Good-bye Discussion Thread: Creating a Community of Inquiry in an online Master's Program

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a detailed methodology used to create a "Community of Inquiry" (Lipman, 2003) in an online Master of Organizational Leadership program at a private New England university. Courses were designed to offer an alternative to asynchronous discussion threads as a primary means of communicating and exchanging ideas. Small group collaborative assignments facilitated active learning, reflective thinking, and discussion. Teams submitted the results of their discussions in a "professional meeting minute format" on the Blackboard platform supported by the university. Using readily available screen capture software, feedback was given to student teams in audio and or video formats by the instructor. The result of this instructional method provided a dynamic learning environment, engaged students and high levels of interaction.

INTRODUCTION

If you gather a group of educators teaching online courses and get them on the topic of using discussion threads as a primary means of student participation and interaction, inevitably the conversation will include passionate language such as:

- Does not meet all learning styles (Kolb, 1984)
- Time consuming, tedious to grade with poor outcomes (Seaman, 2009; Lin & Hsieh, 2001, Song, 2004)
- Students hesitate to be authentic or lack social trust (Song, 2004)
- Lessens personal interaction between teacher-to student and student- to- student (Burgoon, Bonito, Ramirez, Dunbar, Kam, & Fischer, 2002; Jensen, Farnham, Drucker, & Kollock, 2000; Pauleen & Yoong, 2001).
- Too linear (Jeong, 2003)

Online education historically has relied heavily on discussion threads or forums as a means of communication. Asynchronous discussion forums as a main source of teacher-to student and student- to- student communication are inadequate to provide faculty and students the robust environment needed to support lively exchange of ideas for all parties (Burgoon, et al., 2002; Jensen, et al., 2000; Kolb, 1984; Pauleen et al., 2001).

In addition, grading student contributions is time consuming and presents concerns for qualitative analysis (Lin, et al., 2001). This educator introduced a new mechanism for communication using student team submissions based on a professional meeting minute's format and audio feedback, rather like a podcast, from the instructor to student groups. Initial results indicate high levels of personal interaction develop. This environment provides a more eloquent mechanism for graduate students to share learning experiences supported by instructor feedback. The purpose of this paper is to share my experience teaching in an online Masters of Organizational Leadership (MSOL) program replacing the asynchronous discussion thread with a new methodology and the choice of two communication tools that are easily accessed with little or no cost.

SO WHAT IS THE PROBLEM WITH THE STATUS QUO?

Although there are a number of challenges to online teaching as previously mentioned, one of the biggest challenges for faculty can be designing and teaching online courses that translate the experiential style and collaborative culture found in traditional classrooms. Human communication and collaborative work benefit from multisensory experiences that include verbal and non-verbal inputs (Burgoon, et al., 2002; Halliday, Natusch & Stacey, 2009). Quality outcomes are directly affected by high levels of personal interaction (Burgoon, et al., 2002; Gunawardena, 1995; Moore, 1989). Moore (1989) distinguishes three important classifications of interaction in distance education: teacher-student, student-instructional material, and student-student interactions.

The text-only discussion tools as used in many online courses for teacher-student and student-student interaction presents user exchanges in a linear format in what can become a complex network of linked messages. A user typically follows a cumbersome process of posting a thread and/ or reading the links between messages in discussion threads where links between messages can span multiple levels of branching subthreads (Jeong, 2003). Plain text has been shown to be a low order modality that does not posi-

tively affect personal interaction in this environment (Jensen, et al., 2000).

In addition, recent research studies indicate under certain conditions audio cues improve personal interaction between teacher - student, student - student and student - instructional material when compared to text and visual cues in online courses (Burgoon, et al., 2002; Jensen, et al., 2000; Pauleen , et al., 2001). Audio communication provides improved understanding of emotional tone, style and judgments. The addition of rich media has been shown to benefit communication processes (Burgoon, et al., 2002).

Further, three distinct problems stem from the design of a linear text only discussion tool. The first relates to complex networks of linked messages that can act as a barrier to collaboration. The second problem is lack of rich media reduces the quality of personal interaction. XU and Morris state (2007), "It is the interaction and connections built into the course that students remember as the key to learning in an online course (Kang, 2001; Palloff & Pratt, 2001)." (p. 36). The third issue relates to measuring learning outcomes against discussion thread postings. Personal narratives from faculty teaching online courses and current research on the topic accentuate the grading experience as time consuming and challenging (Lin, et al., 2001). Finding solutions to these issues will address expressed concerns by faculty regarding online course efficiencies and quality. Enriching student and faculty online communication exchanges will deepen personal interaction between members and improve perceptions of the course experience.

Community of Inquiry Philosophy

This section looks at factors ideally found in typical traditional class experiences leading to a discussion how these might be included in online course design. In my experience, a typical traditional class starts with a short lecture – no more than 20 minutes followed by in-class group assignments focused on active learning principles (Morgan, Howard & Mihalek, 2005). After an appropriate amount of time, I request a spokesperson from each team share consensus, insights, discussion points or results of their discussion. The learning experience was designed to embrace a Community of Inquiry philosophy. Lipman (2003) in his foundational work, *Thinking in Education*, described a Community of Inquiry as follows:

> … in one sense a learning together, and it is therefore an example of the value of shared experience. But in another sense it represents a magnification of the efficiency of the learning process, since students who thought that all learning had to be learning by oneself come to discover that they can also use and profit from the learning experiences of others (p. 93).

Garrison, Anderson, & Archer (2000), posit that an exceptional higher educational learning experience which is based on this philosophy includes three essential ele-

ments: cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence. Cognitive presence as a "vital element of critical thinking" is described as the most significant of the three.

Students express levels of social presence by their willingness to fully engage with others in their community or group through authentic and open actions. Garrison, et al. (2000) suggest that the success of an educational experience is supported by positive group interactions and personal fulfillment. As such, a small group setting can encourage learning and sharing of ideas.

The teaching presence or instructor's role is twofold. The first is to design a curriculum and structure that facilitates a Community of Inquiry. The second is to facilitate the process of learning and student-to-student interaction. Xu and Morris (2007) state, "In this sense, online course development should be conceptualized as a process of transformation rather than simply translation of lecture content to another medium (Torrisi & Davis, 2000)." (p.36). When this philosophy becomes a foundational approach to course design in online education, it dramatically reduces the "status quo" educational experience for instructors and students. The next section provides detail of my efforts to create a higher level learning experience in the online environment.

AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TO COURSE DESIGN – STRUCTURE

Background

I teach multiple courses and all Master's students in an online leadership program in a typical small New England private college. Students are working professionals who have a minimum of two years work experience. Courses are accelerated and delivered solely online in a seven week format. Typically 25 students are enrolled per course. An instructor is assigned to teach three courses per semester with two sections being the same. This puts upwards of fifty students in a course.

The online platform is an older version of Blackboard 8. This version allows students to be assigned to groups, but does not offer a group grading or group assignment functions. Design options allow for group pages, discussion threads, Wiki pages, and email.

The courses are designed so the first week of the semester students are required to post their introductions and self-select into teams. Self-selection allows students with like interests and most importantly compatible schedules to work together. The ideal team size is between 4-5 students. As part of orientation, students are introduced to the concept of working together on team projects using available communication tools such as Skype, Communicator, Adobe Connect and email. Discussion threads are provided for student-to-student communication within groups in Blackboard. This allows students the ability to work on projects and discuss information outside of their personal or corporate email systems. Wiki pages are also provided as a

means of posting project work to each other. Although it is preferred students use the richest media possible to communicate, there are occasions when students are in remote locations or have time constraints. In this situation, students can use their team discussion thread to offer contribution to the weekly topics being discussed.

Each of the seven weeks is broken into individual and group assignments. As one focus of this paper is group interaction, only group submissions will be discussed in detail. Vrasidas and Cyprus (1999) stated, "Requiring students to engage in discussions and collaborate on projects increased interaction in the course. Therefore, increased structure led to more dialogue and interaction." (p.32). Each week students are responsible to read text, cases, articles or other course materials and subsequently work in their groups to discuss specific questions and/ or work on group projects. Cookson and Chang (1995) suggest adult students empowered by an instructor will benefit from student-student interaction.

Student-Student Interaction

It was my goal to translate the Community of Inquiry experience to the online environment. Postings to the discussion thread did not meet the requirements needed for this enriched culture. As communicating information in concise well-written documents is a valuable skill in business, professional weekly meeting minutes (WMM) format was selected for groups to share the outcome of their meetings (see Appendix A). The WMM form has evolved over time with student input to become a structure that guides reflective thinking on specific topics, works as a time management tool, and provides control mechanisms for student participation. At the beginning of the semester students were provided assignments such as: lecture materials, reading assignments, case studies, and/or article reviews with corresponding questions. The WMM format has been useful for team e-discussion assignments whether the team has an ongoing relationship or comes together ad hoc.

Each week students were required to meet virtually using an application of their choosing to share their perceptions of the material. As previously mentioned, students have the flexibility to chose to communicate using Skype, Communicator, conference calls, or other applications. Following their discussion, they were required to post their meeting minutes on a group page on Blackboard. Their group pages were accessible by the instructor, but not by other teams. To keep the pages organized with an eloquent appearance, each week two separate threads were available: a student-to-student thread for idea sharing and document posting and a thread to post WMM to the instructor. Postings from prior weeks were always accessible during the semester.

Students were required to choose a facilitator each week. This process has also been used successfully by students who assigned a facilitator for each question. Students are allowed a measure of creativity using the WMM form. Students have used the form to prepare the group prior to the meeting. It is important to encourage students to move beyond having one individual post a "text book" response without an in-depth discussion (see Appendix B). This format requires the facilitator to prepare a response as a means to show they answered the question and to initiate discussion. One of the most important components of the WMM is the conclusion for each section. This requires students to move beyond a "text book" response to one that requires reflective thinking and synthesis of ideas. As discussed previously, teaching presence is a critical component of the exceptional higher educational learning experience. In order to facilitate the process of learning and enhance the student-student experience, content-rich, timely feedback needs to be included.

Feedback –Instructor – Student Interaction

Grading student contributions presents concerns for effective use of an instructor's time and even more importantly for qualitative analysis (Lin, et al., 2001). Plain text only responses have been shown *not* to positively affect personal interaction (Jensen, et al., 2000). Instructor feedback provides an opportunity to develop personal interaction between student and teacher. Yet, a plain text feedback tool requires additional effort by instructors and has been shown *not* to be effective in creating a "Community of Inquiry" (Jensen, et al., 2000, Lipman, 2003). Under these conditions, it was important to look beyond the constraints of the system for a means to provide student feedback.

As stated previously, audio cues provide a benefit to human communication and collaborative work (Burgoon, et al., 2002; Halliday, et al., 2009). There are many computer applications that allow users to record lectures. Two different applications have been successfully used in the program, Audacity (http://audacity.sourceforge.net/) is free software for audio only feedback. Camtasia (http://www.techsmith.com/camtasia/) is a means to give visual and audio feedback on team submissions. The software captures what is on the computer screen and can record an instructor's voice. Rather than just using an edit feature on a document such as Word track changes, students are able to hear the instructor's comments while reviewing their submission or other files. Both are relatively easy to use and save files in .mp3 and or .wmv files which can upload to Blackboard or to mp3 players. Often, composing written feedback can be more time consuming than making a few verbal comments, and more importantly verbal messages improve personal interaction in student to instructor relationships (Fulford & Zhang, 1993). Using the software allows instructors to acknowledge students individually by name, comment on their work and extend the conversation.

Weekly Meeting Minutes were graded as team assignments using audio feedback with a rubric (see Appendix C). However, individuals could be graded by requiring each individual to: 1) facilitate a question or provide a real world example, 2) offer a link to article/webpage that adds to the discussion with explanation, 3) provide in-depth crit-

ical analysis on an issue. It could be as simple as including a section– "What is the most important thing you contributed to Question 1 discussion?" Students profit from exercises that encourage succinct, clear summations. Request they put their contribution in a bullet format when possible (Brevity is the soul of wit, Polonius in Hamlet, Act 2). Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1999) suggest consistent and timely communication key to building trust and commitment in distributed teams. Each WMM submission receives a grade accompanied by an audio and or video response of varying lengths. The cycle of learning from student interaction with course materials, to in-depth student discussion, to instructor feedback deepens each week as personal interaction develops.

CONCLUSIONS

A Community of Inquiry philosophy can be structured into an online course. However, all essential elements must be incorporated (Garrison, et al, 2000). Students - especially at the Master's level- must be cognitively present and hold themselves accountable for their own learning. Most students indicate a strong sense of social presence in part because they were empowered to self-select onto a team. As such, peer/social pressure gives meaning to individual preparation for team meetings. Subsequently, higher learning experiences can be achieved as individuals perform at their highest levels. As teams experience active learning scenarios, team dynamics deepen. Even though the semester is only seven weeks, many students express strong bonds among members. The audio/video feedback from the instructor to students provides a powerful means to deepen personal interaction. This is evidenced by both anecdotal comments made to me in emails or through more formal commentary in student's final peer/course reviews.

This course design addresses concerns expressed by faculty regarding the discussion thread as a primary means of communication See Appendix D).   Small group discussion, projects and active learning assignments, accompanied by written and audio feedback from their instructor provide a number of channels to accommodate various learning styles (Kolb, 1984). Grading WMM is not tedious. Instructors gain a good sense of group and individual weekly contributions in a very organized and concise presentation. Providing audio feedback promotes teacher –student interaction and positive group experience with an easy to use assessment tool, WMM rubric. In the beginning of the course, students are encouraged to develop a culture that promotes a community of learning and as such tend to be more open and authentic in small group discussions. To this point, there has been negligible negative feedback about the virtual team meeting requirement. In part because there is an option for discussion thread only communication provided. In this case, teams would still be required to synthesis the conversation and post WMM. The vast majority of students opt to virtually hold meetings via Skype or conference call rather than to just rely on the discussion thread for communication. Duck and Parente (2008) raise interesting and valid points - advancements in technology are entering our educational environment at a rapid pace and the traditional classroom is changing. This can also be said for online education. It is critically important course design does not rely upon existing technical parameters to set pedagogical standards. Rather, innovative use of tools and techniques should offer exceptional higher educational learning experiences for faculty and student alike.

DISCUSSION

A major goal of this paper is to generate discourse about alternative methods using discussion threads as a primary means of communication in online higher education. Another is to raise awareness of methodologies that can be used to create "Communities of Inquiry" (Lipman, 2003) in the online environment. The WMM instructional tool is not meant to preclude the entire class or multiple teams from engaging in discussion and discourse. Individuals and teams can be encouraged to communicate with one another. Additional assignments can also be given during the semester that open the student experience to their peer's opinions and work product. Although the author has been assessing data from peer/course reviews for a number of years and some insight has been gained into the effects of this format on student–student and student-teacher interaction, research using valid and reliable survey methods is recommended. Further research investigating effects of course design on levels of interaction in online higher education will provide a benefit to course designers, teachers and administrators.

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APPENDIX A
Weekly Meeting Minutes Form

MEETING CALLED BY	
TYPE OF MEETING	Type of meeting: such as Conference Call
FACILITATOR	
NOTE TAKER	
DATE(S)/TIME	
DURATION	Such as: 60-minutes
ATTENDEES	
ABSCENT	

Agenda Topic (s)

DISCUSSION	Any Team Forming, Norming, Storming discussions -
CONCLUSION	
Discussion	**Text/.lecture/Video Review – Ch**
CONCLUSION	
Discussion	**CASE/ Article**
CONCLUSION	
OTHER:	

ACTION ITEMS	PERSON RESPONSIBLE	DEADLINE
		Weekly

APPENDIX B
Facilitator Style Weekly Meeting Minute Form

Norming – Week 4 Meeting Agenda

Prior to the call, JW (the appointed facilitator for the week) circulated the agenda below to structure the discussion:
(1) Housekeeping (5 minutes)

- Weekly Minutes - confirm note keeper
- Update on file exchange site on blackboard - Response from Dr. Chandler on ME's clarification e-mail- "Please submit documents you wish me to review in the appropriate week under WMM. You can submit the files as separate documents if that makes it easier for you"
- Dr. Chandler's feedback on our WMM and Design Module responses

(2) Text Discussion – Chapter 6 (15 minutes)

- Discussion on questions on p. 175 -team to discuss some/all of the 5 questions (10 minutes)
- Thoughts on Ch. 7 -optional read (5 minutes)

(3) Organization Insight 6.4 - Liz Claiborne Refashions its Structure (MH Leads) (5 minutes)

- MH summarize thoughts
- Team discussion/reaction/commentary

(4) Case: A New Caterpillar Emerges- p. 177 (ME Leads) (5 minutes)

- ME summarize thoughts
- Team discussion/reaction/commentary

(5) Final paper (JW Leads) (5 minutes)

- JW update team on Design Module #6 (pg. 176)

(6) Case Analysis and Presentation- Case 1 United Products, Inc. (pg. 411) (20-30 minutes)

Discussion Questions
Synopsis of Company
Presentations- Power Point/ Breeze Posting
Presentation Review
  (8) Wrap Up (5 minutes)

- Distribute next week's assignments
- Agree on next steps RE: Minute Posting

| **CONCLUSION** | Since Wk 2 we have rotated facilitator duties per our assigned schedule. In Wk 3 we implemented a meeting agenda which has helped keep the team on task during our 60 – 90 min teleconference. Both of these actions have improved our team discussion and completion of assigned tasks. |

APPENDIX C
Weekly Meeting Minute Grading Rubric

Points	Business/ leadership acumen	Application to Experience (Real World RW)	Synthesis - Course Concept/ Theory Under- standing	Argument - Thesis	Format/content (WMM Form)
5	Consistent, ccurate us-age of terms	Presents many RW situations applied course concepts to RW experience includ-ing personal expe-rience and current events	Shows understand-ing of key con-cepts/theory, syn-thesized infor-mation tied to RWA	Exhibits substantial con-tent and clear organiza-tion and focus. Presents ideas clearly and suc-cinctly.	Professional presenta-tion (format) and style exceeded all require-ments / IA, cases, lec-tures, project work, discussed. Initiative for outside research taken.
4	Adequate usage of terms	Relates practical application applies some personal experience or a current event	Usually demon-strates an under-standing , synthe-sized some infor-mation tied to RWA	The strengths outweigh its weaknesses. It has solid development and is clearly organized and focused, but it is not as strong and has limited organization.	Professional presenta-tion and style met all requirements / IA, cas-es, lectures, project work, discussed.
3	Occational use with few errors	Occationally re-lates to real life skills/goals lacks any strategy for application.	Inadequately demonstrates an understanding rarely synthesized information	The strengths and weak-ness are about equally balanced. The writer has tried to develop ideas, focus the WMM, and use effective language. But parts are underde-veloped, disorganized, or confusing. The writ-ing may also be too gen-eral or predictable.	The presentation met most requirements. Most topics discussed or lacked in depth.
2	Infrequent usage or errors	Little practical application	Poor understand-ing of concepts	The weaknesses out-weigh the strengths. The argument is weak, un-derdeveloped, poorly focused, and too general. However, it could be error-free.	The presentation did not follow many of the requirements. The breadth of discussion was narrow or lacked depth.
1	No terms in usage	No practical appli-cation	No references to concepts	Its weaknesses outweigh its strengths in most ways. It is unfocused, underdeveloped, and also plagued with gram-matical errors that make it unintelligible.	The presentation did not follow requirements. The breadth and depth of discussion was inad-aquate.

APPENDIX D
Implications for the Classroom

The following is provided to instructors preparing for a course that includes a meeting minute format. Prior to the course complete:

Schedule -
1. Map course schedule that involves group work to Blackboard.
2. Fill in assignments (by type) to WMM schedule thus creating a due date document for team discussion. For example, break out discussion topics and group assignments. Discussion topics can be text questions, case analysis, and article reviews.
3. Make a WMM due dates document available with the syllabus to students

Student Orientation -
4. Introduce the concept of a "Community of Inquiry" (Lipman, 2003). Present the idea that they work to bring about a culture where all can be contributing members and were all members have a voice.
5. Have students post introductions and self select into teams.
6. Introduce WMM as a concept to students
   A. Technical Aspects
      1. What is due and when
         a. Require a discussion of team norms and netiquette concerns in the first week of class
         b. Encourage the inclusion of an agenda for each meeting
      2. Where to submit
      3. How to write professional meeting minutes.

   Remind students: The meeting minutes exercise is not meant to be time consuming or a complete diary of everything discussed. Don't try to record notes verbatim – it's not necessary. Minutes are meant to give an outline of what happened in the meeting, not a detailed record of who said what. Focus on understanding what's being discussed and on recording the consensus, opinions or decisions. A website that students have found valuable to improve writing in this style is found at: http://www.effectivemeetings.com/meetingbasics/minutes.asp