



## Engaging students in learning through online discussion: A phenomenographic study

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This article draws on the findings of phenomenographic research into university teachers' conceptions of learning through online discussion. It was revealed that university teachers consider online discussion in their pedagogy to – a. provide time and access; b. engage learners; c. foster a community of learners; and d. enable higher-order cognition and learning. Widening participation in higher education reinforces the challenge for teachers to encourage learner engagement. This article explores the adoption of online discussion as a strategy to engage learners. It contributes to our understanding of how teachers' think about learning technologies, in particular, asynchronous online discussion and its affordances for learning. There are implications for university teachers, educational designers, academic developers, e-learning professionals and all those involved with the enhancement of student engagement, learning experiences and outcomes.

Keywords: engagement, online discussion, phenomenography, teachers' conceptions

### Introduction

Engagement is recognised as a fundamental attribute of deep learning. Teachers of school education, workplace professional development and higher education are particularly focused on strategies to engage learners in activity for learning. Fostering engagement involves well-designed curricula, courses, lessons and student exercises. Increasingly, our learning environments involve technology to mediate student-teacher, student-student and student-expert communication, particularly in online programs and increasingly in blended programs. In light of a call to widen participation in higher education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008), the synergy between good strategies for engagement and the affordances of computers, the Internet and mobile technologies is an important line of research. There is general agreement that engagement is important in learning and teaching however, as revealed by Harris (2008), there is less agreement on what counts as engagement. Harris (2008) found six qualitatively different conceptions held by compulsory school-teachers (p. 68).

This article draws on the findings of a recent study that revealed university teachers' conceptions of learning through online discussion in various positive ways, including as a way to engage learners. The study extends specialised research into university teachers' conceptions of and approaches to e-learning (Ellis, Hughes, Weyers, & Riding, 2009; González, 2010) and blended learning (Ellis, Steed, & Applebee, 2006) by investigating a single but central component of e-learning courses – online discussion (Palloff & Pratt, 2007, p. 148). Ellis et al. (2009) found university teachers think about learning technologies as – tools to enable access,

tools for information delivery, tools to provide active learning and tools to build knowledge. The research described in this article is situated broadly in literature on students' and teachers' conceptions of phenomena in education (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999). Conceptions are important because they inform teachers, educational designers and researchers of how to approach pedagogy, design and research in light of current practice with and thinking about phenomena in education. This study investigates one of the teacher competencies that Goodyear, Salmon, Spector, Steeples and Tickner (2001) refer to as *facilitation of online learning*. Additionally, the study described in this article incorporates preliminary research findings (Parisio, 2010).

## **The importance of discussion and online discussion**

Discussion can enliven classrooms by creating a balance of students' and teachers' voices (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005). It is a valuable way to reveal diverse and complex views about a topic as learners are guided to explore questions, challenge beliefs and learn about other perspectives on subject matter. Indeed, good teaching has been described as 'a sort of conversation' where learners and teachers are equally listening and talking (Ramsden, 2003, p. 160). Interestingly, it is often a large component of our courses but rarely articulated in curriculum documents. Moreover, it is central to instructional strategies such as cooperative and collaborative learning but it's taken-for-granted that our students will know how to effectively practice democratic discussion for learning.

In online courses, discussion for learning moves from the traditional face-to-face context to an online environment – usually, but not limited to, a learning management system. Indeed, some campus-based courses incorporate online discussion components in a blended mode of teaching and learning (See Ellis & Calvo, 2004; Ellis & Calvo, 2006; Ellis, Goodyear, O'Hara, & Prosser, 2007; Ellis, Goodyear, Prosser, & O'Hara, 2006). Brookfield and Preskill (2005) suggest that often online discussion is experienced as sterile, unfriendly and alienating. Many of the contextual cues we have come to rely on in traditional face-to-face discussion, such as the speaker's tone, tenor, intonation, and facial expression, are removed. Like many faculty teaching staff, Brookfield and Preskill were sceptical of a trend to commodify and strip courses of the presence of a face-to-face teacher (2005, p. 215). However, the present study reveals that teachers think about many benefits for learning through online discussion. In the next section, an outline of how the study was conducted is presented.

## **Methodology**

The study adopted a broad phenomenographic approach to research. Phenomenography emerged out of seminal studies investigating students' approaches to and conceptions of learning (See Marton, 1981; Marton & Säljö, 1976). The aim is to systematically reveal and describe the various ways that people experience phenomena in education (Marton & Booth, 1997, p. 111). It is qualitative and based on a second-order perspective on phenomena, thus phenomena are understood by learning how other people experience them (Marton & Booth, 1997). This is in contrast to the researcher directly studying the phenomena (first-order). Phenomenography has been adopted in various ways to research students' and teachers' conceptions in higher education research, compulsory education, health and business research (Harris, 2011).

The sample size (N=15) for this study was based on recommendations from experienced phenomenographers who indicate that fifteen to twenty participants adequately allows for saturation of categories (Bowden & Walsh, 2000). Saturation means there will most likely be repeated conceptions in the sample but most importantly all the various conceptions are captured. In order to capture the greatest variety of conceptions, the sample varied on discipline; class size; degree type; teaching mode (online/blended); and years of experience teaching with technology. They were professors, associate professors, senior lecturers and lecturers who all used online discussion in their teaching. Data was collected systematically via in-depth semi-structured interviews with a focus on the question – What does learning through online discussion mean to you? The interviews were a joint interviewer-interviewee exploration, or in other words, a constitution of the phenomenon as seen by the interviewee. An articulation of the interviewee's reflections on their experience was made as complete as possible by following up with probing questions (Marton & Booth, 1997).

Systematic analysis was performed in three iterations, as is recommended in phenomenographic methodology. The first involved reading the text-based transcripts line-by-line to identify utterances that related to the area of investigation. Analysis of interview transcripts was conducted in a way similar to open coding in Grounded Theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The analysis went beyond the words and content to explore the meanings that people were conveying. The second iteration involved bringing together the utterances into groups of conceptions by identifying similarities and differences in meanings. A conception was compared with the pool

of meanings gathered during the first analysis and also within the context of its transcript. In this process, some conceptions were merged as they were essentially describing similar experiences. The third iteration of the analysis shifted focus to the relationships between the categories. The groups of utterances were arranged, re-arranged and narrowed into categories by testing them against the original data – adjusting, retesting and readjusting again until eventually the whole system of meanings was stabilized (Marton, 1994). These conceptions were arranged in hierarchical-order to reveal the outcome space. Importantly, logical relations between the categories were described to highlight the hierarchical arrangement: the higher-order categories encapsulate and extend the lower-order ones (Bowden & Walsh, 2000).

## Results and discussion

The majority of research participants described experiences with asynchronous text-based discussion that took place on a ‘discussion board’ in a learning management system. Only two participants described experiences with synchronous online discussion (the real-time rapid exchange of text and/or audio). Nonetheless, all experiences were treated as research data. It was revealed that the university teachers sampled think about learning through online discussion as a way to –

- a. provide time and access,
- b. engage learners,
- c. foster a community of learners, and
- d. enable higher-order cognition and learning.

The richness and variability of the knowledge that teachers have about learning through online discussion resonates with some conceptions of learning technologies. For example, learning through online discussion as a way to provide access for remote, isolated and online students (category ‘a’) was consistent with thinking about learning technologies as tools for access and information delivery (Ellis, et al., 2009, p. 112). For the purpose of this article, category ‘b’, to engage learners, will be explored and discussed in detail in the next section.

### Category b. Learning through online discussion as a way to engage learners

This category of conceptions relates to the way teachers consider online discussion as a way to engage learners. It reflects a shift of focus from technology to learning and students. It encapsulates using online discussion as a way to build confidence, self-efficacy and self-esteem and to encourage ‘*experimenting and risk taking with ideas*’ (Teacher 2). It also encapsulates the first category where teachers described experiences of using online discussion to give the learner time to think about and construct a contribution to the discussion. The representative quotation for category b is reproduced below, along with other quotations in the category. A commentary on analytical thinking is offered to increase transparency.

[...] where people feel safe and prepared to take a risk and where they support one another and comment and respond to what other people are saying in their own time. [...] I think there is anonymity in an online discussion forum, although students know each other’s name. It is a safe environment where students are prepared to speak out (Teacher 12).

In the representative quote above, the teacher describes online discussion as a way of engaging students because they are more likely to take risks. This quotation aligns with a conception of engagement that focuses on motivation and confidence in participation (Harris, 2008, p. 65). In this way, students are more likely to engage in the learning exercises. In another way, the quote below refers to an attempt to use technologies that students are familiar with in their social life. This teacher is drawing on a popular social networking culture (e.g. Facebook) to foster engagement in the learning.

What is it that students today engage in that they can bring from their social life into their educational life? So, I thought, this is where a lot of students are spending their time with their social networking type things. If I can build on those skills and use discussion forums in that way, then hopefully I am going to promote engagement. You know tapping into what students, like to do (Teacher 13).

In the teacher quotation below, asynchronous online discussion is considered part of assessment. This teacher describes a focus on contribution quality to determine if a student has demonstrated ‘deep engagement’ in the discussion. In this quotation, the teacher described a focus on those contributions that *further the discussion* as

evidence of engagement.

So a post that demonstrates deep engagement is one where they have read others' postings and really reflected on it and then provided some further discussion to build on that community's knowledge. But it is not enough for them to provide say, an opinion, or an emotional response, it has to be more scholarly than that (Teacher 4).

In the following quotation, the teacher has described a technique used in facilitation to help give students a sense of ownership. Here the teacher describes how providing space for students to discuss by themselves can lead to greater learner engagement.

To let them take ownership of their discussion, the content that they are producing, even their assessment tasks, you know, it is all one and the same thing. Um, if people feel ownership, then they are far more likely to engage, they are more likely to remember it, and are far more likely to learn the meta-cognitive skills or generic skills or whatever, that your course is teaching. If you allow them that freedom they feel that they are actually contributing and respected (Teacher 2).

This quotation resonates with teachers' approaches to teaching – blended teaching as a way to encourage student autonomy in learning (Ellis, et al., 2009, p. 115). Additionally, this quotation reflects teachers' conceptions of engagement – engagement as owning and valuing learning (Harris, 2008, p. 65).

## Conclusion and future directions

This study revealed four qualitatively different ways teachers think about learning through online discussion. The article has contributed particularly to our understanding how teachers think about engagement in online learning contexts by focusing on a specific but central component of online and blended environments – online discussion. University teachers have described online discussion as a way to enable risk taking, to link to popular culture, to assess learning, to show respect and to provide learners with a sense of ownership. This adds to our understanding of what constitutes learner engagement in online environments. In light of a call to widen participation in higher education, it reveals implications for educational designers and developers in higher education who are involved with design, training and support in online teaching and learning contexts. A logical addition to research in this area would be to investigate the relationship with students' conceptions, which would result in a more holistic understanding of this integral part of the online learning experience.

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