Analyzing Students' Conversations in "Chat Room" Discussion Groups
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Abstract
When I turned to asynchronous delivery for Educational Research Methods two years ago, I found it difficult to provide social interactions crucial for deep meaningful learning. I knew I would be using threaded discussions, but wanted to supplement them with social interactions to better support meaningful learning and allow students to make knowledge their own. I decided to incorporate synchronous small group discussions. I thought discussion among peers might replace much of what was lost without face-to-face meetings. I wanted discussions to be opportunities for students to better understand the material by hearing others' interpretations, while sharing their own. This paper will be an analysis of students' conversations in these "chat room" discussions. The goal of the analysis will be to discover the ways in which peers engaged each other and the content of the course in these discussions.

More and more courses are being offered for distance delivery in many disciplines. Both the number of courses offered and the number of entire degree programs offered online doubled between 1995 and 1998 (Phillips, 1999). Distance delivery includes synchronous formats, requiring participants to be online at the same time, and asynchronous formats that allow participants to work more flexibly. When I turned to asynchronous delivery for Educational Research Methods in the Spring 2000 semester, I found it difficult to provide social interactions crucial for deep meaningful learning (Vygotsky, 1978).

I struggled to find ways to provide social interactions within an asynchronous delivery format. I knew I would be using threaded discussions, but wanted to supplement them with more authentic social interactions to better support meaningful learning and allow students to make knowledge their own. I decided to incorporate synchronous small group discussions. I thought discussion among peers might replace much of what was lost without face-to-face meetings (Verba, 1994).

I envisioned these groups as student support groups. Assignments consisted of discussing topics from the readings and students' approaches to upcoming assignments. When an exam was coming, groups posed questions to each other that might appear on that exam. I wanted discussions to be opportunities for students to better understand the material by hearing others' interpretations, while sharing their own.

I asked students to email me copies of their discussions so that I could answer unresolved questions. Reading those discussions helped me gauge my students' comprehension in ways similar to those available in face-to-face classrooms. They helped replace reading students' faces, questions during lectures, and small group activities in class. They allowed me to modify my instruction, taking each class's strengths and weaknesses into account. They allowed me to know my students, as I could not have done otherwise. The data for this study consist of these "chat room" conversations sent to me as text files during the Spring 2000 semester.

Most students indicated that the discussion groups were their favorite part of the course before it was over. The discussions let them get to know their peers, discuss the
content in ways they had not done in other online courses, and get feedback from me for anything their peers couldn't help resolve.

This study will consist of a detailed qualitative analysis of the text of students' discussion group conversations in order to discover the ways in which peers engaged each other and the content of the course in these discussions. The analysis, which is currently in progress, focuses on emerging themes in these conversations. These include, but are not limited to, the types and levels of questions raised, group problem solving strategies, and the characteristics of and discourse patterns in more and less successful groups.

References

