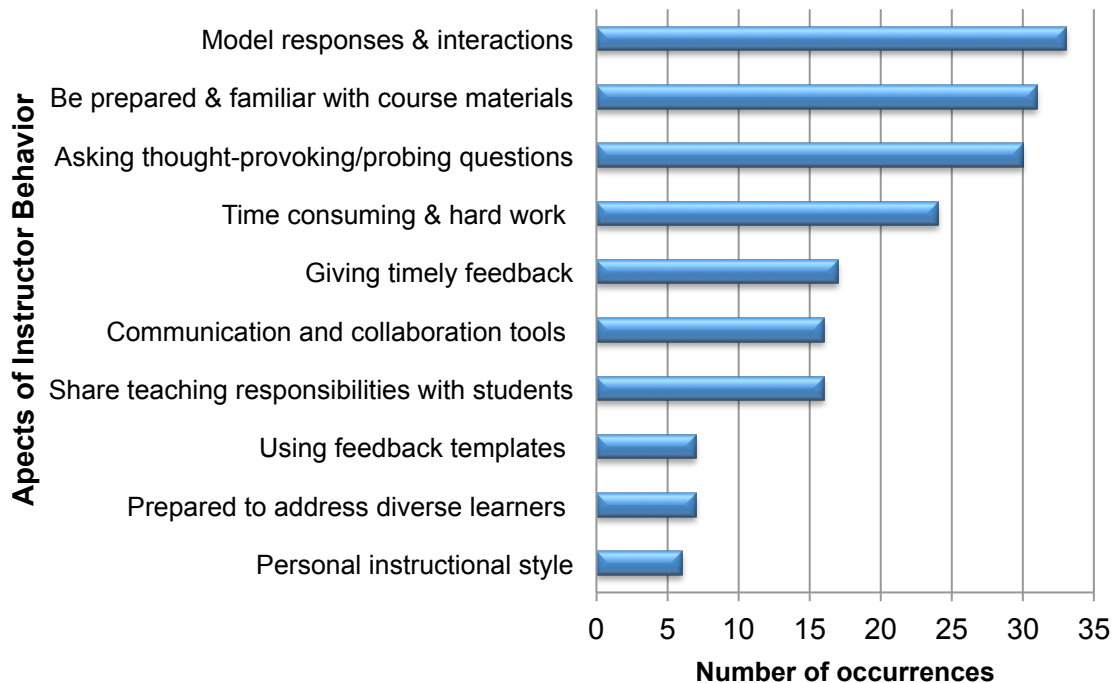


Figure 2. Instructor Behavior in Online Discussions

The third category, *Assignments*, that emerged from the data relates to how the instructor could provide structure for discussions (Figure 3). The three most frequent aspects mentioned in the students' responses were doing assignments with colleagues, having synchronous interaction and doing introductory/ice-breaker assignments. The latter was mentioned by several students as an important activity and as something they would like to use in the future in their own classes. Regarding synchronous interaction one student stated "I really like Skype and would use this tool to provide feedback to students and use it as a forum for positive debates and discussions." Concerning doing assignments with classmates one student wrote "I think that it is important for students to work together to share ideas and experiences. This allows growth and an opportunity for students to experience situations from other students' perspective."

Additional comments included providing course objectives and expectations for course guidance. One student wrote she plans to "(...) explain that the course will consist of individual and group work and what each should look like (that students can contact teacher if there is a problem)." while another student wrote that in her future classes she "(...) would set clear expectations with an outline, create activities that require partner work, incorporate twitter and/or blogs to enhance social interaction between students."

The last set of comments under *Assignments* mentioned sharing of the students' work on the discussion board and the discussions being a way to reinforce the learning and see various perspectives. Regarding this, one student wrote "The sharing of new ideas and opening of new doors by fellow classmates and moderators in our discussion board assignment is truly where the learning happened during this course."

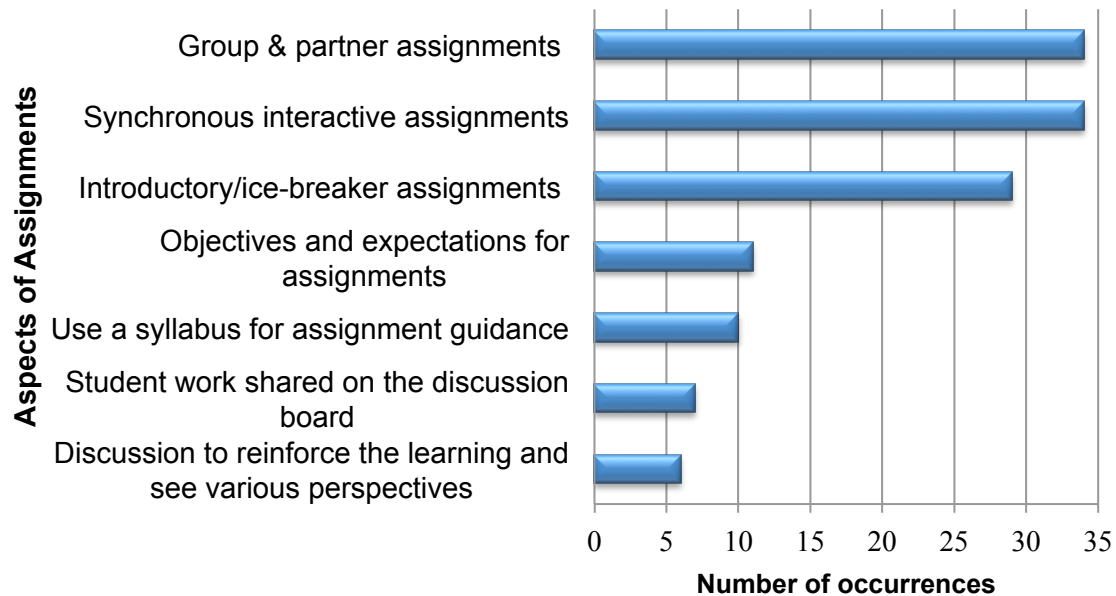


Figure 3. Assignments in Online Discussions

The last category (*Community Building*) is about how students learned by connecting with each other through building a community (Figure 4). This category relates to question #3 that students were asked. Students unanimously agreed that community building was an important part of online learning and was also repeated in response to some of the other questions and thus it appears as both a category and an aspect in Figure 4.

The aspects that emerged point to personal connections, encouragement of classmates to extend their learning and community building. One student wrote "I feel that in an online course, students are more willing to interact and become a 'community' than in a face-to-face setting." Another student wrote "Building an online community is not only relevant to the learning process, it is essential."

Other aspects mentioned were that work quality increases if there are relationships and that community building creates a sense of belonging. This aspect was mentioned by a student who wrote "Students that feel like they are a part of a larger group usually feel more comfortable to get involved and share their thoughts and opinions with their peers." Another student made the following observation about learning communities in an online environment. "Learning communities often develop naturally in a traditional classroom environment, but in an online course, the instructor must make that happen."

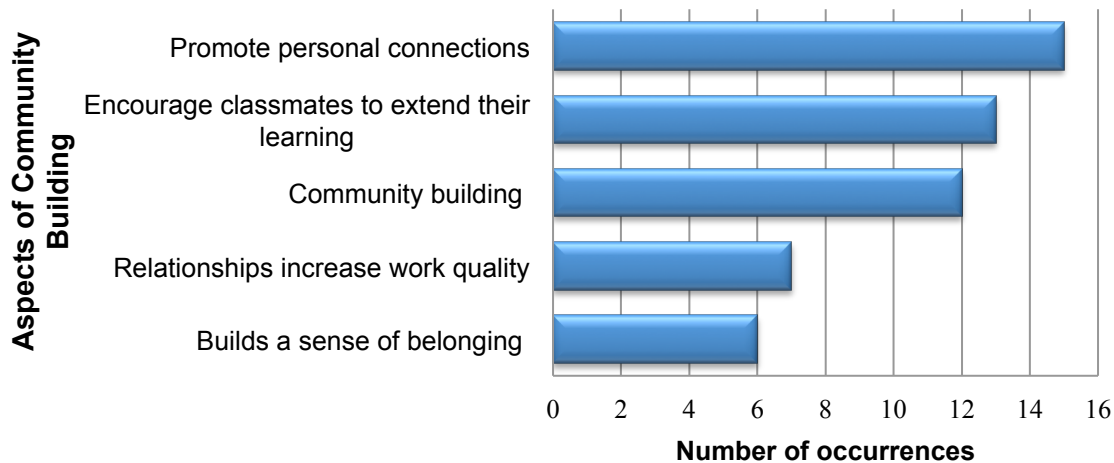


Figure 4. Community Building in Online Discussions

Because students were practicing and observing interaction and community they did not explicitly define these terms. However, the aspects frequently mentioned in their responses to the questions and a few quotes can provide some insight into how they defined the major focus of this research. Some of the data shown in Figures 1, 2 and 4 help to define what is perceived as successful interaction. This involves student engagement and comfort to share unique perspectives.

Interaction is enhanced by both students and instructors use of thought-provoking questions, timely feedback and building a personal instructional style. One student wrote “Classmate and instructor feedback on each assignment has made me more involved and I sometimes find myself going into the discussion board just to see what people have said.”

The definition of community is viewed as building personal connections and promoting a sense of belonging which increase work quality. In reference to community a student wrote “A community of learners enhances and reinforces the learning experience for all participants.”

The most frequently mentioned aspects of facilitating discussions that were found in the students responses are presented in the Figures above. However, since the assignment was open-ended many more aspects of facilitation that students felt are valuable were recorded. A few of these included instructor availability to answer questions, using a grading system which encourages students to participate and having a student-centered approach.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to find out what graduate students, who were enrolled in a course about teaching online, find most valuable about online moderation and community building.

It is clear from students’ unanimous agreement that community building is essential in the learning process. Many confirm this by suggesting that community may decrease the feeling of isolation in an online course (Canada, 2000; Liu, Magjuka, Bonk, & Lee, 2007; West, 2010). In addition, students need to feel safe and respected and learn from each other. This position may be due to students feeling that it is preferable to learn with others rather than alone and as Liu et al. (2007) reported students feel more engaged. Contact with others such as synchronous meetings, working in groups and sharing assignments with each other all reinforce the importance of community in the learning process. Introducing themselves or doing some informal activities to get to know each other better was popular and was also suggested by West (2010) and Sosulski (2012). The data clearly indicates that students value personal connections. If they are able to build commonalities they can feel more comfortable sharing their real perspectives about the course content. Since online courses do not naturally allow students to get together for a cup of coffee or meet informally, pre-planned interactions are appreciated and necessary. The above aspects that students mentioned are ways in which community experience can be built in online courses.

Students felt that the instructor plays a large role in providing support for learning. They expect guidance from the instructor and do not see themselves only learning from their peers but need an instructor's help. Modelling interactions, asking thought-provoking questions and knowing the material well are considered important aspects of the instructor's role. These ideas may have their roots in the way the students, who were all currently teaching, engage with their own students. Also since they have experienced this type of support they want it to be replicated in the online format. In addition, this may be what they think that others expect them to do.

A large number of students commented that leading discussions was time consuming and hard work. The literature (Rodriguez, Ortiz, & Dvorsky, 2006; Song & Hill, 2007; Spector, 2005) supports this for online students especially in the context of self-directed activities. Spector (2005) found that "faculty, all of whom were experienced online teachers, invested considerably more time in their online courses." (p.5).

Having most of the students fully participating and sharing their honest perspectives was possibly a way that students felt they would be able to gain more from the course. Research conducted by Matusov, Hayes, & Pluta (2005) found "that instructional interactive webs can be a useful tool for promoting and building an academic community of learners" (p.16)

If a course is teacher-centered or only a few students speak up, thinking deeply about a topic by individual students may be hampered. Having both classmates and instructor challenging their ideas and fully participating seems to enhance their learning experience. Since all of the students in these courses took on the role of moderating for one week, they were involved in sharing leadership responsibilities which may explain the high importance of engaging classmates and hearing their viewpoints. It was interesting to note that many students mentioned shared responsibility for learning as being productive. Typically when students take on a leadership role they become empowered and thus learn more and feel more connected to the content and to their classmates.

An aspect mentioned that impacts both instructor's and students' behavior was to encourage students to extend their learning. Asking questions and participating fully in the discussion would support extending learning. This insight may have evolved as a result of students being moderators. They may have wanted to help each other since they hoped to gain classmates' help when their turn as moderator happened.

To decrease the sense of being alone may have been one of the reasons that students felt that timely feedback was important. Other possibilities include that it helped them feel more connected and provided them with guidance concerning how they were doing in the course and how they might improve their performance.

Using current and interesting communication and collaboration tools can serve multiple purposes and this is supported by Sosulski (2012) and research conducted by Menchaca & Bekele (2008). As has been noted interacting is a way to stay connected with others in the class. In addition, using various media will potentially motivate and hold students' attention. The feeling that the instructor and classmates are on the "cutting edge" in use of technology can sometimes motivate students to participate more.

Closure for each session was an aspect that was cited as beneficial. Some students mentioned that it would provide a summary of the discussion for future needs. It also may have helped to pull ideas together. It may give them "permission" to move on to the next assignment and help to pro-actively end the discussion in an orderly fashion.

Having course guidelines including, course objectives and expectations were viewed as significant. This is valid in any course format. However, it can be particularly important in online courses since knowing how to get clarifying information about the class and assignments is not immediately clear. If there is clear documentation, many of the students' questions and potential insecurities about how the course will be structured can be anticipated and addressed.

The researchers have over the years received informal feedback from students that several of the aspects of facilitation, community building and clear guidelines have not been practiced by some of

their previous instructors. Often students have complained that assignments in these courses were read and write, read and write, and take some tests. Clarity of assignments and expectations were not present and it was difficult to get clarity. Little or no interaction among students was promoted. If discussions were required, instructors often did not participate. The rationale for sharing this research is so that current and future online instructors take note of and perhaps incorporate aspects that students consider important in their online teaching.

The data provides clues to what students think are vital aspects for planning and implementing online discussions. Regardless of why they shared one aspect more often than others it is useful for an online instructor to think about incorporating as many of these aspects as possible which may be valuable for student learning, satisfaction and retention.

Limitations

The results of this study are based on a substantial but not extensive sample size. Responses might have been influenced by the fact that participants were exposed to a particular online teaching methodology about how to teach online. However, all of the participants had taken courses from other instructors at Lesley University and/or other institutions which may have broadened their perspectives. Their responses may also have been somewhat biased since students were enrolled in an elective course and they were clearly interested in the subject.

Implications

The ideas students presented for developing discussions in online courses can be useful for all instructors. As educators the goal is to help students think deeply about content and potentially use this information to guide their future thoughts and actions. However, the online course environment is different from a face-to-face classroom since instructors need to consciously encourage students to be receptive to the course content.

The following 10 guidelines drawn from the data can be used to enhance instructional design and implementation of an online course and result in students reaching their goals.

1. Create an environment that allows students to share, take risks feel safe & respected.
2. Include some synchronous interaction and group assignments
3. Model interactions and ask thought-provoking/probing questions
4. Be familiar with course material and shape the course to promote and extend learning among students
5. Use introductory/ice-breaker assignments
6. Be prepared for time consuming, hard work
7. Promote student engagement, allow unique perspectives and give timely feedback
8. Share teaching responsibilities with students and consciously build community
9. Use communication and collaboration tools and facilitate personal connections
10. Provide course guidelines, objectives and expectations

Although this list is long, many of the guidelines presented are tenets of good teaching, online or face-to-face. However based on the data collected, they seem to be critical to promoting successful online discussions. Based on this research, observing which aspects are already being implemented by instructors in online courses should be continued. Then a choice should be made about which of the unobserved aspects might be incorporated into future online classes which can improve instruction and learning.

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Appendix

Questions posed to students for the culminating assignment

1. What did you learn from moderating discussions?
 2. What did you learn from your classmates and instructor when they moderated discussions?
 3. Do you think building an online community is relevant to the learning process? Why? Or why not?
 4. Think about and write a plan indicating what facilitation strategies you will use when teaching your online courses.
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