Asynchronous Discussions: Best Practices

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Introduction

It is commonly accepted among online educators that asynchronous discussions enhance online learning and should be used in most online classrooms due to the reflective time available and the collaborative nature of the method (Brooks & Jeong, 2006; Kramarski & Mizrahi, 2006; Schellens and Valcke, 2006; Dennen, 2005; Jin, 2005; Biesenbach-Lucas, 2004; Fry-Welch, 2004). Assuming that asynchronous discussions contribute to online learning, educational leaders then need to find and implement the best practices. A review of the literature suggests that such practices can be grouped into six areas: size of the discussion groups, how the instructor implements the discussion in the classroom, whether or not it is assessed, how many discussions should occur, use of rubrics and what faculty support is provided. Each of those will be covered in the following sections.

Discussion Group Size

Barkley, Cross and Major (2005) recommend that the best in collaborative learning occurred in classes of two to six students. Spokane Falls Community College (2005) suggests that online discussion groups be limited to a maximum of five participants, regardless of the number registered in the class. Huang and Law (2004) also encourage the use of smaller discussion groups. Levin, He and Robbins (2006) recommend six to eight students per class. Du, Durrington and Mathews (2007) report that among those students who expressed a preference, the preferred group size was four to six students. Fernandez (2007) successfully used groups of three in a class of fifteen to create effective discussions groups. My own findings from an earlier study suggested the range for discussion groups should be five students plus or minus 2 students (Berry, 2007).

But two dissenting studies recommend larger class sizes. Fisher, Thompson and Silverberg (2005) recommend 25 students as the optimal class size for an asynchronous discussion. Their study over two years found that large group size seemed to produce the minimal number of acceptable messages in each asynchronous discussion. Reonieri (2006) concluded that 10 – 15 students per class is optimal based on a survey of both online faculty and online students. He concluded that smaller class sizes did not provide a diversity of views and that a larger class size needed to be divided into the optimally sized groups so that all voices could be heard.

In the most extensive study, Schellens and Valcke (2007) suggested that classes with less than ten students provide higher order critical thinking opportunities for students. While agreeing that the traditional literature suggested 10-12 students as the optimal class size for an appropriate number of substantive postings, they insist that their findings, involving over 300 students and 38 different asynchronous discussions, points to smaller groups as being the most effective in collaborative learning.

Taking all the studies into account, it appears that the best discussion group size is between four to nine students. But this is only the first of several best practices. The next question becomes how to effectively guide the discussion.
Instructor Implementation and Leading of Discussions

Instructors in an online classroom should ensure that they do not dominate the asynchronous discussions. As the authority figure in the class, students will often take clues from the instructor’s postings as to how to approach their own postings. Swan (2004) suggested that instructors must consciously restrain their willingness to post and must find ways to stimulate student-to-student learning collaboration. She recommends that the instructor set the standards and tone of the classroom early and then participate less and less in the discussions. To ensure that students know the instructor is still engaged and reviewing the asynchronous posts, she suggests continued weekly contacts through individual feedback mechanisms or email since those opportunities can be used to coach students on their postings. Biesenbach-Lucas (2004) reinforces Swan’s point by noting that when instructors take over the discussions, students are less willing to openly make their own suggestions because they perceive they are less of an expert than the instructor.

On the other hand, using Socratic Dialogue has long been a traditional classroom teaching style for advanced studies seminars and has been readily recognized as enhancing critical thinking. Yang, Newby and Bill (2005), using both quantitative and qualitative methods, conclude that Socratic questioning in asynchronous discussions, with careful monitoring by the professor, can both enhance critical thinking and help students maintain those skills. They further noted that timely placement of questions by the professor is essential for Socratic Dialogue to function well.

As an administrator, I have visited a number of classrooms. Some professors tend to pontificate and overwhelm the student responses. Other professors contribute nothing, not even in individual feedback, leaving the students to wonder if instructors were even reading student postings. This illustrates the need for guidelines and suggestions to faculty, which will be covered in the sixth section below.

Assessment of Discussions

Assessment or grading of asynchronous discussions appears to be common. Perhaps this is due in part to an American educational culture that fosters the idea that students will not do an assignment unless it is for credit. Biesenbach-Lucas (2004) requires a minimum number of postings and responses as well as conducting an analytic review of each posting. Literacy skills were assessed by evaluating postings in Buchanan’s (2002) study. Chabon (2001) required a minimum number postings and subsequent activity submissions. Fry-Welch (2004) required students to do a formal critique of five journal articles and then lead the subsequent discussion with classmates. Weicha (2003) did a qualitative assessment of postings to determine if students had achieved an understanding of interviewing concepts.

What is not clear from the various studies is how much weight is given to asynchronous discussions. Was it usually ten percent of the course grade or seventy percent? In my anecdotal experience as an online teacher, assessment values (grades) must be given, no matter how small, to every aspect of the assignment and fifty to seventy percent of the course grade is appropriate.

Number of Discussions per Class

If assessment of asynchronous discussions is valid, then it begs another question: how many asynchronous discussions should occur in a course? For example, which would be better in an online class: a question posed every week of a semester or only five questions posted throughout the semester? While it may seem counter intuitive to the traditional professor accustomed to weekly lectures or discussions, Biesenbach-Lucas (2004) concludes the latter. In her study over five semesters, the reduced assignments actually increased the quality of contributions posted against the assignments. Student quality requirements were increased which students perceived to have deepened their understanding of the subject.
Brooks and Jeong (2006) report that a large number of pre-structured discussions limited student contribution time and their ability to effectively discuss the topics in appropriate analytical detail. Students and instructors were often overwhelmed with the number of postings (Hewitt, 2005). They could, for example, have read an extremely relevant and well-crafted posting and chose not to comment on it because there were easier postings to respond to.

My experience as an administrator has provided the opportunity to visit classes with a wide range of discussion groups, from one to 56. The former is invariably nothing more than a self-introduction group and the latter excess by an enthusiastic professor who did not realize what he was doing to his students and to himself. One discussion a week gets tiresome in a 16 week class. My personal standard, which has met with some success, is seven discussion groups per class. Therefore, the recommended best number of discussion groups per class should be restrained to five to seven per class.

**Asynchronous Discussion Rubrics**

Now that class size, faculty implementation, grading and total number of discussions have been covered; how should standards be set for students to participate in the discussions? Little in the peer-reviewed literature examined or even simply discussed the use of rubrics for asynchronous discussions. Asynchronous discussion examples from reputable institutions are available through Internet sites. Loyola University of Chicago provides a comprehensive seven-category, five-level rubric. It lists standards for knowledge of the subject matter, research, word usage, applicability to the assigned topic, timeliness and responses to others. The University of Delaware publishes a six category, four level rubric covering frequency, initial posting, follow-up postings, content, references and word usage. Swan, Ou and Kuo (2006) provide an excellent series of charts from a conference presentation that shows how to develop an asynchronous discussion rubric for a particular class. Links are available to all in the reference list.

Some faculty members will argue against the use of discussion rubrics either for reasons of academic freedom or the amount of time spent grading the rubrics. In my use of rubrics, neither seem to be a problem. The clear pre-published expectation standards greatly reduce the student questions. And actual grading is far easier when using a rubric and the feedback can be pointed and specific. Assessment or grading of asynchronous discussion postings and replies is an essential best practice. The more weight given to the discussions likely produces more substantive contributions from the students. Succinctly, rubrics should be used to evaluate asynchronous discussions.

**Faculty Guidelines and Suggestions**

Again, little in the peer-reviewed literature discusses faculty guidelines or suggestions to improve classroom asynchronous discussions. A few schools publish guides, goals or suggestions on how faculty members could best teach online. One of the best is from Spokane Falls Community College in the state of Washington. It publishes a very thorough faculty guide on how to effectively lead online classrooms discussions, listing specific suggestions on how to encourage students to participate. Key points include setting the proper tone early in the class discussion area, requiring student participation by grading both their primary posting as well as their following interactivity with classmates, saving best posts by the faculty for future use in responding and summarizing the discussion at the end of each assignment. This school provides its faculty with a wealth of direction and suggestion on how to effectively use asynchronous discussions.

Another faculty guide in use at the University of Minnesota highly encourages the use of asynchronous discussions even in the traditional classes. The guide notes the great benefit to students and their learning
environment. Though it did not direct specific methods, the site did suggest that each student must make a primary posting and reply to another student.

Swan, Ou and Kuo (2006) provided an excellent series of charts from a conference presentation that suggested specific tools for faculty use and subjects that should considered to optimize online discussion. They justify assessment, goals for discussions, rubric development, and collaboration. They also provided a list of the best practices when teaching those not from the American culture.

At American Public University System, the faculty is required to attend annual professional development sessions, most of which are on the successful use of the classroom tools with the emphasis on asynchronous discussion groups. The Center for Learning provides website resources. One of the eight categories of the annual faculty performance evaluation covers how well the faculty member is stimulating asynchronous discussions. In summary, faculty members need training and guidance on how to effectively use asynchronous discussions.

Conclusion

The following summary lists the best practices in using asynchronous discussions:

- Asynchronous discussion group size should be limited to between four and nine students.
- Assessment or grading of asynchronous discussion postings and replies is an essential component.
- Instructors need to be judicious about how they interact and avoid dominating the classroom.
- Number of discussion groups per class should be restrained to 5-7.
- Rubrics should be used to evaluate asynchronous discussions.
- Faculty members need training and guidance on how to effectively use asynchronous discussions.

References


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About the Presenter

Gary Berry is the Assistant Dean for Advanced Studies Development at American Public University System. He spent 26 years in the Army to include three tours in Germany and commanding four units. He served in various staff positions, such as G1 of the 4th Infantry Division, Adjutant of DELTA Force, a Protocol Officer for the Chief of Staff, Army and in two joint assignments. His PhD is from Touro University International and his research field of interest is asynchronous discussion groups.

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