



Discussion Board Tool and Student Engagement in a Digital Learning Space

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this paper is to share the author's online teaching experiences on increasing student engagement and learning experiences in a digital teaching environment using the discussion board tool. Blackboard was adopted as the learning management system at the author's affiliated university for digital teaching and learning delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic era. A discussion board is a communication tool contained within Blackboard Collaborate Ultra that can be used to enhance learning and teaching. To achieve the purpose of my personal reflection reporting, this study asks one question of the participants: how would you describe your learning experience and engagement with your lecturer and fellow students using the discussion board tool for pre-tutorial and group assignments? This paper presents the context, reflection, and case scenarios of three UG teaching units concerning fostering student engagement in a digital learning environment through the discussion board tool. Findings indicate that there are three stages of student engagement using the discussion board tool, namely: tutor-student engagement, student-student engagement, and student group-student group engagement. The discussion board tool encourages an active learning experience. The implications of my reflective account show that fostering student engagement in a digital learning environment through the discussion board is important for both tutors and students. It is recommended that more faculty members explore learning and teaching resources available on the discussion board tool in the "new normal" era.

KEYWORDS: Blackboard collaborate, discussion board tool, student engagement, active learning.

1. Introduction

This paper is a reflective account of the author's digital teaching experience. In this workshop, I'll be sharing the role of the discussion board in fostering student engagement and learning experiences. This paper/presentation was written in the first person—that is, the author as I positioned myself within the case studies. I have been engaged with students' cohorts using the software Blackboard Collaborate Ultra Live since March 2020, when teaching delivery was moved to online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. An additional three Bachelor of Commerce teaching units were involved as samples in this semester 1 of 2021.

2. Literature Review

Student engagement has been defined as comprising "active and collaborative learning, participation in challenging academic activities, formative communication with academic staff, involvement in enriching educational experiences, and feeling legitimated and supported by university learning communities" [1]. Based on this definition, the process has been conceptually mapped and aligned with five elements that characterize effective teaching and learning environments, namely: learning resources, learning activities, communication and collaboration, student support, assessment and feedback. The Office of Learning and Teaching at Curtin, with effect from April 25, 2011, provides a road map regarding student engagement in blended learning environments guidelines (including online learning) [2]. For example, Curtin University developed and facilitated a digital learning environment to support teaching and learning in both blended and fully online learning settings. This environment resides within the Blackboard Learning Management System (LMS) and may involve other enterprise technologies [2]. In order to engage students productively and achieve the stated learning outcomes, they should be involved in active learning. Active learning in a digital teaching environment Active learning is good teaching practice in an online learning and teaching environment. Active learning is "a method of learning in which students are actively or experientially involved in the learning process and where there are different levels of active learning, depending on student involvement" [3]. According to a previous study [3], "students participate [in active learning] when they are doing something besides passively listening." It has been suggested by [3] that learners work collaboratively, discuss materials while role-playing, debate, engage in case studies, take part in cooperative learning, or produce short written exercises and online presentations.

2.1. Discussion board

The Discussion Board is a communication tool that can be used to enhance your learning and teaching. The main posting is called a "forum" and related replies are called "threads". Learn how to add a thread, post a message, and more.

2.2. Using the discussion board

The "Discussion Board" link in the navigation panel is a shortcut to the discussion area. In it you will find topic-specific discussions, as well as a general discussion area in which you can post messages to your fellow students and your lecturer. You can get to the discussion board in two ways: Go to the Discussion Board using the link provided through the appropriate module accessible through unit resources.

2.3. Reflective Practice and Reflection

"Reflective practice is where the practitioner makes meaning from a given situation so that he/she can better understand the art of his/her professional practice" [4]. Reflective practice is learning through and from experience towards gaining new insights into self and practice [5].

2.4. Reflection

Reflection is a systematic reviewing process for all teachers that allows you to make links from one experience to the next, making sure your students make maximum progress. Digital

learning and teaching reflections are pedagogical practices that should be encouraged among faculty members in order to increase student engagement and achieve learning outcomes.

2.5. Using the discussion board

Click the Discussion Board option in the navigation panel on the left of the screen. All the discussions for the unit will be listed, and you will need to select the one you require. Please make sure that you read any instructions for the discussion from your lecturer before proceeding; your lecturer might want you to address a particular angle of the topic in question rather than run the discussion in a general way.

2.6. General discussion board (GDB)

Apart from the topical discussions, there is also a general Discussion Board on which you can post general comments, queries, and suggestions. It is the only place in GDB where students can post an anonymous comment. Sometimes it is very difficult to ask a question for fear of looking silly or ill-informed and losing face in front of your peers and lecturer. An anonymous posting gives students an opportunity to avoid personal attention. Students should use this feature to clarify any issues they may have as well as to provide feedback to their peers and lecturer while adhering to the unwritten rules of discussion room etiquette.

To join a discussion:

- Open the discussion in question (if coming through Discussion Board on the menu).
- Click on +Thread button. Give the thread a title (in the Subject area).
- Type your message. (NB: Please avoid using the Attachment feature in the Discussion Boards, as it slows it down considerably. It is preferable to copy and paste your comments in directly).
- Click Submit.

To comment on someone else's contribution:

- Open the message (thread) you want to comment on by clicking on its title.
- Click Reply. Enter your comment (message). Click Submit.
- In both cases, you will see your comment appear under the discussion once you have clicked Submit.

3. Methods

Table 1. Teachings Units and Participants

Unit Code	Unit Name	No. of Participants
XXX1000	HOSPEXP	5
YYY2000	PTHE	5
ZZZ3000	MTD	7
Total		17

Source: Developed for this study via Discussion Board

For this paper, a qualitative case study was adopted [6]. Three Bachelor of Commerce teaching units in semester 1 2021 were involved and subsequently categorised into case studies to provide commentary and shared experiences on student engagement learning and teaching during COVID-19 pandemic era. This study asks the participants one question: How would you describe your learning experience and engagement with your lecturer and fellow students

using the discussion board for pre-tutorial and group assignment? There are 17 participants as presented in Table 1.

4. Analysis and Findings

The following are the extracts from the selected participants as depicted in Table 2.

Table 2. Result extracted from Blackboard

Participant ID	Extracts from Participant
PTHE PCN No. 1	It is undeniable that online learning and teaching is a challenge faced by all students and lecturers as there are many factors that can affect the quality of learning and teaching. Through using the discussion board as reflective learning experience, I am able to learn about others' opinions from a different perspective. The forum and the threads posted by classmates and the tutor will be available throughout the semester so that I can refer back whenever I want. It is also a self-motivation method to learn more and think more. It can be the best way for enhancing communication between students in online learning. Overall, my experience for discussion board reflective learning is quite good and I am satisfied with it.
PCN No. 2	The learning experience for me was great since I reading work submitted by my fellow classmates. Each week, each of us will post our work based on the tasks assigned and this eventually gave me greater understanding throughout this unit since I had different views to interpret from. Besides that, we were sometimes asked to present in class and once the session is over, our slides are submitted to the discussion board. Personally, I found this to be an effective to stay interacted within the unit considering it was done fully online. Moreover, our submitted work on the discussion board is reviewed by our tutor, and he always shares his thoughts in class. This kind of engagement meant a lot to me as I have always been a student who values feedback from my fellow teachers. To sum it all up, my learning experience and engagement with those involved using the discussion board has been fantastic so far and I hope to see more units utilize this feature in the future.
HOSPEXP PCN No. 3	Discussion board has played an important role for us students. As it is because, it allows us to upload our class activity assignments and also helps us to gain more knowledge and information by collecting different answers and different perspectives from the other students. Aside from that, the discussion board also allows us to get more feedback from our tutor, as it is a must for us students when we are taking an online class due to the pandemic, helping us to recognise our mistakes and what we can do to improve our class practises and assignments.
PCN No. 4	In my opinion, the discussion board is actually a useful tool for every student to discuss some tutorial questions or even assignments. This is because when I submit my answer to the discussion board, I can also see how my classmates answer the same question from different angles. Besides that, discussion board plays an essential role in our learning experience. This is due to the fact that tutor could provide feedbacks to everyone during the class after he read our answers from the discussion board. Feedbacks from tutor are necessary because we could make improvements when we know our mistakes and weaknesses.
TOUR PCN No. 5	Personally, I would still prefer to attend classes face-to-face. However, in my opinion, using discussion board as a part of the learning method is a very good choice. I am able to view other's opinion and point of view while comparing to mine as it is harder to write and discuss in blackboard collaborate. It is a better way for lecturer to really comment on our opinion and we can always refer back to our answer for future references.
PCN No. 6	My overall experience using discussion board for the pre-tutorial, learning, engaging with students and lecturer and also for group assignments have been alright so far. Although my internet connection is unstable at times, it is still manageable. Hence, I would still prefer going to physical classes as it would not require any internet connections. Given the current situation, discussion board really allows students to communicate efficiently and also learn from lecturers. As for group assignments, it is very convenient to utilize discussion board because there is no need to sign up and students can utilize the discussion board.

5. Implications and Conclusion

5.1. Using the discussion board

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proceeding; your lecturer might want you to address a particular angle of the topic in question rather than run the discussion in a general way.

5.2. General discussion board (GDB)

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- Open the message (thread) you want to comment on by clicking on its title.
- Click Reply. Enter your comment (message). Click Submit.
- In both cases, you will see your comment appear under the discussion once you have clicked Submit.

In conclusion, fostering student engagement in a digital learning environment through the discussion board is important for both tutors and students [7]. It is recommended that more faculty members explore learning and teaching resources available on the discussion board in the "new normal" era.

Competing Interest

The authors declare no financial or non-financial competing interests.

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