Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

LEARNING & TEACHING

UNIVERSITY
OF WOLLONGONG
AUSTRALIA

Out of the too-hard basket:

Strategies for productive online (asynchronous) interactions

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A bit of background

- B.Arts – Italian and English Language and Linguistics, 2007
- M.Ed (TESOL), 2009
- PhD, 2014
- Teaching Development Team @ LTC since 2014

Strategies for asynchronous interactions (as the preferred form of online discussions in HE) – emerged from my PhD study

2014 ESDF grant – developed and trialled Communicative Strategies for Productive Online Discussions

2016 OLT Seed grant – UOW with Victoria University, University of the Sunshine Coast and Central Queensland University

Overview

- Thinking about the benefits of discussion
- Tricky? The transfer to online asynchronous discussion
- Designing-in discussion
- Explicit support: the impact
- What students said …
- A checklist

Why is discussion beneficial?

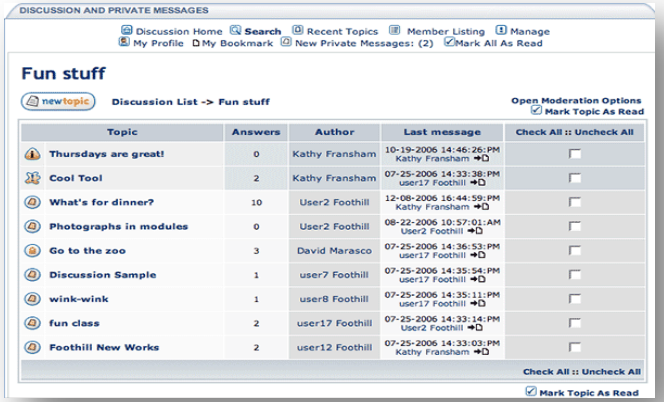
Why is discussion beneficial?

Enables teachers and students to:

- Engage meaningfully in the learning process
- Negotiate new or different ideas / perspectives
- Practice communicating in the 'discipline discourse'
- Contribute to individual and collective knowledge – fill gaps in understanding
- Create a social space for learning - a sense of community, 'safety', belonging …
- Foster a sense of shared purpose / goals
- Form identities as learners – i.e. as *becoming-professionals*

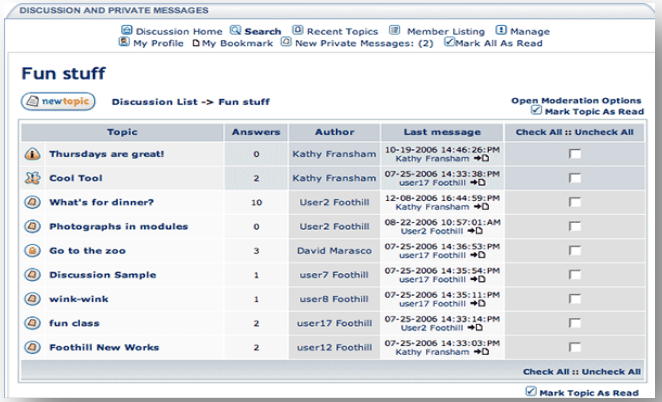
Transfer to online discussion - tricky?

think



Transfer to online discussion - tricky?

F2F to online discussion – NOT DIRECTLY TRANSFERABLE



- Separation (time, space, physical / geographical)
- Lack of immediacy for clarification
- Lack of meaning-making cues (gesture, facial expressions, voice tone/volume …)
- The weight of ‘meaning’ is wholly dependent on the written text

Transfer to online discussion - tricky?

What is the purpose of online discussion?

‘discussion’ or ‘display’?

Should discussion be assessed or not?

How / what do I assess?

Should I be involved or not? How involved?

(How) does it meet / link to learning outcomes?

How will it affect my workload?

Delahunty, Verenikina & Jones (2014)

Designing-in discussion

What a discussion task **should not** be ….

something an individual can do in isolation or independently of others

(for example: *Access the lecture / readings and answer the following questions*)

Designing-in discussion

To encourage students to engage in discussion, consider:

- the learning outcome(s) – building skills / knowledge for assessment – now or future
- the concepts, issues or ideas students will need to be(come) familiar with – what is the BIG IDEA?
- the resources students will need access to (including your expertise)
- the communicative skills that will enable students to participate (make no assumptions)
- tasks which promote purposeful discussion, related to content, learning outcomes, and world beyond … clarity in expectations for engagement

Designing-in discussion – an example

Discussion around a case study

The case

A four-and-a-half-year old girl Masha was asked to get a candy from a cupboard shelf. A couple of stools and a stick were offered to her as possible tools to reach the candy. Researcher's description of the process of her problem solving reads as follows: (Masha stands up on a stool, quietly looking, holding the stick). "On the stool "(Glances at the researcher. Puts stick in the other hand.) "Is that really the candy?" (Hesitates.) "I can get it from that other stool, stand and get it." (Puts the stick down and gets the second stool.) "No, that doesn't get it. I could use the stick!" (Takes the stick and knocks at the candy.) "It will move now." (Knocks the candy). "It moved, I couldn't get it with the stool, but the… but the stick worked." (adapted from Vygotsky, 1978, p. 25).

The task: Please discuss the following statement made by Ivan, a student assistant: **"Masha finally solved the problem, but it took her a long time. Of course, the task was not easy for a four year old, but she could have solved this problem much quicker if she didn't waste her time talking so much!"**

Designing-in discussion – an example

Big Idea: Private Speech

Learning Outcome: Understanding the role of language in children's cognitive development

The case: an authentic discipline based environment / clinical setting

Designing-in discussion – an example

The case was followed by a **direct instruction** of what the students needed to do next:

Please discuss the following statement made by Ivan, a student assistant:

"Masha finally solved the problem, but it took her a long time. Of course, the task was not easy for a four year old, but she could have solved this problem much quicker if she didn't waste her time talking so much!"

Designing-in discussion – an example

Case study

A four-and-a-half-year old
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'DISCUSSABLE' element

frames the case as a problem – Ivan's statement contradicts the learning outcome

CONTROVERSIAL

"Masha finally solved the problem, but it took her a long time. Of course, the task was not easy for a four year old, but she could have solved this problem much quicker if she didn't waste her time talking so much!"

Designing-in discussion – an example

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IVAN'S WORDS

Using Ivan's words gives the sense that the discussion has already started …

"Masha finally solved the problem, but it took her a long time. Of course, the task was not easy for a four year old, but she could have solved this problem much quicker if she didn't waste her time talking so much!"

Designing-in discussion – an example

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Task Instructions are explicit and set the parameters

SUPPORT

Task instructions:
Read the case as well as Ivan's statement, and respond with at least two posts (40-50 words), using the following communicative strategies (also not forgetting the previous strategies – see the guide to forum 4 for more detail):

- Presenting alternatives …
- Challenging the idea(s) …
- Justifying your position …

Designing-in discussion – an example

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Communicative strategies are explicit, with examples of wordings for the strategies to support students (not shown here)

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- **Presenting alternatives …**
- **Challenging the idea(s) …**
- **Justifying your position …**

Impact of explicit, designed-in support

Data for the Non-Guided Forum

	Total no. of Posts*	31 new topics initiated: By Students	By Instructor(s)	No. of topics with responses	No. of topics with NIL response	% of topics unattended to
One Forum	63	23	8	8	23	74% (=23/31)

Table 1: Non-guided discussions - posting patterns. Participants were 21 Students, 2 Instructors (*total includes topics initiated and responses made)

EXAMPLE 1
Subject X: Open, continuous forum – students encouraged to contribute, not guided by the instructor

Data for the Guided Forums

	Total No. of Posts*	40 new Topics initiated: By Students	By Instructor(s)	No. of topics With responses	No. of topics with NIL response	% of topics unattended to	# Forum Views (Students only)
Forum 1	50	0	2	48	0	0% (=0/2)	179
Forum 2	32	8	2	22	3	30% (=3/10)	424
Forum 3	30	3	0	27	0	0% (=0/3)	323
Forum 4	31	1	5	25	1	17% (1/6)	395
Forum 5	17	6	0	11	2	33% (2/6)	211
Forum 7	49	12	1	36	2	15% (2/13)	680
TOTALS	**209**	**30**	**10**	**169**	**8**	**20% (=8/40)**	2212

Table 2: Posting patterns across all forums in the re-designed subject (except Forum 6 which was a resource sharing forum rather than a discussion and therefore qualitatively different). Participants were 13 Students, 2 instructors (*total includes topics initiated and responses made)

EXAMPLE 2
Subject Y: Forums designed around cases and guided by the instructor

Explicit and designed-in support

enabled focused discussion on the topic “Private Speech”

Explicit and designed-in support

Communicative Strategies: enabled informed language choices: to build sense of belonging *and* collective knowledge

"Hi **Wei**, ***I agree with you*** in that I would give Masha as much time as she needed …"

"***I like your comment Karen*** about …"

Building sociality
(naming and acknowledging)

"I have enjoyed reading your discussion … and you have raised some really interesting points. **Just to add to what you mentioned** in this post, I think …"

Adding another perspective
(adding new or varying information)

"… I also feel that one way does not work for all children "

"Would Masha's problem solving be just as successful … if we asked her NOT talk aloud?"

Proposing alternatives
(moving the discussion along)

"You are absolutely right. Yes, we should … but my concern is …"

"I'm in agreeance with you … I would also like to pose the question - are there times when children choose not to use private speech and is it because they feel it is not necessary to assist them as the task?"

Challenging the **idea** (not the person)
(to stimulate deeper, critical thinking)

Explicit and designed-in support

Selection of student comments from survey data:

- social connections leading to a sense of belonging

  *"I felt a **connection and network** was formed within the subject between participants and Lecturers **because of the forums**"*

- an enhanced learning experience

  *"It **clarified ideas, concepts and pedagogical practices**. When I read comments that I disagreed with, it provided me with opportunities to reflect on my own pedagogy and practices as to why I did not agree"*

- transferrable communicative skills

  *"I would feel very confident to use them again as they gave me **confidence to participate** and also to **pay more attention** to what others have written"*

- increased appreciation of different perspectives

  *"I think that the discussions have given me an **awareness** of the importance of everyone's voice … in staff meetings, I listen more actively to what each staff member has to offer"*

A quick checklist

- I know the BIG IDEA I want students to work towards
- I have identified the learning outcome(s) and linked to the task
- I have designed the discussion task with something DISUSSABLE i.e. a problem to solve, some kind of controversy, a gap to fill
- I have been explicit in how students will interact - they know their audience (i.e. *will it be assessed or not?),* have 'wordings' as model texts or starters, and clear about the benefits of investing time in discussion …

If interested in knowing more about online communicative strategies, as part of the OLT Seed Grant:

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‘seeding’ for future collaborations