

## **Designing Forum Assignments to Build Community in Multinational Classrooms**

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There are more than 500,000 international students in the United States (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2005). Colleges and universities often recruit these students for the purpose of diversity (Smithee, Greenblatt & Eland, 2004, p. 9). To reap optimum benefits from this diversity, it is essential for U.S. and international students to interact dynamically in academic settings. The use of online discussion forums is one approach to facilitating interaction and building community in multinational classrooms. Compared to synchronous interaction (e.g., instant messaging or face-to-face communication), asynchronous interaction (e.g., online forum participation) can be more valuable for academic discussion because it provides students with more time to consider issues critically and express views in greater depth (Sotillo, 2000). However, the success of online discussions may rest on the design of forum assignments with the objective of bridging possible linguistic and cultural gaps between students of diverse backgrounds.

### **Challenges for International Students**

For many international students, the academic environment in the U.S. is different from what they are used to in their home countries. Most international students face challenges in at least one of three areas: language, classroom culture, and information literacy.

The majority of international students do not speak English as their native language. Many non-native English speakers (NNESs) have developed basic interpersonal communication skills, while they lag behind their peers who are native English speakers (NESs) in their cognitive academic language proficiency (Cummins, 1999). Academic language is characterized by language functions and critical thinking skills that students need in order to succeed in a broad range of content areas. NNESs, in particular, struggle with the complex language required for higher-order language functions such as analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994, p. 40).

International students from high-context cultures will often have greater confidence and a greater comfort level in teacher-centered classes than in learner-centered classes, which are widely favored in the U.S. These students will often need time to adapt to an academic culture in which they are expected to ask questions, exchange ideas, and pursue learning objectives independently (Eslami-Rasekh & Valizadeh, 2004).

While many international students have extensive experience using technology for personal communication (e.g., through instant messaging or email), they may have limited expectations related to online forum discussions as a means to reach academic objectives (Thorne, 2003). Information literacy, which supports student success on forums and in other academic contexts, is generally a greater challenge for international students than for U.S. students (Bagnole & Miller, 2003). In addition, when international students do online research, they are often at a disadvantage because they have difficulty recognizing cultural biases that are usually obvious to their U.S. peers (Stapleton, Helms-Park, & Radia, 2006).

### **Scaffolding for Online Discussion Forums**

Purposeful, ongoing scaffolding that addresses the challenges of language, classroom culture, and information literacy can foster stronger academic performance and more enthusiastic forum participation for both U.S. and international students.

Integrating a variety of community-building activities into the instructional program can increase students' comfort levels in online forums, which can, in turn, increase their commitment to cognitive learning objectives (Woods & Ebersole, 2003). Online autobiographies and forums about students' personal interests build camaraderie and open avenues of discussion about students' cultural backgrounds. Classroom activities that "break the ice" can also contribute to greater comfort levels online and greater interest in exploring multicultural perspectives.

The types of language functions required in initial assignments can influence levels of student participation on forums throughout the length of the course. Advanced-level NNEs will be able to narrate and describe events with relative ease, while supporting opinions will be challenging for them (as it is for many of their NES peers) (Breiner-Sanders, Swender, & Terry, 2000). By including narrative or descriptive language tasks in initial assignments, the instructor can expect fairly comparable language complexity in NNEs and NES forum contributions. This sets the stage for NNEs and NESs to interact online as equal partners in the learning process. As students experience success, the instructor can raise the level of critical thinking required for increasingly challenging assignments.

A review of popular databases reveals that instructors in many disciplines use Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (Bloom et al., 1956) as a basis for planning instruction and assessment related to critical thinking. Not surprisingly, most international and U.S. students are aware that critical thinking is valued in U.S. classrooms. However, students are often unable to use critical thinking effectively to achieve course objectives or to engage each other in the construction of knowledge. Instructors who have had the greatest success in eliciting critical thinking from students have made specific critical thinking objectives clear through explicit instruction, practice and assessment (Bissell & Lemons, 2006). This clarity is especially valuable to international students, who may be unfamiliar with unstated critical thinking expectations in U.S. classrooms. Instructors can also make systematic use of Bloom's taxonomy as a guide to help students ask each other dynamic questions (Vrchota, 2004). Requiring students to ask a broad range of questions provides greater opportunities for students to ask each other about their cultural perceptions.

In both synchronous and asynchronous environments, international students often worry about linguistic or social interactions with their U.S. peers. However, NNEs need to develop an awareness that a greater threat to their credibility as co-learners may rest in their misunderstanding of prevailing standards of academic integrity. Difficulties related to citing references, for example, are more likely to become an issue in online forums than in face-to-face classroom or social settings, in which students have infrequent access to each other's research. Interpretations of plagiarism, in particular, vary greatly from culture to culture, and students often mistakenly consider the online environment more flexible in regards to ownership of knowledge (Bowden, 1996). Therefore, it is important for instructors to emphasize the importance of their institution's official statement about academic honesty. Student resources should also include straight-forward models for citations within forum contributions. The systematic integration of library support into the instructional program can help students with the information-gathering and information-evaluation tasks, which can substantially improve the level of their online contributions (Bagnole & Miller, 2003).

### The Importance of Teacher Presence

These recommendations for scaffolding focus on the role of the instructor in designing online forum assignments that build community and foster critical thinking. Instructors with these goals are especially effective when they link forum assignments to class activities and content objectives (Weasenforth, Biesenbach-Lucas, & Meloni, 2001). For students to engage seriously in discussion forums, however, extensive teacher presence in course organization is critical (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001). Systematic attention to organization serves to legitimize the importance of online forum assignments as part of the overall design to achieve course objectives. NNEs' online messages tend to be more cursory than NESs' (Jun & Park, 2003), so requirements for the quantity, quality, and format of contributions should be explicit. The enforcement of deadlines and timely, well-focused instructor assessment of online assignments can also contribute to productive student participation.

Effective teacher presence in attention to organizational details can give students confidence that their online interaction is an important part of their academic experience. Commitment to forum participation provides opportunities for both students and teachers to benefit from the increasingly multinational environments in our institutions of higher learning.

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### Biographical Sketch

Janis Hanson is the coordinator of the TESOL program at the University of Wisconsin – La Crosse, where she has taught TESOL and ESL courses for 21 years. She has used online discussion forums to facilitate interaction between TESOL and ESL students since 2000. Her recent presentations at local, regional and international conferences have focused on using online course management systems and integrating TESOL and ESL education. With support from a UW-Madison Academic Co-Lab FIPSE grant (2003 – 2005), she developed seven online tutorials as a module on designing learning activities with Web-based learning objects.

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