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SYDNEY

Engaging students in learning through online discussion: A phenomenographic study

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- › The broad study
 - The aim
 - The importance of such research
 - An overview of the background literature
 - An outline the research methodology
 - The final results
- › **Learning through online discussion as a way to engage learners**
 - Online discussion, engagement and assessment
- › Conclusion and future lines of research
- › Questions and discussion



Asynchronous discussion

Build Teach Student View 2010 Semester 2, EDEE1234 Information Technology and Education

Course Tools

- Course Content
- Announcements
- Learning Modules
- Calendar (H)
- Discussions (H)**
- Web Links

(H) = Hidden

Instructor Tools

- Manage Course
- Assessment Manager
- Assignment Dropbox
- Grade Book
- Grading Forms
- Group Manager
- Tracking
- Selective Release

Your location: [Discussions](#) > **Project 1: SUBMISSION area for 9am group**

Project 1: SUBMISSION area for 9am group (Conditional)

Description (click to collapse)

Use this forum to post your critique and provide comments to your peers' critiques.

Topic Type: Threaded
Graded: No
Peer Review: No
Posting Restrictions: Allow post and reply
User Identification: User Name

Create Message **View Drafts**

Expand All Collapse All Display: **Threaded** Unthreaded **All** Unread

<input type="checkbox"/>	Subject	Messages	Author	Date
<input type="checkbox"/>	IWB "Flags of Africa" (New)		COHEN	24 August 2010 16:42
<input type="checkbox"/>	Simon's critique of the IWB		SIMON	19 August 2010 06:42
<input type="checkbox"/>	Aaron's critique of Pythagoras' Theorem 2		AARON	19 August 2010 06:41
<input type="checkbox"/>	Juliana's critique of the IWB Resource "Pushing and Pulling"		JULIANA	19 August 2010 02:13
<input type="checkbox"/>	Frank's comments on Ivy's IWB resource "Pushing and Pulling"		FRANK	19 August 2010 06:00
<input type="checkbox"/>	Critique of the IWB resource "Silent Invaders."	3	LYNDA	18 August 2010 20:23
<input type="checkbox"/>	Re: Critique of the		FANGYAN	18 August 2010 11:03

The aim of the broad study

- › Master of Learning Science and Technology (research stream), The University of Sydney
 - 2010 dissertation is located in **Sydney eScholarship** collection (<http://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/handle/2123/7023>)
- › This study aims to reveal the **qualitatively different ways university teachers' experience learning through online discussion**.
 - aims to **extend** recent research into university teachers' conceptions of and approaches to e-learning
 - aims to **complement** research into students' conceptions of and approaches to online discussion

› **Students'** experiences

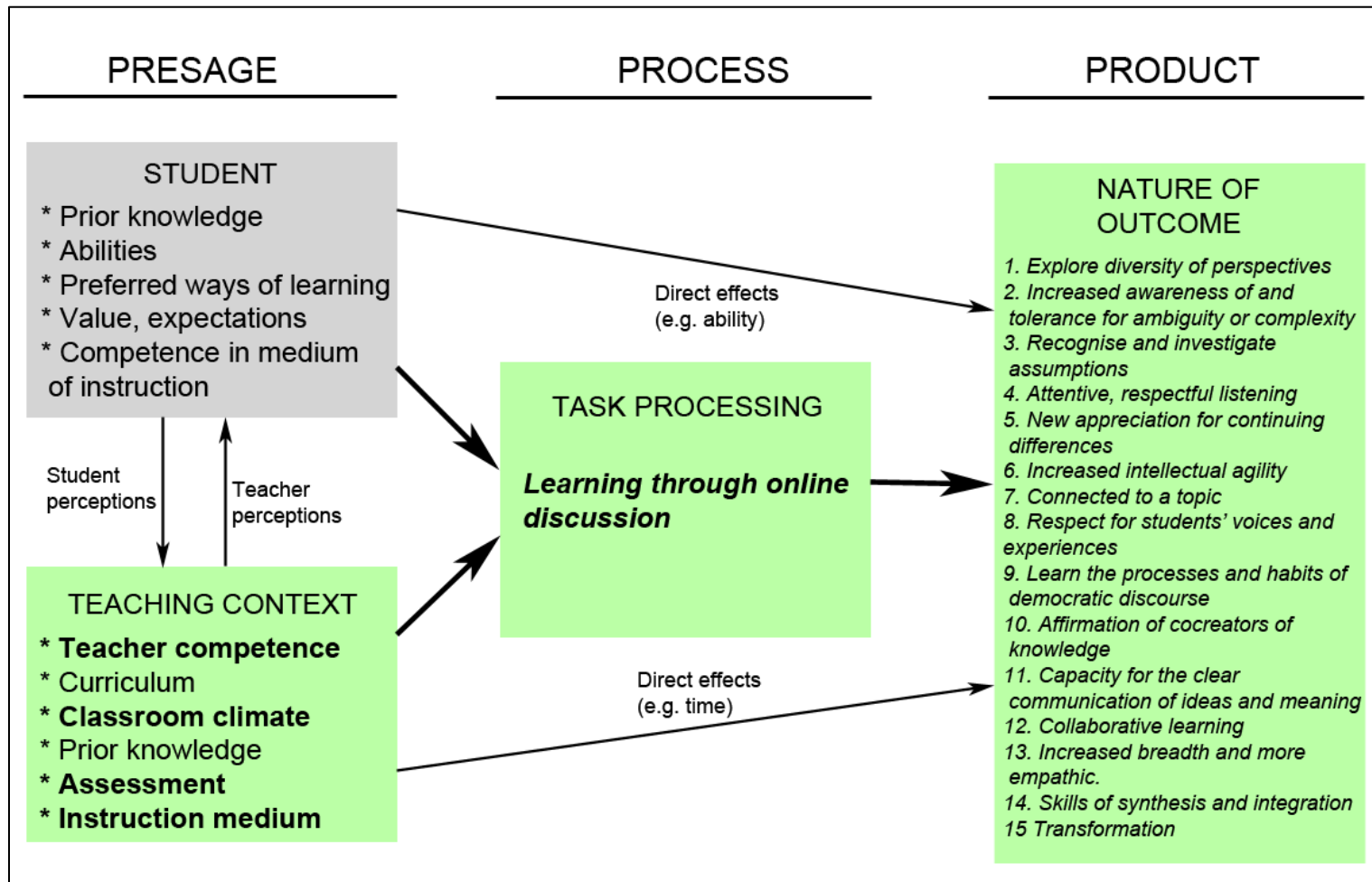
- **Learning** (e.g. Biggs, 1987; Dart et al., 2000; N. Entwistle, Hanley, & Hounsell, 1979; N. J. Entwistle, 1991; Marton & Säljö, 1997; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Trigwell & Ashwin, 2006; Trigwell & Prosser, 1991)
- **e-learning, (online) discussion** and blended discussion (e.g. Beckmann, 2011; Ellis & Goodyear, 2010; Ellis, Goodyear, O'Hara, & Prosser, 2007)

› **Teachers'** experiences

- **Teaching** (e.g. Kember & Kwan, 2000; Trigwell & Prosser, 1996; Trigwell, Prosser, & Taylor, 1994)
- **e-learning** and 'learning technologies' (e.g. Ellis, et al., 2009; González, 2009, 2010)



The aim of the broad study: 3P model of learning



(Biggs, 1993, p. 75; Brookfield & Preskill, 2005, pp. 21 - 41)

The importance of such research

› Discussion

- Often a large component of university courses but rarely articulated in curriculum documents
- Often central to **cooperative** and **collaborative learning designs**
 - Taken-for-granted that students practice effective 'democratic' discussion for learning

› An important **pedagogical challenge** for online learning

- To ensure that students develop the higher level skills of dialogue and critical exchange with their peers when they are in different locations or time zones(Beckmann, 2011)

› Discussion (as a way of teaching)

- 15 benefits of discussion for learning (Brookfield and Preskill, 2005)
- Discussion is a way to mediate social interaction

→ 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** (Brookfield and Preskill, 2005).

→ It can **enliven classrooms** by creating **a balance of students' and teachers' voices** while maintaining moral, political, and pedagogic integrity (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005)

→ Teaching as '**a sort of conversation**' where learners and teachers are equally listening and talking (Ramsden, 2003)

More challenging (but possible) in an online environment

- › Teachers' approaches to teaching (Kember, 1997)
 1. Imparting information – Teaching is purely the transfer of information
 2. Transmitting structured knowledge – Teaching is the transfer of structured, logical and easily understood information
 3. Student-teacher interaction – Teaching is a focus on interaction between the student and the teacher
 4. Facilitating understanding – Teaching is helping individual students learn
 5. Conceptual change/intellectual development – Teaching is changing student conceptions

(Ellis, Goodyear, Prosser, & O'Hara, 2006)

- › Students' consider discussion as a way of –
 1. checking your ideas are right
 2. collecting ideas
 3. challenging and improving your ideas
 4. challenging ideas and beliefs in order to arrive at a more complete understanding

- › Students engaging in online discussions to –
 1. read postings to avoid repetition
 2. use postings to add to ideas
 3. evaluate postings to challenge ideas
 4. evaluate postings to reflect on key ideas

	Teachers' conceptions of e-learning and learning technology	
	(Ellis, et al., 2009)	(González, 2010)
Less complete, less inclusive, focused on tools	1. Learning technologies as tools for access	1. eLearning as a medium to provide information to students
	2. Learning technologies as tools for information delivery	2. eLearning as a medium for occasional communication among unit participants
More complete, more inclusive, supportive of student learning	3. Learning technologies as ways of providing active learning opportunities	3. eLearning as a medium for engaging students in online discussions
	4. Learning technologies as ways of building knowledge	4. eLearning as a medium to support knowledge building tasks

› A **phenomenographic approach to research**

- A phenomenographic approach is applied to systematically explore and reveal the ways teachers conceptualise the phenomenon 'learning through online discussion'.
- Emerged out of seminal research investigating students' conceptions of and approaches to learning (Marton & Säljö, 1976)
- Qualitative research collecting data in semi structured interviews
- Understand phenomena from a '*second-order perspective*' (Marton, 1981)
 - a **phenomenon** (in education) is understood by studying how people (closely engaged) **experience** it (the approach and the conception)
 - Using *what we know now* to prepare students for the unknown future (Bowden & Marton, 1998)
- Reveal **qualitatively different** conceptions of phenomena in Education

- › **Sample size** (N) = 15 (Bowden, 1996; Bowden & Walsh, 2000)
 - Sampling strategy to ensure adequate variation
 - Teaching area (discipline); class size; level of study (postgraduate/undergraduate); teaching mode (online/blended); and years of experience with teaching with technology
 - Professors, associate professors, senior lecturers and lecturers

Research sample

Teacher	Discipline	Size	Level	Mode	Experience
1	Social science	< 50	PG	Blended	5 - 10 years
2	Higher education (AD)	< 50	PG	Blended	5 - 10 years
3	Primary/secondary education	> 200	UG	Blended	< 5 years
4	Secondary education (ICT)	< 100	UG	Blended	10 – 15 years
5	Higher education (e-learning)	< 50	PG	Blended	10 – 15 years
6	Higher education (AD)	< 50	PG	Blended	10 – 15 years
7	Arts (language)	< 100	PG	Blended	10 – 15 years
8	Higher education (AD)	< 50	PG	Blended	5 - 10 years
9	Business and economics	< 50	PG	Blended	5 - 10 years
10	Higher education (AD)	< 50	PG	Blended	5 - 10 years
11	Higher education (e-learning)	< 50	PG	Blended	5 - 10 years
12	Primary/secondary education	> 200	UG	Blended	< 5 years
13	Higher education (AD)	< 50	PG	Blended	10 – 15 years
14	Higher education (Research)	< 50	PG	Blended	10 – 15 years
15	Politics and sociology	< 50	UG	Online	< 5 years

- › Predominantly **asynchronous discussion** in learning management system (Blackboard/WebCT)
 - Students' privacy (policies)
 - Time zones and Internet connectivity
 - Specialised skills
- › Two participants discussed synchronous discussion (Adobe Connect)
 - Fully online
 - A blend of face-to-face and online students in class

- › Three key questions with several probing questions
 1. What does learning through online discussion mean to you?
 2. How do you go about the design of learning through online discussion?
 3. How do you go about the facilitation of learning through online discussion
- › Approximately 3000 lines of interview transcripts
- › Three (3) iterations of analysis using NVivo 8.0
 1. line-by-line to identify utterances (beyond the words and content to explore the meanings) that related to the area of investigation similar to Grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990)
 2. Bringing together the conceptions into groups by identifying similarities and differences in meanings
 3. focus to the relationships between the categories

- › Learning through online discussion as a way to –
 1. provide time and access
 - 2. engage learners**
 3. foster a community of learners
 4. enable higher-order cognition and learning

- › ‘engage’ 21 instances
- › ‘engagement’ 9 instances
- › ‘engaged’ 14 instances
- › ‘engaging’ 10 instances

- › [...] 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).

- › *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).

- › *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).

- › *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).

Online discussion, engagement and assessment

- › *As part of their assessment? I think a lot of teachers do it as, you know, as, part assessment. And that's how they encourage students to collaborate. I don't particularly like that, and I have spoken a colleague who's doing that in a postgraduate unit at the minute on higher education where that's required and she's finding that it's really, **it's artificial, it promotes a whole lot of artificial sort of discussion**, however, um. (Teacher 10)*
- › *it's not assessed directly, but **they analyse their own text chat** and um, they're assessed on the basis of their analysis, so they're encouraged to contribute otherwise they won't have anything analyse. (Teacher 10)*

Online discussion, engagement and assessment

- › so, you know, like, you need to use **the assessment to drive why they might participate**, I think that's a first thing. So, you know, like you might say well, 25% of the course is going to be your engagement in this (Teacher 8)
- › there are all different ways of doing it, like [] in her course, has got, she makes some **students be responsible for facilitating the discussion** each week, and so that means they have to sit down – I'm actually doing it with one the students this afternoon – we sit down a look at the readings for week 11, what are some are some key questions that we might ask, and we'll setup some of discussion topic (Teacher 8)

Conclusion and future directions for research

- › Teachers' descriptions emphasised the importance learners' thoughtful engagement for learning
 - Leads to **deep learning** (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999)
- › Teachers' described a pedagogical challenge
 - How does one balance **assessment** requirements with designs for **authentic learner engagement** in **online learning spaces**?
- › **Relational studies** investigating the phenomenon of **engagement**
 - There is significantly more value in analysing the relationship between teachers' conceptions and approaches, and students' conceptions and approaches. There are few relational studies in the literature that do this. Trigwell, Prosser and Waterhouse (1999) is a noteworthy exception.

› Question/discussion time

› Further details

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