

Building the Community of Inquiry through Asynchronous Online Discussions

To promote student higher order learning in asynchronous online discussions, it is essential that the discussion is carried out in the context of the community of inquiry. The major purpose of implementing online discussions in university courses is to extend opportunities for student higher order learning. It is hoped that students gain better understanding of course content through reflective dialogues. The online discussion allows anytime and anywhere communications, and is a unique communication tool to increase student-to-student and student-to-teacher interactions.

Although the online discussion is widely acknowledged for its potential to promote student learning, expected successes are not inevitable because the tool is available. Studies repeatedly report problems that severely encumber its effectiveness as a learning tool for cognitive enhancement. Frequently occurred problems include non-participation, superficial postings, and topic digression to unfocused chatters. “Consequently, the rich promise of asynchronous learning networks for supporting students’ learning can prove hard to achieve” (Oliver & Shaw; p. 56,).

The most balanced view about the online discussion is that it opens the potential for both success and failure (Lang, 2000). “Some discussions fail miserably,

while others are spectacularly successful (p. 23). The quality of the online discussion is largely determined by its careful and meticulous design.

The primary focus of past research has been on end products of online discussions. Studies either report successful discussions or describe results that fall short of desired learning outcomes. Absent is the in-depth investigation on how the design of online discussion activities is related to its success or otherwise.

This study reports our experiences in designing the community of inquiry through asynchronous online discussion, implementing our design in a university course, and empirically investigating our design.