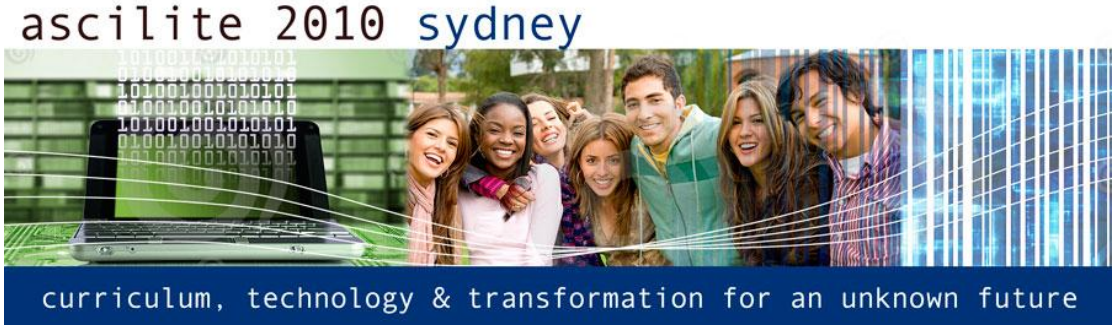

Asynchronous online discussion: Instructor facilitation vs. peer facilitation

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Asynchronous online discussion forums have been widely used in schools and universities. They form an integral part of e-learning and blended learning. Many researchers and educators use asynchronous online discussion activity to develop student thinking skills, problem solving skills, and others. There are many factors that may affect student participation in asynchronous online discussion forums such as discussion topics, group size, ground rules of the discussion forums, facilitation skills, and others. We believe that facilitators play an important role in the success of asynchronous online discussion. Usually instructors or students serve as facilitators for online discussion activities. In this study, we explore participants' preference in terms of facilitator (instructor facilitator vs. peer facilitator). In addition, we also found out the reasons for their preference.

Keywords: asynchronous online discussion, facilitation, instructor facilitator, peer facilitator, learners' participation.

Introduction

Asynchronous online discussion activities have been widely used in schools and universities. Through the online discussion activities, students can learn to develop thinking skills (Cheong, & Cheung, 2008), and solve ill-structured problems (Cheung and Hew, 2004; Hew & Knapczyk, 2007).

There are many factors that may affect the quantity and quality of asynchronous online discussion activities. We believe that online facilitation is one of the key factors. Researchers have conducted studies examining the facilitator's facilitation skill, and habits of mind. However, we believe who the facilitator is could be an important factor too. Usually either the instructor or peer can serve as the facilitator of an online discussion activity.

In this study, we explore participants' preference for instructor facilitator or peer facilitator. In addition, we also explore the reasons for their preference. The study was conducted at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. Twelve undergraduate students who were in a "Facilitating Asynchronous Online Discussion" course participated in this study. It was an elective course with both face-to-face and asynchronous online discussion activities. Each student had the opportunity to be a facilitator as well as participant.

Research questions

1. Did the participants prefer their instructor or their peer to be the facilitator in an asynchronous online discussion environment?
2. Why did they have the preference?

Literature review

According to Rourke and Kanuka (2009), teaching presence is one factor that could affect an online community environment. Teaching presence may be considered as a form of facilitation in an online discussion setting. Usually in an online discussion environment, there is a facilitator who manages the online discussion activities. Paulsen (1995) classified the role of facilitation into three different types: organizational, social and intellectual. Based on Paulsen's framework (1995), Cheung and Hew (2005) further analysed and summarized the role of facilitation from others researchers into Table 1.

Who should be the facilitator? Instructors and researchers have to decide to choose between an 'instructor facilitator' or 'peer facilitator' approach when they conduct asynchronous online discussion activities. Yet, some fundamental questions remain unanswered. Which approach do participants prefer (instructor facilitation vs. peer facilitation), and why?

Although many online discussion forums were facilitated by the instructors, not all researchers agree that this might be the best choice (e.g., Poole, 2000, Zhao & McDougall, 2005; Mazzolini and Maddision, 2003). An instructor's postings may prevent students from contributing in the online discussion because students tend to think that the instructor is the final authority (Zhao & McDougall, 2005). Students might also perceive instructor questioning in the online discussion forum a form of assessment (Mazzolini and Maddision, 2003). According to Mazzolini and Maddision (2003), when instructors were involved in the online discussion, the student postings did not increase. Fauske and Wade (2003-2004) found that not all students preferred having instructors involved in the online discussion because an instructor's involvement was oppressive to certain students and their ideas. As a result, peer facilitation may be the choice. Hew, Cheung, and Ng (2009), in their study of two classes at the Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, found that a majority of students indeed preferred to contribute in online discussions that were facilitated by their classmates instead of by the instructor. The participants examined in Hew et al.'s (2009) classes were all education-major students. There is a need to study further if these preferences hold true in other contexts (e.g. non education-major students).

Table 1: Description of activity related to the organizational, social and intellectual facilitation types (Cheung & Hew, 2005, pp. 59-60)

Facilitation type	Description of activity	Source
Organizational	Spur participation when it is lagging. For example, request direct comments and responses to the issues discussed.	Paulsen (1995)
	Require regular participation. For example, exhorting students to post at least two messages per week.	Klemm (1998); Paulsen (1995)
	Prompt frequently. Use private messages to urge participants to take part in the discussion, to initiate debates, and to solicit suggestions	Paulsen (1995)
	Encourage participants to respond to each other as well as to the tutor.	Salter (2000)
	Keep discussion on track	Winiecki & Chyung (1998)
Social	Be responsive. E.g., respond quickly to every contribution either by posting a personal message to the contributor or by referring to the author's comment in the discussion.	Paulsen (1995)
	Reinforce good discussant behaviours. For example, praise students who respond effectively online.	
Intellectual	Ask questions to help participants understand.	O'Grady (2001)
	Challenge ideas or opinions. Draw attention to opposing perspectives, different directions or conflicting opinions.	Paulsen (1995); Goodyear et al. (1995)
	Make appropriate contributions.	Goodyear et al (2001)
	Insist that opinions posted by participants are supported with data and rational reasoning.	Klemm (1998)

Methodology

We used a case study approach in this study. According to Merriam (2001), the case study approach allows the researcher to develop an in-depth understanding of a situation – facilitator preference and why participants have such preferences. Twelve undergraduate students (all non education-major) were involved in this study. They were taking an elective course with face-to-face tutorials and online discussion activities. All the students had the opportunity to be facilitators as well as participants. Before the students took the role of a facilitator, the instructor had already given six hours of tutorials about how to take the role as a facilitator in an online discussion environment. When students had problems in facilitating their forums, they were encouraged to discuss the problems with their instructor and seek advice from him through personal emails, phone calls and /or during tutorial time.

The source of data is the reflection logs which were collected at the end of the course. Students were asked to write reflection logs at the end of the course to share their view about facilitator preferences and the reasons why they chose their preference. Content analysis of the students' reflection data was later carried out (Hew, Liu, Martinez, Bonk, & Lee, 2004). We examined the participants' reasons by using the constant-comparative approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to determine any emergent themes with regard to the reasons why they made their choice.

Results

1. Did the participants prefer their instructor or their peer to be the facilitator in an asynchronous online discussion environment?

The majority of the participants' preferred their instructor to lead the online discussion (64% preferred instructor as the facilitator and 36 % preferred peer as the facilitator).

2. Why did they have the preference?

We identified two reasons why participants preferred "instructor as facilitator". They are 'instructor as motivator', and 'instructor as monitor'.

- Instructor as motivator: Participants believed that the instructor should take the role of motivating participants to be involved in the online discussion forums.
- Instructor as monitor: Most of the participants believed the instructor would do a good job to monitor the online discussions (e.g. keeping the discussion on-topic). As a result the online discussion would be more effective.

On the other hand, we identified 3 reasons why participants preferred 'peer as facilitator'. They are "Hands-on Experience", "Participants feel more at ease", and "Forums are more vibrant". Most of them tend to agree that "Hands-on Experience" was the major reason why they preferred 'peer as facilitator'.

- Hands-on Experience: Some of the participants pointed out that it was important for them to have the hands-on experience as facilitators. They could practice their learned facilitation skills, and learn from the peers how they facilitate the discussion forums. By doing that, they would have a better understanding the role of a facilitator.
- Participants feel more at ease. Some participants preferred the peer facilitator because participants would be more at ease in the online discussion. They believe the discussion atmosphere would be friendlier.
- Forums are more vibrant. When the peers serve as facilitators, each one will have a different style. As a result, all the forums may be more vibrant because each one is facilitated by different individuals.

Discussion and conclusion

A majority of the participants preferred to have an instructor facilitator. They believe that an instructor would do a better job in monitoring and motivating the participants. In other words, the participants would prefer the instructor to take care of the 'organizational matters' of the online discussion activities (refer to Table 1). It is possible that the participants, being undergraduate students, are used to

listening to or to "take orders" from the instructor as far as organizational matters are concerned. Thus, it might not be surprising that the majority of the participants preferred instructor facilitation.

For the minority who preferred peer facilitation, three main reasons were given as to why they made such a choice. They agreed that "hands-on experience" was very important because they really could have the opportunity to learn to be a facilitator to try out different facilitation techniques and see the different responses to them. Perhaps the participants thought that it is important for them to have the hands-on experience as facilitators because they were taking the "Facilitating Asynchronous Online Discussion" course; otherwise, they might not desire to be a peer facilitator.

They also believed that when they took the role as a facilitator, their peers would be more at ease. Their view tends to support the idea when participants are at ease and feel comfortable in the online discussion environment, they will participate more. This finding is consistent with Hew et al.'s (2009) study which found that the absence of an instructor's involvement gave students a greater freedom to express themselves in the online discussion. However, the discussion may be off the tangent too. We believe their view needs other empirical studies to support it.

Another reason they had to support peer facilitation is the online discussion forums would be more vibrant because each forum had different facilitators. As one student remarked, "having peers facilitating their individual discussion forum will result in more colourful discussion forums compared to just one instructor facilitating all the forums."

Limitations and future research

There are a few limitations of this study. First, we had a small number of participants, only eleven. The results may be different if we carry out the study using a larger sample size. Second, the participants were taking the "Facilitating Asynchronous Online Discussion" course. If the participants were to take other courses, they might have a different view about their preference. To have a better understanding about the issue (i.e. instructor facilitation vs. peer facilitation), the sample size should be increased, and participants taking other courses should be recruited for the study. Follow-up interviews should also be conducted in order to explore more in-depth why students chose their specific preference for instructor or peer facilitation.

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