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LETTER

Use of online discussion boards as a teaching and learning methodology in the postgraduate setting: a commentary

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ABSTRACT

Information and communication technology is now a fundamental component in the delivery of teaching and the facilitation of student-focused learning. Online discussion boards (ODBs) are used in higher education to allow a collaborative exchange of views amongst learners. This commentary reflects on first-hand experiences of ODBs within the postgraduate context.

It can be argued that the success of ODBs is reliant on self-directed learners who are motivated and willing to contribute to the group conversation regularly. Studies suggest learners who actively engage with ODBs activate cognitive processes which result in a stronger course performance and enhanced learning outcomes. However, the quality of ODB interactions is also reliant on assertive facilitators who encourage reflection by adopting a motivational teaching presence. To initiate deeper collaborative learning, facilitators could combine ODBs with face-to-face sessions or create a buddy system which provides a social presence alongside electronic learning.

KEYWORDS: online discussion boards, postgraduate education, self-directed learning, student-focused learning.

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Background

This commentary reflects on my experience using online discussion boards (ODBs) during the Delivering Teaching and Facilitating Learning Opportunities PGCert module and will be framed by Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle (as cited in Wijnen-Meijer et al., 2022).

An ODB includes a group of people with a common interest who have a collaborative exchange of views and opinions, with elimination of geographical or time constraints (Danaher et al., 2021; Ratheeswari, 2018). These may include digital platforms such as Blackboard, Microsoft Teams and Virtual Common Rooms which enable users to engage in conversations and develop peer connections for learning purposes (Ratheeswari, 2018).

Constructivism and online discussion boards

Constructivist approaches incorporate student-focused learning by encouraging development of knowledge through social interactions which create a sense of community and promote higher levels of learning (Covelli, 2017; Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007; McDonald, 2007). As ODBs function within virtual spaces, the importance of creating a collaborative learning environment is vital to sustain interaction and engagement. From the first in-person session, our module tutor created a seating plan with students sitting within their pre-allocated ODB groups. Although ODBs lack a human component and can lead to feelings of isolation, these in-person introductions reinforced the sense of community (Dumford & Miller, 2018). The in-person session allowed students to project themselves as 'real people' by sharing their opinions and experiences (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007, p. 159). Online identities developed with sustained interaction which eliminated barriers and motivated more students to contribute in the exchange (Alghamdi, 2013; Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2015). However, a collaborative learning exchange with varied viewpoints requires self-directed students who are willing to participate (Covelli, 2017).

Cognitivism and online discussion boards

Whilst the formation of dynamic and collaborative communities is vital for the social presence of ODBs, students must actively participate to build new knowledge (Chandrawati et al., 2024). Garrison and Arbaugh (2007) suggested that learners who engage and interact with ODBs develop new knowledge by constructing meaning and understanding through reflection and

sustained discourse. Students who were willing to contribute to the conversation and answer questions proposed by the module tutor developed a greater awareness of the learning objectives which led to further participation. Also, Krentler and Willis-Flurry (2005) found that students who regularly engaged in ODBs had enhanced learning outcomes and stronger course performance.

However, Gasell et al. (2022) found that many higher education students posted on ODBs within the first two weeks of term with a steady decrease in the following weeks. Our ODB interactions correlate with these findings and showed a fifty percent decrease in responses from the first ODB. To encourage sustained interaction, Rovai (2007) proposed a discussion rubric to promote learner-to-learner dialogue and engagement by outlining the expectations for active participation. This standardised mark scheme would allow tutors to review the quality of students' responses whilst providing a guide for students to develop their skills and understanding of collaborative discussion throughout the academic term. Maddix (2012) argued that although rubrics provide clear guidelines for ODB contributions, effective learning requires students who are willing to take responsibility for communal learning and engage in discussions regularly. Discussion rubrics require educator training and thorough designs for effective implementation, which had not been previously considered for this module. If used, this may have helped frame high-quality, coherent responses whilst providing an objective framework to assess learning (Maddix, 2012).

The role of learners in online discussion boards

Hancock (2016) postulated that students can adopt discussion roles in ODBs to promote effective student-focused learning and improve the quality of contributions. Our ODB included several students who independently adopted the role of 'Discussion Starters' to probe comments and encourage discussion. These proactive roles support student-focused learning through autonomy, problem-solving and teamwork (Douglas et al., 2020). However, a qualitative study exploring students' perceptions found that ODBs were not the primary source of knowledge acquisition, with limited opportunities for higher level thinking (Rashtchi & Khoshnevisan, 2021). By pairing students in ODBs, tutors can encourage students to alternate between summarising content, which requires comprehension and reasoning, and connecting ideas to theory through use of references and educational principles to support ideas. Our module tutor did not incorporate a buddying system which resulted in students

embracing comfortable discussion roles aligning with their natural disposition. Wilkinson and Barlow (2010, as cited in Alghamdi, 2013, p. 75) encouraged facilitators to use a buddy system to promote constructivist approaches and self-directed enquiry.

The role of tutors in online discussion boards

Arguably, the quality of the social and content-related ODB interactions is reliant on the direction of facilitators to achieve worthwhile learning outcomes (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). Our module tutor posed open-ended questions, allowing individualisation of thought, encouraging reflection and creating a welcoming learning environment (Maddix, 2012). Tutors are vital in sustaining students' motivational levels by providing structured learning and feedback to meet specific outcomes (Douglas et al., 2020; Rovai, 2007).

On reflection, my initial engagement with the ODB was dictated by the formative curriculum component. However, the direct access to tutor feedback, the collaborative exchange of ideas and the supportive learning environment developed my confidence to contribute. Arguably, a summative component, a discussion rubric and buddy system may have stifled creativity and learner progression. Sustaining inclusive ODBs requires adaptable educators who facilitate structured discourse and create welcoming learning environments.

Conclusion

This commentary outlines ODBs as collaborative learning spaces consisting of motivated students for information exchange and guided by competent educators who actively promote discussions to foster a learning environment of higher-level thinking.

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