Full- time, In-Class, Face- to- Face Courses...Why (then) Online Discussion?

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Abstract

Most of the literature advocating online discussions cite the main advantage as encouraging interaction for students who either see each other rarely (e.g. in mostly distance learning courses) or have insufficient time to interact in class (e.g. in large lecture halls).

However, at AUC, some faculty are using online discussions, despite the relatively small class size, and the regular meetings every week.

In this paper we explore two different cases of using online discussion at AUC across several semesters: one for an introductory environmental science course and one for an advanced economics course. The instructors outline their reasons for using online discussions in their courses, and share their reflections on the results.

We then attempt to produce recommendations for other users of online discussions in similar situations.

Background on AUC

The American University in Cairo is an American liberal arts university in Cairo, Egypt. At AUC, classes typically meet 2-3 times each week, and each class usually has no more than 40 students.

The Learning Management System (LMS) WebCT has been available at AUC since spring 2002, but has only been used for "blended" courses or as a supplement to face-to-face classes, since AUC has no 100% distance learning courses. A paper presented last year (Bali and Ellozy 2005) showed there was a strong correlation of 0.54 (significant at the 0.01 level) between students' perception of WebCT's added value to their learning, and their perception that use of online discussions on WebCT contributed to their learning. This was an interesting finding because the most commonly cited benefits of online discussions did not apply to AUC. This paper presents some of the results of an investigation (by Bali 2005) into the pedagogical uses of online discussions implemented at AUC by various instructors.

Benefits of Asynchronous Online Discussions

Collins and Berge (2001) define "Computer-Mediated Communication" as

…the various flavors of computer conferencing with the computer in its role as interpersonal communication device, used synchronously or asynchronously to connect human beings to each other. This can be via email and mailing lists or computer conferencing systems

In this paper, when we are referring to asynchronous online discussions via WebCT between students taking a particular course together.

Online discussion's pedagogical benefits include (adapted from Bali 2005):

- Flexibility of location (McConnell 2002), so that those who cannot meet face-to-face can communicate online. This benefit is not relevant to AUC where students meet several times a week in classes and can meet at other times on campus
- Flexibility of time (McConnell 2002, Green 1998), so students can log on at any time that suits them, especially if they cannot meet synchronously. Again, this is less relevant to AUC than other institutions, since students do make the time to meet synchronously during class time and to work together on projects
- Continuity beyond the classroom (McConnell 2002), which allows discussions that are abruptly ended in class to continue online and be referred to later

- Promotes reflection (Hiltz 1997) because students have more time to think than they do in the synchronous class discussion
- Promotes interaction and cooperation among students (Berge and Collins 2001), especially if the instructor designs the activity to be interactive; this can save time in class for covering material
- Better participation (McConnell 2002): shy students and minorities (Green 1998) have been shown to participate more actively in online discussions versus face to face.
- Conversations are automatically recorded (Meyer 2005), which allows students and instructors to go back at any time to reflect on what has been said previously, and make connections
- Availability of the internet as a resource (Green 1998), which can enrich students' writing as they use the internet to support their postings.

Issues with online discussions (adapted from Bali 2005)
- Text-based (Green 1998), so may not be appealing for visual learners, and may pose difficulties for those with poor language skills, although anecdotal evidence shows that language learners are eager to use online discussions
- Information overload (McConnell 2002) may occur if there are too many postings and students cannot keep up or discern which postings to read. In this situation, some students may completely give up and stop posting
- Delayed response, which may be frustrating, especially that online, students cannot tell whether others have read their messages, and cannot know why there have

been no responses. This should not pose a problem for AUC students since they meet in class regularly and can meet on campus as well
- Reluctance of students to participate (McConnell 2002), either because of aversion to the technology, or because students do not want to put in time or effort. This can be improved if the instructor
- Lurking, which refers to participants who read the messages but seldom post anything themselves. This can be seen as unfair to others, but more recent literature shows that these people are benefiting and have reasons for not participating such as feeling they have nothing to add (Preece et al 2004).

Types of Activities via Online Discussions

Paulsen (1995) lists the pedagogical techniques that can be conducted via online discussion. These include:
- As a notice board
- For resource sharing
- Free-flow discussion related to content
- Structured discussion
- Peer review
- Computer-supported writing language learning
- For students to work as debate teams
- For students to work together on group projects
- Networking with others outside the class/institution
- Informal socializing

A previous study (Bali 2005) surveyed eleven courses for the different uses of online discussion in each of them; of these courses:

- 6 used it for peer review
- 6 used it for computer-supported writing language learning
- 5 used it for resource sharing
- 3 used it for free-flow discussion related to content
- 2 used it for structured discussion
- 1 used it for students to work together on group projects
- 1 used it for students to work as debate teams
- 1 used it for networking with others outside the class/institution
- 1 used it for Informal socializing
- 1 used it as a notice board

Some courses used more than one of these techniques.

The rest of this paper focuses on two of these courses, explaining the instructor's rationale for using online discussion, showing the students' reactions to this, and connects this with the pros/cons discussed earlier.

Case Study 1: Introductory environmental science course

Overview of the course

This is a course on the environment that non-science students can take to fulfill their science requirements. The course usually has 30-40 students per class, most of whom are first-year students, but some of whom are older.

Why use online discussion?

The instructor used online discussion to give students a chance to discuss environmental issues in Egypt and explore their solutions. He felt this would give them time to relate the course to their daily lives, and discuss these issues outside of class. He also wanted to encourage participation by the more reflective learners or those who have a lag in their reasoning skills.

The activity would be structured into phases, each phase opening a question for discussion, and

the next phase building upon the previous one. The instructor starts each phase with a summary of the previous one, and introduces the new cycle. Students would receive a "bonus" grade if they contribute in a "clever way". The instructor would contribute to the discussion to build upon students' ideas, encourage good responses, and correct misconceptions.

Results

According to the instructor, in some semesters students were more active than others. Last semester, a significant number of his students were very quiet in class but very active online. He later discovered that this was due to their limited spoken English skills, which made them shy of speaking up in class. Although he was satisfied with the overall performance of his students in online discussions, he is often disappointed that their critical thinking skills seemed limited, and that some students would just post without giving their writing much thought. He also found that students sometimes all converged on one point and failed to look beyond it into others, particularly if the point is one that is obvious (for e.g. the lack of awareness being a cause of environmental degradation). This leads to repetitiveness.

When his students were asked about their opinion, a portion of them felt the online discussions affected their learning positively, and that it allowed them to think of issues they would not have otherwise considered. Several students, however, complained of "information overload", saying that they stopped reading and posting when the messages became too many and too repetitive.

Reflections

It is clear that the online discussion benefited a number of students, especially those who were shy to speak in class; and those who used the opportunity to think critically and make connections with their daily lives.

Because the activity is a bonus, only interested students (i.e. the ones having something to say), as well as those who need the grade (i.e. the ones with a stake in the matter), would contribute. This means that students would not simply become part of the

discussion by default, as they would if it were part of the course work. Those who contribute would therefore be making a conscious choice of becoming involved. This is believed to positively impact the quality of discussion. In order to ensure this, particularly with regards to the students who are contributing because they need the grade, an assessment of the postings is crucial, even though it is very time consuming. In this respect and in order to assist students make meaningful contributions, the instructor plans to give his students rubrics or criteria for what a good posting should contain and/or address. He hopes this will help them focus their responses and reduce the non-substantive and repetitive ones.

Another possible way to reduce repetitiveness and information overload is to split the student body contributing to the forum up into smaller groups instead of having all students participate on one forum, for cases where the number of contributors is significant. This is expected to make the follow up on the postings less overwhelming and hopefully encourage more students to contribute. However, this is not without a potential adverse impact. The discussion dynamics within a more limited group of students faces the risk of losing momentum if not enough ideas are generated within the discussion, possibly leading to a significant slow down in the discussion and necessitating more intervention from the instructor to reactivate it within such groups.

Case Study 2: Advanced Economics course

Overview of the course

This is a class of about 20 students, usually Economics majors or minors, most of whom are in their third or fourth year at AUC. The course discusses information technology and economics. Half of the course is instructor-led discussion on readings; another half of the course is student presentations on self-chosen topics, and during the course, the instructor holds a debate.

Why use online discussion?

The instructor uses online discussions as an extension of in-class discussions, and as an avenue for students to share resources. She uses it to help students prepare for their in-class presentations, and receive feedback from their peers after they've done the presentations. She also feels it would help students relate presentations to each other if they are all discussed online. Last semester, she also wanted to create folders for each of the debate teams to use for preparation.

She grades students on number of posts, and this is part of their participation. She would prefer to grade on quality, but time constraints prevent such analysis.

Results

Participation has varied across semesters, but she is overall happy with the students' use of online discussion, especially that she rarely has time to contribute herself. She found that when students did not know how they would be graded, their spontaneous responses were of better quality.

She felt that online discussions always contributed to student learning, but says that if she had been able to participate more, they would have contributed more and learned more. Last semester, they participated more at the beginning while they were involved with the readings, but then their online participation slowed down.

When asked, some of her students found online discussions beneficial because they had more time to think, could participate from the comfort of their own homes, and use the internet as a resource while working. They also felt that participation should have been voluntary, so that only those who had something substantive to say would post. Some suggested that the online discussions would either be a continuation of in-class discussions, or assigned tasks. However, all of them preferred face-to-face communication because feedback was more immediate.

Reflections

Even though the students were more mature than the previous course, and did participate on their own with little intervention from the instructor, both students and instructor feel that further

prodding from the instructor would have helped them participate better.

It is possible that integrating the online discussion more closely to what is happening in class would motivate students to participate more fully and more thoughtfully.

Conclusions and recommendations

Clearly, AUC students recognize the disadvantages of online discussion, including information overload and the delayed response. Instructors face the issue of encouraging students to participate, or at least to give quality contributions.

We can see from these two cases that online discussion can be beneficial to AUC students, even though these students meet regularly. Benefits found by instructors and students in these two cases included more time for reflection, access to the internet as a resource, and time to discuss issues beyond class time. In the environment course, it also apparently helped those who could not speak up in class due to shyness or limited spoken English.

One of the important questions facing both these instructors (and others at AUC), is how to integrated the online discussions with the class objectives, and whether to have the activity as a bonus or to have it as a required course work. Regardless of this choice, grading based on quantity, would lead to more students postings, which would not necessarily always be substantive. However, grading online discussions based on quality of contribution is known to be time-consuming. The balance is difficult for instructors who have so many other responsibilities. One of our instructors once said that she felt using online discussions was like teaching a course on top of another course.

Future studies will look into courses where online discussions are strongly linked to course objectives and integrated with the course itself, with insight into instructor and student perspectives.

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