

# Student moderators in online discussions

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Online discussions can be a major aspect of learning and teaching when a course is offered entirely online. Using online discussions can lead to new considerations of the tutor's role in relation to the students. This article outlines some of the research findings regarding online discussions, and considers these in relation to an online Masters course using a problem based approach. The course makes extensive use of online discussions. In this course, students are given the task of being the online moderator for a week to encourage active participation and development of their ideas through discussion. The article includes evaluation feedback from the students.

**Keywords:** online, discussion, moderator

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## Introduction

The introduction of new technologies to a course is often seen as an opportunity to reconsider both teacher and student roles in the learning and teaching process. Technology may be used to enable students to learn in more active ways, leading to a deeper understanding of the course materials. Some of the ways of achieving this are to apply a problem based approach in which learning is focused on resolving a major issue, and to encourage sharing ideas among the students (Biggs, 1999). Using technology to support active exploration to find new meanings is considered to be an effective way of creating a constructivist learning environment (Jonassen, 1999).

This article examines an online masters program in post-colonial studies of English literature from the perspectives of course design, the application of technology to enable student access, and the approach taken to managing online discussions, a key element in the learning process, involving students as online moderators. The process involved both the course tutor and the students having to learn new and unaccustomed roles – the students needed to learn to moderate an online discussion and the tutor needed to relinquish the accustomed level of control over the process to give the students the necessary freedom. The study will review issues in the literature, and relate these to the design and implementation of the online course and the role of online discussions. The role of the academic staff member in managing online discussions will be considered in relation to the student moderator role, and to staff time required. This course ran with a small number of students, however the process is considered to be scalable for larger numbers. The concluding section will consider the issues in the literature in comparison to the outcomes from course implementation and evaluation, with recommendations for using this approach with students.

## Online discussion

Online discussion can be considered to be a new mode of learning and teaching, of which most academic staff have limited experience of either the teacher or student roles. A number of key characteristics of this mode of learning, using asynchronous discussions, have emerged from research in the area. Some of these, relevant to the study, will be considered here.

The simple fact that online discussion is in writing has major implications. People tend to structure their ideas before writing, which is not always necessary in the free flow of spoken discussion. Many people who find it difficult to participate in oral discussion appreciate the opportunity to reflect and to contribute in writing. A comparison of online and face to face tutorials found online discussion to be less spontaneous, but more reflective and demonstrative of a higher quality of learning (Newman, Johnson, Webb, & Cochrane, 1997).

As in classroom discussions the role played by the tutor is likely to be pivotal to the process. Online discussions may be strongly influenced by the modelling role played by the tutor as this can influence the depth, frequency and nature of student input (McAlpine, 2000). Online discussion, used effectively, can play a critical role in supporting and shaping the students' cognitive processes. Salmon (1998, pp 6-7) suggests the following list of cognitive processes that could be developed and applied through online discussion:

- offering up ideas or resources and inviting a critique;
- asking challenging questions;
- articulating, explaining and supporting positions on issues;
- exploring and supporting issues by adding explanations and examples;
- reflecting on and re-evaluating personal positions;
- Critiquing, challenging, discussing, and expanding ideas of others;
- negotiating interpretations, definitions and meanings;
- summarising and modelling previous contributions; and
- proposing actions based on developed ideas.

One result of these processes, in writing, is that the tutor is able to identify the way students have understood and can articulate key concepts and the course. This can be done in ways that are not possible through other modes (McAlpine & Ashcroft, 2002).

Online discussion needs to be considered in relation to the rest of the course, as the role it plays in the learning process will influence the direction taken by the discussion. One possibility is to focus ongoing discussion around course topics, with frequent new discussion starters, such as every week (for example, McAlpine & Ashcroft, 2002). Other possibilities include problem based formats in which the students work in groups online to resolve problem issues through dialogue and the development of a group response (for example, Oliver & Omari, 1999). This form of learning can play a key role in developing higher order cognitive skills through discussion and problem solving as a group process (Boud & Feletti, 1997) and in developing metacognitive skills that may be effective in transferring learning and problem solving and teamwork processes to new situations (Orion, 2003).

As students develop skills in using online discussion as a learning tool, the pedagogical role played by the tutor may change. To foster the development of cognitive capability and metacognitive skills through active learning processes, students may be given some of the facilitation role (Wiesenberg & Hutton, 2000). This may encourage greater participation in the discussion, prevent domination of the discussion by a few individuals, and lead to greater online collaboration among students (Salmon, 2000). To achieve this outcome, students need to develop skills in the use of and participation in online discussions. A key aspect of this is expert modelling of appropriate processes to be carried out by the online tutor (Wiesenberg & Hutton, 2000).

Online discussion can play a critical role in enabling students to construct a deep understanding of course topics. Cognitive development can occur progressively through ongoing discussion by sharing knowledge and points of view, and reflecting on the perspectives brought to the discussion by other students and the tutor. The written discussion process requires the students to think carefully and to construct their arguments, and the written record demonstrates to the students and the tutor how their understanding is developing. Pedagogical roles facilitate this process. These can include diversifying the tutor role to include students as moderators of the online discussion. This can provide a deeper learning experience for the students, enabling them to shape cognitive development through peer discussion and critique.

## **Course design**

The course on which this study is based was developed under the auspices of a UNSW initiative called the Innovative Teaching and Educational Technology Program (ITET) in which selected participants developed innovative projects designed to capitalise on educational theory and to maximise the potential of educational technology in the university. This course was designed as a template for a suite of six courses in a Master's Program in Post-colonial Studies intended for delivery to an international cohort.

The course, entitled 'Post-colonial Representations' was run fully online for the first time in the second Semester 2003. Of the eight students who finished the course five were located interstate or internationally including some students completing Master's degrees outside the School of English. All discussion, delivery of assessment and feedback was conducted online and the course proved to be extremely successful.

The course was divided into five modules each of which addressed a 'problem' in post-colonial theory and various texts were examined to draw out the literary and cultural issues revolving around each issue. These issues includes the terms 'post-colonial'; representation; resistance; language; and history. The course demonstrated the applicability of problem based learning to the humanities. Although not a strictly functional problem based course, since the problems were not amenable to a solution, the issues presented 'problems' in that they were the site of considerable argument and debate in the field. In this way, the problematic nature of the issues enhanced the potential for independent thought and the articulation of individual positions on the issues. This approach to critical issues in the field proved to be an extremely useful way of developing critical and independent thinking.

The learning outcomes of the course involve high level cognitive and interpretative abilities. At its completion the students should not only be able to identify various critical issues in post-colonial studies but should be able to assess the competing positions in debates about these issues, state a position on the issue and identify the ways in which it affects the production of post-colonial cultural texts. They will be able to recognise that representation itself is not a simple matter of picturing the world but is a complex ideological process of great significance in cultural communication. In keeping with learning outcomes in postgraduate courses, the students are given an opportunity to develop and refine their ability to think independently, form critical judgments and express their ideas articulately. The principle of problem based learning as it was adapted for this course proved to be ideal for the development of these outcomes. The importance of online discussion was confirmed by the high proportion of marks allocated to it in the assessment of the course. Students received 30% of total marks for online discussion; 20% for moderating a week's discussion and 50% for a major essay.

## **Student reflection on moderation**

One specific aim of this first delivery of the course was to assess the place of student moderation in course discussion. Students were required, as part of their assessment, to moderate a week's discussion. Each student would post a draft essay in response to a topic, suggest issues and questions for discussion and lead the discussion for the week. In the course guide the students were given directions on moderating and a separate thread was set up for students to discuss the problems and challenges involved in moderating a week's discussion. Directions included advice on:

- Introducing the Discussion;
- Generating Questions
- Encouraging People to Post Responses;
- Guiding the Discussion;
- Summarising

A separate thread was established in the course in which moderators were asked to reflect on their own performance and experience as a way of improving the process. Some of their comments are included below. Although one aim was to assess the extent to which such student moderation relieved the workload of the tutor, the tutor still participated regularly, but the responsibility for the conception and direction of the discussion was entirely in the hands of the student.

The discussion on moderation started with a flurry but petered out towards the midpoint of the course as students became more familiar with the process and more taken up with the demands of the course tasks. A prominent early concern of moderators revolved around 'netiquette'. One student berated her moderator for not replying directly to her posting and this elicited some intervention from the tutor concerning appropriate tone in online discussion.

### **Essay versus moderation**

It was immediately apparent that the differences between a moderated online discussion and a usual face to face seminar, were greatly beneficial for the learning process. Normally, in a graduate seminar, students would produce a polished paper and read it - whether they go on to lead or even contribute to discussion would depend very much on the person. In this course the student posted a written paper that was not necessarily polished but operated as a stimulus to discussion. The continuous and active learning process then proceeded in the discussion. One student responded:

Its quite an intensive process getting online everyday, analysing everything, coming up with new content and keeping ideas on track with questions – allow lots of spare time the week you're on! I think posing questions to the group is essential, and you should spend time focussing on what you want to achieve from them – broadening the debate, or fine tuning ideas...

For this reason it is important that in an asynchronous discussion the moderators see this as a week long assessment activity (whereas discussion itself is a session long assessment activity), rather than submitted essay. The experience of moderating expressed by the students would suggest that the moderation works better as a learning activity than a polished paper. The written submission at the beginning is still important because it is the basis on which discussion proceeds. But when a student moderates a discussion the process of interacting, and the active engagement it entails, is the important learning experience. Online moderating requires the continual management of the discussion during the week, a moderator ideally logging on every day and his or her effectiveness in managing the discussion often determined by the depth of knowledge of the week's topic.

### **Set questions versus new material**

One interesting feature of the discussion was that very often the set piece questions offered by moderators in their papers were not taken up in discussion. Obviously the moderator needs to push whatever line of discussion is felt to be beneficial. If the questions are posed in the paper they need to be reiterated if the moderator still feels they are important. But then again, the discussion may take a direction that is more exploratory, in which case the moderator needs to reformulate questions as a stimulus to discussion. This suggested that the discussion takes on a life of its own as the students link the problem at hand to issues close to their experience.

This is precisely what happened when students posted new material. The offering of new material by both the moderator and discussants during the week provided substantial evidence of the superiority of this form of discussion over a face to face seminar. Such new material – online essays, news items or images – was a great stimulus to discussion. Invariably, students provided attachments of topical issues that constructively adapted the problems being discussed to immediately relevant events. The reflection demanded by online discussion was enhanced by added material which ensured that discussion remained relevant and lively.

### **Early entry into discussion**

It was important to stress that people get into the conversation early in the week. The temptation in a situation in which the discussion is assessed is that people simply offer monologues. These can be very good, but lose the dynamic of the dialogue that leads to reflection and the refinement of thinking. The task of moderator is helped by the early involvement of the class. One student moderator responded:

I agree that it is important to get into the thread early. As a moderator it is difficult to keep going back to questions which have been dealt with earlier when you are trying to move forward in the discussion. That said, sometimes concepts need to be revised as not everyone can be on the "same page" all the time.

### **Variety of learning skills**

One student identified the intensity and variety of the skills involved in moderating:

Moderating can be hard because in a short space of time you have to cover a lot of ground and it can take time to get use to different styles of writing and expression in the class. Further, the limitations that present themselves as a result of not being able to thrash out an issue with everyone present can slow things down a little. That said, the great thing is that you can ponder people's ideas.

The danger in moderation, particularly with a small group, is that the moderator feels obliged to respond to every posting. One moderator in particular valiantly tried to mention everyone, and respond to individual postings. But this tended to become a two way response rather than a multi-levelled conversation between the various participants. One of the more engaging descriptions of the intensity and motivation of the learning experience involved in moderating a week's discussion was provided by a student who says:

I would come home from work exhausted, but then after reading your comments and beginning to type my own responses, I'd slowly wake up. And then I couldn't go to sleep because I'd still be thinking about what people had said! Then the next day would come and I'd do it again... I would suggest that you do get into things early and research your topic properly before your week of moderating, knowing the novel well really helped me to pull the points together – as you don't want to be learning this while trying to moderate because writing up posts are quite time consuming.

## End of course evaluation

The evaluation was carried out using a questionnaire that was completed online at the end of the course. The questionnaire asked specific questions, scored on a Likert scale, and open ended questions. The specific questions were grouped thematically in the questionnaire. Each group of questions was followed by an open ended one to give the students a chance to elaborate on the issue with their own views. Thematic groups for questions included support and guidance for online learning, the problem based learning activities, online moderation, and tutor guidance and feedback. The student responses to these provide a perspective on the critical learning design issues for the course.

Students responded positively to questions about support, resources and guidance for online learning. The open ended questions revealed some difficulties, such as slow downloads and orientation to the new technology and different mode of learning. These, however, were seen as relatively minor and were balanced with positive comments about the process.

**Table 1: Questions on problem based learning activities**

		SA*	A*	NS*	D*	SD*
9	The problem/project topic had some features that were familiar to me.	1	5			2
10	I found the problem/project topic appropriately challenging.	7	1			
11	The problem/project enabled me to build on knowledge I already had	3	3	1		1
12	I developed new knowledge by working on the problem/project	7	1			
13	I learned little that was new by working on the problem/project				1	7
14	The method of addressing issues as problems was a useful aid to learning.	1	6		1	
15	The fact that the problems might not have a specific solution proved to be a difficulty for me.		1	1	4	2

\* Strongly agree SA; Agree A; Not sure/does not apply NS; Disagree D; Strongly disagree SD

The constructivist approach to course design is reflected in the problem based aspect of the course design, and the knowledge construction processes associated with problem solving through online discussion and writing. Table 1 shows the questions related the problem based aspects of the course design. These

questions are designed to reflect the cognitive processes of associating new knowledge with prior knowledge (q. 9), fostering elaboration of existing knowledge structures through activities that are appropriately challenging (qs. 10 – 11), and constructing new knowledge through problem solving (qs. 12 & 14). As some students find open ended problem situations unsettling, question 15 was included to see if this caused difficulties. One student, out of eight, indicated that this was a difficulty.

In general the feedback from the questionnaires was positive. Most students agreed that the problems had familiar topics, were appropriately challenging, enabled them to build on existing knowledge, and to develop new knowledge. Two students (25% of this survey) found the problem topics unfamiliar, and two did not agree that they were building on existing knowledge. In the open ended comments, two students indicated that they found the theory to be new and difficult, which could explain these responses.

Most students agreed that the problem based approach was a useful aid to learning. There was one disagreement with this, possibly the same student who had difficulty with the open ended nature of the problems. This response is to be expected as it is always likely that some students will not appreciate problems without definite solutions. A higher percentage of negative responses to questions 14 and 15 would have indicated that some design changes were needed, possibly by including more specific guidelines. A student who, in the open ended comments indicated that the theoretical articles were particularly challenging, also indicated that reading other students interpretations also helped. This provides some confirmation of the effectiveness of the written discussion method used in the course.

**Table 2: Questions on student moderation**

		SA	A	NS	D	SD
18	The online moderation was a valuable learning experience.	5	3			
19	I learned a lot from other people's online moderation.	7	1			
20	The questions for online discussion were a useful aid to learning.	6	2			

Table 2 presents the questions relating to student moderation. Responses to these questions were unambiguously positive. Responses to an open ended question on problems, if any, with the moderation process indicated:

the process worked well but was really hard work as the moderator for the week could spend 2 – 3 hours per day online;  
 some students hadn't engaged with the readings which meant their comments were speculative;  
 while the process was time consuming, a good understanding was needed to make thoughtful postings. This meant that people took more care than they would in a class discussion, and that they have a great resource of course notes to refer to.

The final open ended questions asked the students to elaborate further on any of the previous issues. Points made by individual students include:

It is more work than a face to face course. The model should be used in other schools within the university  
 The course was really enjoyable.  
 An advantage of online learning is having to formulate thoughts in advance to present them in writing. This led to a deepening of analytical and critical skills. Depth of learning has been much greater than in a face to face class, yet the social interaction of being in a class group was missed. Improvement is intellectual and the students lose out on the social/psychological benefits of being in a classroom.  
 It was surprising how much was learned from this method. Everybody in the group was very motivated and articulate in postings to the online discussion.

Many students made strongly positive comments about the course tutor (BA) for his interest in the students, his depth of knowledge of the course material, and for making the course an enriching experience.

## Discussion and conclusions

This course took an innovative approach to online discussions by using the student moderators rather than leaving all moderation to the course tutor. This is seen to be consistent with a constructivist approach, as the moderation process, in which the student puts forward a point of view in a draft essay then leads a discussion on the topic that encompasses a range of other points of view, before polishing the final draft of the essay, encourages both a cognitive and a social constructive process. The students, in the End of Course Evaluation, could clearly identify how their skills had developed during the process. This approach appears to have been very successful with these students, and is likely to work with other students in appropriate circumstances. The applicability of these findings to a larger course can be determined from a pilot study made of a previous course (McAlpine and Ashcroft 2002) in which findings were collected from eight students. Subsequent offerings of that course attracted over two hundred students with tutors directing groups of 15-20 in which the initial findings were replicated. This illustrates that a successful course model of this kind can be scalable to larger courses in which discussion is moderated by students in tutorial groups.

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