Dialogue Intensive Learning

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Introduction

The discussion element of an online course, in theory, is the “classroom” where much of the instructor-student and student-student interaction takes place. To a large degree it is intended to approximate the on-campus class experience. As most online instructors know, the online discussions, if designed appropriately, can far exceed the interactions in the campus classroom. As Rossman (1999) notes, discussions in online courses “are a rich source of learning, enjoyment, and an integral part of the course.” Students often comment on the differences in interaction between online and on-campus classes.

*The depth and frequency of intellectual exchange with your classmates exceeds that of traditional graduate school experiences. My learning team colleagues brought a wealth of experience from the private and public sector to our online discussions - which were much more lively than the traditional lecture-format learning environment.*

Online Student, 2006

We have learned, however, that not all online discussions are created equally. In our online experiences, we have witnessed three types of online discussions; the “Q&A” Model, the “1+” Model and the “dialogue intensive” model.

Discussion Models

The “Q&A” model, used in some online programs, is built around a structured environment where the student has specific response tasks. Typically, the instructor will post a question related to the unit’s topic and the students are required to post a single response to the question. There is little to no instructor-student interaction or student-student interaction. The primary value of this model is the sharing of approaches and perspectives in response to the specific question.

The “1+” model, used in other online programs, is built around a limited interactive model. Students are required to respond to a specific question in each unit as well as responding to at least one of their peer’s postings. This model has the potential for more instructor-student interaction depending on the level of the instructor’s engagement. However in our experience, student-student interaction has been limited. Many students just post the obligatory one response to a peer’s posting. Others try to engage in more discussion but with limited responses, the discussion energy tends to dissipate.

The “dialogue intensive” model is built around the notion that much of the learning occurs with active instructor-student and student-student interaction. An initial discussion question is posed as a foundation and as students respond and the instructor engages, the discussion is extended through the sharing of professional experiences, personal insights and other source materials. It is not atypical in a dialogue intensive model for a week’s unit to have 150+ postings in a 10-student class.

We have been monitoring online student feedback for the last three years, specifically focusing on comments about the discussion elements of the class. The sample pool is approximately 80 students from...
each discussion model. The dialogue intensive model garnered the most commentary, the Q&A model the least. Approximately 67% of the students in the dialogue intensive courses provided comments on the discussions. The +1 model received 29% comments and the Q&A model 17%. The dialogue intensive model received predominantly positive comments (87%), while the other two models were generally mixed. The dialogue intensive model received significantly more in-depth and reflective comments than the other two models.

This is not to say that the “Q&A” Model or the “1+” model is pedagogically weak or to suggest they do not have their value. However, it does seem clear from the samples that the dialogue intensive model can create a deeper and richer learning experience for the students.

**Framing the Dialogue Intensive Model**

It is very important to create an appropriate climate for this model. This starts with the proper expectations. The course syllabus must be very specific about discussion expectations in terms of its relative grade value and student engagement. The discussion’s grade weight should be high enough to really matter (15-30%). Students also need to understand how discussion points are earned. The ideal method for discussion grading should be a blend of quantity and quality. Too little quantity and the dialogue-intensive model dissolves into the “1+” model, too little quality and the intensive nature of the model becomes watered down. Too much quantity can be overwhelming. The syllabus should have specific metrics for quantity as well as a rubric for quality.

The instructor should also ensure a proper balance between “knowing and doing” in the discussions. Using course or outside materials (knowing) is important to the learning objectives but the discussion comes alive with examples (doing). Students should be encouraged to share relevant professional experiences or to comment on relevant current events to illuminate the underlying discussion question.

To encourage interaction, the instructor should emphasize the minimum number of days required for participation. For example, “you are expected to post a minimum of 7 postings over 4 days in the discussion week.” This ensures the discussions are spread out a bit and also countermands the tendency to either post early and disappear, or to post frantically in the last day of the discussion.

The issue of discussion “etiquette” also needs to be addressed. If you have ever participated in a chaotic chat session, you understand the need for some basics. We usually post a document called “A Survival Guide to Our Discussions” which covers again some of the discussion topics noted in the syllabus. It also covers issues related to organization of the discussion room (use of the subject line, how to respond to a posting and how to post new threads), tone, language use, expectations about grammar and writing style, proper citations, and an admonition about respecting the discussion area. Finally, in this document, it is helpful to provide some advice on how to manage the workload in a dialogue intensive class. Ideally, the student would enter the discussions twice per day, 5-6 days a week, but never miss two days in a row. This makes an intensive discussion manageable and enhances the learning experience by reducing stress.

**Creating the Right Climate**

Once expectations have been set, the instructor must now create an active, positive climate for the discussions. It all starts with the discussion question. A good discussion question addresses the topic and aligns with the learning objectives but also allows the student to bring in personal, relevant experiences or to extend the point by asking a tangential question or bringing in outside materials.

The key ingredient to the dialogue intensive model is active engagement by the instructor. Without the instructor’s energy and guiding hand, the discussion can easily spin out of control and undermine the
learning objectives. Ideally, the instructor bookends the course and actively guides the discussion every day in between. It starts with the initial discussion question as discussed above and ends with a summary posting on the last day of the unit which captures the key learning points of the discussion. This ensures that the students leave the discussion unit with what the instructor thinks are the critical learning points. Citing specific students in this summary creates further positive energy for the coming discussions units.

It is also helpful if the instructor mixes up his instructional style during the discussions. Many instructors have a favored style in the discussions (e.g. the Socratic style). We have found that shifting styles can help foster more interaction. Students respond well to “expert” postings where the instructor shares specific experiences or knowledge. Students also respond especially well to “learn it, apply it” type postings. Ideas, practices or experiences that they can apply the next day at work not only create more discussion engagement but they also help translate the course material into easily understood concepts or practices. The Socratic method is very useful because it forces the student to think and offer his own perspective. Too much of this method and the students can get frustrated.

Another style is the Devil’s Advocate. Discussions really sing with engaged, professional debate. Students are often hesitant to challenge each other or the instructor. Playing Devil’s Advocate can break down the hesitation and get students off the fence and into a debate.

One of the challenges experienced in online discussions is that the discourse can often be superficial. The students answer the discussion question and respond to each other but the dialogue remains predictable or filled with “stating the obvious” type postings. A shifting engagement style by the instructor will change the dynamic a bit and often entice the students to dig deeper. Additionally, posing questions that demand deeper reflection will help (e.g. “what would you do in this situation…” or “taking it a bit further, what do you think of this…”).

Above all, the instructor must maintain a positive, safe atmosphere where students feel comfortable engaging.

**Student Behaviors – Be on the Lookout**

A dialogue intensive model can be daunting. Not every student embraces the model just as not every student participates in the on-campus classroom. It is the instructor’s job to make them comfortable enough to engage or to prevent them from hiding. There are several student behaviors that if not managed, will undermine the learning experience.

The beauty of the online class is that the student really can’t hide. Despite this, “the invisible man” will try and hide. The best methods we have found to deal with them are to specifically engage the student and to provide discussion feedback both formally and informally during the class.

Another form is the “Jane come lately”: the student who appears in the last 2 days of the discussion unit and posts madly to get to the minimum expected. Obviously, this behavior adds no real value to the discussion and can be very disruptive. The student needs to be called out right away and stopped by encouraging them to spread out their work.

As mentioned earlier, the “You’re wonderful, I could not agree more” student tries to look active without actually adding to the learning experience. The best method to change this behavior is to engage the student in the discussion area as well as to send a private email encouraging them to engage in a more meaningful manner. For example, “Thanks, “Mark. I am glad you agree with Judy’s point about trust and leadership. What have been your experiences in dealing with untrustworthy leaders?”
On the other end of the spectrum is the “dominator.” The dominator often comes in two forms; the overachiever and the egotist. The overachiever dominates by sheer presence. We all appreciate commitment and a strong work ethic but overachievers need to be corralled a bit. The best method is a soft email praising their work while also cautioning about burnout and reminding them to give other students a chance. The egotist is disruptive and difficult to manage. His opinion is the right opinion and he finds it difficult to engage in equal discourse. We find this type the most difficult to manage because egotists tend to be thin skinned and resistant to feedback. The only way that has seemed to work is direct contact off line, usually a live conversation where specific examples and suggestions can be discussed.

**Instructor Roles**

The dialogue intensive model requires focused and active engagement by the instructor. The instructor must be a facilitator, boundary setter, traffic cop and chief cheerleader. The main role of facilitation is well understood by online instructors. If the instructor is only minimally engaged, the discussion often loses energy or structure. In some cases students may be engaged and active, despite the instructor’s absence, but the discussions tend to meander and rarely meet the learning objectives.

Discussions can easily get off topic or take unproductive tangents. The instructor needs to manage the discussion boundaries by nudging the discussions back on track without undermining student engagement. A posting that seems to work is “I appreciate your point about x, let’s talk about how it relates to…” This polite redirection helps get the discussion back on track without sapping the student’s energy.

The roles of traffic cop and chief cheerleader are two sides of the same coin. The instructor must regulate traffic flow. If the class is slow to start, he must remind the students of the need to post the initial responses early in the discussion unit. If the quantity or quality is drifting, the instructor needs to energize them. If individual students are not doing their part, he must “ticket” them and get them on track. The other side, cheerleading, is just as important. Creating a positive environment is critical to intensive dialogue. Praising in public and criticizing in private, acknowledging focus and commitment, or thanking the class for a productive week are examples of how the instructor can motivate the class.

**A CEO, Nun and Rabbi**

A recent class had a CEO, a nun, and a rabbi as well as a social worker, police officer and marketing representative, among others. The beauty of the dialogue intensive model is the learning that emerges from the shared experiences and varied perspectives. There are very few opportunities that bring together this type of diversity of backgrounds and experiences and it would be a shame not to leverage the discussions to enable the students to share their insights and practices. Students often report that the relationships they form in dialogue intensive models far exceed that of on-campus courses. They know more about their online classmates than someone who sat next to them all semester every Thursday night in class. Palloff and Pratt (1999) argued that "it is the relationships and interactions among people through which knowledge is primarily generated. The learning community takes on new proportions in this environment and consequently must be nurtured and developed so as to be an effective vehicle for education” (p.15). The discussions are a living thing and the instructor is the primary source of energy and pace for the discussions in this model. The dialogue intensive model requires a consistent commitment from the instructor, but if led well this model offers a richer and deeper learning experience for the instructor and students alike.

**References**


**About the Presenters**

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