Promoting Liberal Arts Thinking through Online Discussion: A Practical Application and its Theoretical Basis

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ABSTRACT

Addressing Carsten and Worsfold's (2000) assertion that online learning eliminates the possibility for "liberal learning," the author of this paper describes the context and guidelines for an online discussion assignment that he used as a faculty member at a liberal arts college. The purpose of this assignment was to help students engage in personal development by examining the ways course content manifested itself in their own lives. After describing the assignment guidelines, the author connects the assignment to numerous theories that are often associated with "liberal arts" learning. This theoretical explication includes connections to the need for a synthesis between the personal and professional selves, notions of constructing knowledge, and online discussion's placement within the writing process. The implication of this article is that the instructional strategies embedded in an online discussion, not the online environment itself, sustains a liberal education.

Keywords
Online discussion, Liberal arts education, Writing across the curriculum, Constructivism

Introduction

The Writing-Across-the-Curriculum movement and the integration of computers into the college classroom are two innovations that have the potential to enhance learning. When used in conjunction with each other, these two innovations can radically change the milieu of the typical college classroom. This radical change is particularly evident in a liberal arts classroom, where the emphasis isn't necessarily on occupational preparedness as much as it is on developing skills in critical thinking about the self. Carstens and Worsfold (2000) have argued that the online classroom cannot sustain this type of liberal arts learning because the online classroom does not allow students "the freedom" to "make choices that contribute to their personal well-being" (p. 83). I agree with Carstens and Worsfold that nothing inherent to the online classroom will sustain learning. What I think that Carstens and Worsfold overlook, though, is that instructional designers can embed instructional strategies into online courses (c.f. Morrison & Guenther, 2000; Tam, 2000) that allow students to have the opportunity to engage in liberal arts learning.

The purpose of this paper is to describe an asynchronous, computer-mediated writing project that I’ve used in an effort to make learning a more cognitively substantive and intensely personal experience for students in a liberal arts college. This project serves as an example of how instructional design can be used in asynchronous learning environments to promote liberal arts learning. After describing the context in which this writing project occurred, I will offer a description of the project’s guidelines, and I will explain the theoretical rationale for the project.

Context for the Online Discussions

I am a former faculty member at a small liberal arts college in the Southeastern United States. As a faculty member in that college, I taught courses in various disciplines, including Teacher Education, Humanities, Communications, and Business. I have used variations of the asynchronous discussion project described in this article in each of these courses. Further, I have used variations of this writing project over the span of three years.

Regardless of which course I was teaching, a number of institutional goals informed my use of this project. The liberal arts mission of the college included an emphasis on students' critical thinking skills. The college was also

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a Christian College; therefore, its mission included an emphasis on students’ spiritual growth. Strikingly, both the goal of developing critical thinking skills and promoting spiritual growth suggest an emphasis on students’ personal development, as opposed to their preparation for the market place. This idea of education for the sake of personal development is consonant with the notion of liberal arts learning as described by Carstens and Worsfold (2000). As a faculty member at this institution, I had to adjust my pedagogy to focus on this issue of personal development.

Also, the students who attended the college informed my use of this project. The students were extremely heterogeneous in age, ranging from traditional college students to adult learners who were nearing retirement. Students also reflected the racial diversity inherent to the United States’ Mid-South region, and my classes usually had an even distribution of white and black students. Opinions among students were often politically, economically, and sociologically polarized along racial and generation lines, which resulted in a large diversity of opinions about course content. These opinions were also usually deeply ingrained in students’ belief systems, which meant students were often hesitant to even consider opposing viewpoints. In the name of tolerance for a variety of opinions and perspectives, students needed an educational environment where all voices could be heard.

Description of the Online Discussion Project

Students participated in a mass e-mail discussion group, commonly called a listserv. Students sent me e-mail about the relationship between course content and their own lives. My e-mail software automatically forwarded the e-mail to the entire class. This dissemination of e-mail provided a plenary forum for dialogue and discussion about the ways course content manifested itself in students' daily lives. In this section, I describe the assignment guidelines, my role as the instructor of the course, and evaluation processes.

Assignment Guidelines

Students were divided into two groups, and the project was based on a three-week cycle. During the first week of the cycle, one group was responsible for posting an original message to the listserv. The other group was responsible for replying to these original posts. During the second week of the cycle, the roles were reversed; students who posted original messages during the first week of the cycle became respondents, and the respondents from the first week of the cycle posted original messages. During the third week of the cycle, students in both groups were responsible for elaborating on the dominant themes that emerged from their discussions during the two previous weeks. This three-week cycle was repeated throughout the semester.

The original postings were to reflect the students' understanding of course content and elaborate on the ways the content manifested itself in their day-to-day lives. That is, their original contributions should involve more than a simple summary and paraphrase of readings and classroom activities; students were required to make connections between course material and their lives. To make this type of connection, students could:
- share practical applications of course materials. (For example, a student in an education course wrote about how her third-grade teacher inappropriately applied a specific discipline technique.)
- explain how course content manifested itself in their activities as consumers. (For example, a student in a business course wrote about how she used gambits of negotiation when buying a car.)
- establish and defend a position on a controversial issue related to course concepts. (For example, in a first-year-writing course, a student argued that Black English Vernacular should be an accepted written dialect in all discourse communities.)
- connect course content to current events or pop culture. (For example, in an Introduction to Public Speaking course, a student analyzed a political candidate’s use of classical rhetoric and the impact of that rhetoric in his own thinking about political issues.)

Respondents selected two original posts and offered reactions and feedback to those posts. Their larger purpose in responding was to encourage continued dialogue and further exploration about the original post. The possibilities for encouraging continued dialogue are endless, but techniques for responding included asking questions about the original post, offering dissenting opinions to a perspective in the original post, and noting similarities between the respondent’s experiences and experiences described in the original post.
The Role of the Course Instructor

During the first several semesters that I required students to participate in online discussions of this type, I actively contributed to the discussions by offering my own expert perspectives and understandings of course material as a basis for discussion. Over time, I realized that my expertise is irrelevant—and maybe even detrimental—if the goal of the discussion is substantive and lasting student learning. Therefore, instead of playing the expected role of “giver of knowledge,” I made an effort to help students more deeply analyze their classmates’ contributions to the discussion. I accomplished this goal in a variety of ways, including the use of Socratic Questioning, synthesizing students’ contributions to highlight similarities and differences of opinions, and encouraging additional commentary.

In short, my responsibility was to shift gears from playing the traditional role of a college professor—often characterized as an expert, umpire, judge, and critic—to playing the role of a facilitator in the educational process—characterized as co-learner, coach, counselor, and mentor. In spite of this shift, my role was not solely reactive. It was my responsibility, for example, to make sure that students were basing the discussion on factually correct and thorough information. To meet this responsibility, I sometimes reminded students of information from course readings that they seemed to be giving short shrift in the discussion. I also sometimes attempted to anticipate the direction of a conversation and supplement students’ understandings by sending them hyperlinks to web pages and other relevant online resources.

Evaluation Processes

Participation in the discussion comprised twenty percent of a student’s course grade. I was not the sole evaluator who determined that grade, however. Self evaluation and peer evaluation were important components of the evaluation process and allowed students opportunities to improve their contributions to the discussion, and thus their final online discussion grade.

To facilitate self-evaluation, I required students to evaluate their own contributions to the discussion by completing dichotomous or likert-scale checklists. The items on the checklists referenced the evaluation criteria. In addition, students provided specific excerpts of their contributions as evidence for meeting each criterion.

Peer evaluation was also an important component of the evaluation process. For example, students completed likert-scale items and addressed open-ended questions about the contributions of their classmates. Students discussed—both asynchronously and during face-to-face class sessions—these evaluations, and they devised formal plans for improving the quality of their individual and collective contributions to the online discussion.

Theoretical Framework for the Online Discussion Project

Most basically, this project was framed by the use of asynchronous discussion as a cognitive tool. Metaphors of "computer as tool" do have limitations (c.f. Bowers, 1998; Galin & Latchaw, 1998); but in this assignment, online discussions became a tool for promoting Liberal Arts thinking. Online discussion allowed students to develop a more synthesized sense of self, construct knowledge, and more productively engage in the writing process.

Synthesis of the Private and Academic Self

Traditionally, pedagogues have argued that there is a distinct separation between an academic’s personal self and professional self. As a result, the pedagogy of many academics afforded students few opportunities for making personal and emotional connections with course content.

This traditional view of a clear separation between the personal and professional self has changed, however. Across academe, many realized that the academic self does not act apart from the personal self (c.f. Tompkins, 1987; Gudmundsdottir, 1991). As a result of this realization, the personal writings and other autobiographical narratives that are sometimes a part of online discussions and listservs became a valid academic writing style because they can lead to reflective thinking and active knowledge generation among students (Hoover, 1994; Graham, 1991). Indeed, personal narratives can serve as "powerful vehicles of the intellect, as engines that warm
and drive the mind, capable of doubling back or going great distances, carrying with them the maps and memories of all previous trips, along with plans for the next” (Gannett, 1991, p. 99).

Constructing Knowledge

Philosophically, Constructivism is based on the notion that knowledge and truth do not exist beyond a person’s perception (Duffy & Jonassen, 1991). If truth does not exist beyond perception, then students cannot be educated by simply memorizing and regurgitating a database of knowledge (Jonassen, 1991). Instead, a Constructivist pedagogy requires collaboration and dialogue among students as they actively construct knowledge—discover situated meanings and create a personal perspective (Jonassen et al., 1995; Savery & Duffy, 1995).

The type of online discussions described in this article is aligned with Constructivist pedagogy since online discussions require “a collaborative learning process where an audience provides feedback and analysis [through] e-mail” (Fabos & Young, 1999, p. 223). The feedback and analysis help students form personal perspectives and construct knowledge. This connection between online discussions and Constructivism is not artificially contrived. Tam (2000) notes that the use of technology as a pedagogical tool inherently creates a paradigm shift: Knowledge is no longer a possession; it is a construction. Learning is no longer externally guided; it is self-guided. Instruction is no longer an imparting of knowledge; it is a social exploration.

The Writing Process

Online discussions offer students an entry point into the writing process by serving as a form of prewriting and invention—the first step of the writing process. By discussing course material, students are inventing perspectives that can be included in polished drafts of essays, research papers, and other course projects. Said differently, “writing to learn”—online discussions—leads to opportunities for “writing to inform”—drafting main points in major course writings. (See Fulwiler, 1986, and Adams & Hamm, 1990, for a thorough discussion of “writing to learn” and “writing to inform.”)

This perspective is consistent with Kemp (1998) who argues that invention is inherently a social act. What’s more, since e-mail is more similar to conversations than to formal writing, online discussions provide a comfortable environment for invention and brainstorming. This comfort is enhanced by the “pseudo-anonymity” of computer-mediated communication (Kemp, 1998), which allows students to more comfortably divulge the personal self to classmates.

I would be remiss not to point to the limitations of online discussions as they relate to the writing process. For example, the belief that online discussions can serve as a tool for improving students’ writing skills is highly problematic. Fabos & Young (1999) have rightly noted that little evidence exists to connect electronic, socially-constructed writing exchanges with language acquisition or improved writing. By pointing to this problem, I am not suggesting that writing should never be taught in an online environment; I merely am noting the limitations of online discussions as they are presented in this article.

Conclusion

I recognize that in this paper I have not presented an empirical examination of my approach to using online discussion. Such empiricism is needed because it would bring more rigor to examining the type of online discussion that I propose. I also recognize the limitations of reporting the theoretical beliefs and practical approach of one instructor. Even though I base my beliefs in an examination of theory and even though I have seen the merits of my approach in a number of courses across many disciplines, it is reasonable to call my specific methodology into question without a broader testing of that methodology across more disciplines and various instructors.

In spite of the weaknesses of this article, though, I have shown the merit of online discussion. In the electronic age, students will be—whether faculty like it or not—less dependent on subject-matter experts for knowledge (Pitt & Clark, 1999). In fact, the information age has changed the very nature of what counts as valid knowledge. Valid knowledge is not discrete bits of information that exist in textbooks; instead, students create knowledge as they make meaning of information and its relationship to their day-to-day lives.
This article suggests that online discussions may be one tool to help students collaboratively construct a better understanding of course material and examine the ways that their newly-constructed knowledge intersects their day-to-day activities. As a result, students become more fully engaged in the educational process, and thus more fully human. Isn’t that one of the points of a liberal arts education?

References


