Discussion Questions Improvement Project
To Increase Critical Thinking & Decrease Risk of Plagiarism

Increasing Critical Thinking & Decreasing Plagiarism:
A Discussion Questions Project

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Abstract

The use of online discussion original posts (DQs) to stimulate classroom participation and demonstrate learning through research of a topic is a core learning approach. Questions have arisen regarding the originality and quality of thinking in submittals. It was determined that in some existing online courses the "discussion questions" would benefit from guidelines for developing a selection of discussion assignments and rubrics which have a higher probability of generating submittals based upon Bloom's Higher Order Thinking and more original content. A pilot project developed guidelines while updating the DQs to discussion activities and creating rubrics for a selected course. The resulting guidelines are being reviewed and refined using a Delphi method with Faculty and volunteers.

A Discussion Activities Guideline Development Project

In the online learning environment at the subject UK university synchronous class discussions regarding the weekly readings are converted to original essays based upon assigned topics followed by asynchronous replies spread over multiple days. In the last year a project was completed at the sponsoring university requiring all those responsible for maintaining existing courses to review and upgrade course objectives to incorporate language associated with achieving Bloom's Higher Order thinking. The authors, as module managers, noted that a variance in types of discussion activities resulted in a significant variance in achieving the new objectives which called for more analysis and synthesis. The existing discussion activities did not always require the type of thinking necessary to demonstrate the achievement of the revised course objectives.

Background

The objective revisions were done as independent focused tasks. According to Williams Van Rooij (2009) this is not uncommon in educational settings due to response requirements, funding issues and staff availability. As a process engineer and project management instructor, the primary researcher conceived that a research grant could potentially provide the funding to support a combination content analysis and Delphi study within a project approach.   The grant was awarded with the goal of providing a guideline for all courses which include participative discussions. The purpose of this presentation is to solicit IBAM membership perspectives on the elements which need to be included in the guidelines.

The importance of class discussion dates back as far as Kolb's study in 1984 (Andresen, 2009) when the process was identified as critically important to learning. The subject University online campus is based upon the facilitative learning model in which the faculty is responsible for stimulating students to increase their learning through critical thinking discussions (Gorsky & Blau, 2009; Winsted, 2010).   Based upon this model Information Systems courses are structured to have two (2) discussion questions (DQs) each week (selected by faculty from a list of potential DQs) which commence with each student posting their original response to each of the DQs.

The goal of the discussions is to stimulate critical thinking and demonstration of the achievement of learning objectives. According to Webb, Jones, Barker and van Schaik (2004) student achievement of learning outcomes was significantly related to student participation in discussions via original discussion question submittals and replies. Higher levels of substantive participation correlated to higher grades on course exams. However, Andresen's (2009) review of prior literature reports Guldberg and Pilkington's 2007 findings that "Simply forming an asynchronous discussion forum, providing the technology and a question or topic of discussion is not enough to ensure success in an asynchronous discussion." (pg 250). In a brainstorming session Faculty agreed that this

variance is desireable so long as it is balanced to the achievement of all course objectives and various levels of thinking.

Discussion Types

Not all courses are appropriate for the same type of discussions. Andresen (2009) notes two studies found that problem-based courses could have DQs related to ideas and concepts and not for actual problem solving. This correlates to the concept that DQs need to have 'no right answer.' In some courses students are learning new concepts at the 'how' and 'what' level. It is the faculty member's goal to have the student find information that is new to them and report what they have found. There are different 'types' of DQs.

While noting prior research regarding the benefits of online discussion, Dennen & Wieland (2008) posited that task type would significantly impact the levels of interaction and results. In prior research Dennen had found that "When students were asked to discuss topics clearly related to assessments or that encouraged them to share their own experiences they were more likely to contribute than when asked to participate in more generic discussion tasks with unspecified outcomes. In their study Wolff & Dosdall (2010) used discussion questions which were "intended to be provocative and no 'correct' answers were assumed to exist." (pg 57) This differentiation in typing may have significantly contributed to their results demonstrating that such questions and their resulting participation do have a significant impact on learning outcomes. As a result, it is important to have course discussion development processes which include conscious selection of discussion type. It is critically important to have discussion activities which are related to the course readings (Andresen, 2009; Wolff & Dosdall, 2010)

When a DQ is a 'what' question it can result in an attempt to produce a conversation ending 'correct' answer. This was acceptable with prior course objectives. However the course was upgraded to include Bloom's Higher Order language goals and objectives. Higher level thinking often happens when 'why' is asked. K. Winsted (2009) suggests that creating a debate environment for the classroom discussions increases student engagement and stimulates critical thinking. Amanda Cooley (2009) also creates a form of a debate for her course. She notes that it is important to have such discussions because "Business students benefit from as much exposure to best communication practices as possible" (pg. 437).

Writing Quality

It is currently assumed that students are trained in critical thinking essay writing. A review of 210 essays submitted in an online course at the subject university during 2009/2010 indicates that this is not a valid assumption. Discussions amongst faculty during the 2012 faculty conference revealed that not all students in UK masters programs have bachelors degrees. Not all undergraduate programs require writing

skills training.   Discussions with students indicated that they are not accustomed to being graded upon essay writing and most indicated that their undergraduate programs did not require APA formatting. Students need expectations set and to be provided a writing sample and training.

A requirement to apply the topic to the student's life experience needs to be included in the training and demonstrated in the sample.   As Porter (2002) cites Socrates "The unexamined life is not worth living." (pg. 329). Additionally, this 'why' focus and self-application is part of the Socratic Method.   Including the experiential component also increases the breadth of application. Requiring application can show the class all the variations that apply to their various careers and countries.

Faculty Interactions

Faculty engagement with students has been shown to impact the frequency and quality of engagement by students.   Rubrics and grading provide students an incentive to post timely and high quality discussion essays followed by robust participation (Andresen, 2009). Clear expectations and clear guidelines for grading provide consistency across different sections of the same course. That is not to say that all courses ought to have the same rubric. Rather, the Discussion Development Process needs to support the creation of course specific rubrics which align with the Discussion Activities that align with the Learning Objectives.

Research Design & Methods

This research builds upon the primary researcher's prior experience and development of discussion questions based upon the ADDIE model of course development (http://raleighway.com/addie/). Utilizing the existing tools from the author's informal application in the eCommerce course, the tools are being validated and modified to apply current research, and faculty input from brainstorming, presentations and Delphi sessions.   A discussion development process (The Guidelines) is being developed and provided for use in development and/or updating of other existing courses.   The Discussion Guidelines will include the method for establishing the effective Discussion activity type(s) for each week of the course. Templates will be included for a customized course writing training post with a writing sample and discussion rubrics.

Educational Process Improvements

The results of this research are intended to benefit the universities, faculty and students. Students will benefit from being challenged to increase their depth and quality of critical thinking. The ability to question why things happen or are true or if they are true are critically important to the development of executive leadership skills and career advancement into top management positions.   Thus the improved discussion activities will enhance the student learning outcomes.

The course designers and faculty will benefit by having tools to assist them in the development and facilitation of effective discussion activities.   The templates for writing training will promote more effective essay writing by students which stimulates more robust participation.   The rubrics for discussion activity grading will aid faculty in consistent grading across all sections.

The universities will benefit by having discussion activities which are designed to meet the course learning objectives. This methodology will support any accreditation or other approval or certification processes.   The reputation of the university will be enhanced as a result of graduating students with higher levels and depths of critical thinking and communication skills.

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