

Using role plays to stimulate reflective online discussion participation

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Previous online experiences, motivation and discussion confidence levels can all impact on the way tertiary education students interact in class discussion. When discussion contributions are reviewed, elements of pessimism, optimism, social chatter, depth of thought and reflection are all present in varying degrees. There does not appear to be any recognition by some students of the way their contributions are framed and/or received by classmates. While feedback and feedforward to students can highlight these aspects it is still challenging for some people to understand how they communicate online. The assigning of particular roles, once discussion group members are familiar with each other, appears to impact on the student's discussion contributions in new and different ways. This paper describes some work in progress using role playing to stimulate student reflection about what they are saying in their groups' discussion and how they present their ideas to their classmates.

Introduction

Discussion has become an important activity in many tertiary education online classes. While this discussion may replace the familiar interaction found in face-to-face lectures and tutorials, the skills and approaches online can be vastly different. This is posing a challenge both for the teachers and the students who try to draw on previous experiences and integrate these into their online behaviour. In an online class where discussion is seen as central to the class activity it is important that desirable expectations and behaviours are made clear. They need to be modelled, explained and explored if students are to have the opportunity to develop a level of confidence and competence as they interact effectively within their online classroom.

An emphasis on critical thinking in online discussion is essential to sustaining quality learning environments (E-Learning Advisory Group (N.Z.) 2002; MacKnight, 2000). A challenge for teachers is to assist students to understand the impact of their words on the screen. Unlike face-to-face discussion where ill-placed comments can be soon forgotten, the online classroom is less forgiving and comments can remain for the lifetime of the class. This factor is seen by some students as a barrier to their participation as they lurk about wondering what to say and how to say it without looking foolish, bored, disinterested or ignorant.

In any classroom, the role of the teacher is to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to speak and be heard by other members of the group. Teacher presence, facilitation and moderation are all seen as being important components of online discussion (Cummings, Bonk, & Jacobs, 2002; Palloff & Pratt, 2001; Richardson & Swan, 2003; Salmon, 2000). Translating the views shared in the literature however into an unfamiliar and unforgiving environment online can pose teaching and learning challenges that require some innovative approaches (Salmon, 2000). The approach described in this paper has been the use of role plays to encourage reflective discussion participation in a second year undergraduate teacher education paper.

The challenges of discussion planning and facilitation

Quality discussion does not just happen because a group of students have access to the same space online. What takes place can be determined by a wide variety of group variables including the number of members in the group, the experience levels of members relative to the content area, online learning experience along with the interest and motivation of each person. How the group members are determined from a larger pool of students in the class is also important and attributes like gender, geographical location, age and previous familiarity with each other will all prove to be important factors. For teaching staff and students, having been an online teacher/learner before is not always a precursor to understanding how to communicate effectively. If previous models on which they base their discussion behaviour have lacked focus, direction and effective facilitation, then this lacklustre discussion activity can continue.

One of the challenges of maintaining class interest over a series of discussion topics throughout the life of the class is to continually provide relevance and high interest topics. Asking students to engage in reflective discussion does not just happen because you encourage and model this level of thought and reflection. It is important to be able to ignite discussion with a starter that students are keen to engage with because it means something to them at that particular time in the life of the class. Guidelines are also essential to give a framework for them to think about what they might say and how they might say it.

The online class and classroom

The class in which this activity took place was a second year teacher education paper called 'Telecommunications and Education' taught by two lecturers with sixty students enrolled. The students came from Early Childhood and Primary education and included both pre-service and in-service teachers with a breadth of experience both in teaching and as online students. Discussion formed a compulsory part of the participation in the class and the discussion assessment represented 30% of the total marks for the paper. This emphasis on discussion was seen as important in a paper about online education where students learn to communicate in ways that may be unfamiliar and challenging.

There were six discussion groups in the class with group sizes ranging between nine and eleven students. Group selection was made to ensure a mix of teaching experience. Each group had read/write access to their own group's discussion until it was closed at the end of the discussion period of approximately ten days when they continued to have read-only access. All members of the class had read-only access to all discussion in the five other groups.

There were eight discussion topics over the twelve weeks of the semester. Discussion Topic Seven was the one selected for the role playing as the participants were familiar with each other by this stage of the semester and they had developed a significant level of experience in the discussion environment. By this stage in life of the class, some students were beginning to take risks and challenging other student's views and/or posing questions for the group. However, a significant number of students participated regularly but did not always explore ideas in any depth and they regularly appeared to ignore the support structures in place.

Students were provided with clear guidelines as to the type of discussion that was expected and the processes they might use to think about and plan their responses. All discussions, apart from Topic Seven, were assessed and students were given the following assessment guidelines:

The assessment of your discussion contributions considers how you have:

- presented clear, concise and relevant comments
- shared your own experiences
- offered new ideas and raised relevant issues
- validated and extended other students' comments
- shared aspects from your readings/literature (most essential)

You will **not** be assessed on the **frequency** of your contributions; this is about **quality** not **quantity**. We are looking for the kind of contribution you might make in a regular face-to-face discussion in a classroom situation. Any more than **150 words** and you could be considered to be dominating the interaction.

The assessment items showed students what they would receive marks for but it did not necessarily guide them toward more effective discussion participation. Clear steps were therefore provided for students to consider when they plan and prepare their comments. The following points were provided to show students how they might add value to their online discussion contributions.

You can add value to your group's discussion by:

- Sharing your understanding of the focus/purpose of the topic.
- Reading the earlier comments made - perhaps before solidifying your own opinions.
- Coming to an opinion about the comment you wish to share with others and presenting this in a clear and concise manner.
- Thinking about the relevant theory/readings/other resources you may have which will be helpful for others in your group/class.
- Thinking about what "process" aspects need attending to in your range of comments (e.g. validation, commenting on, critiquing constructively etc.).
- Being willing to pose questions for others to ponder.
- Feeling able to ask for clarification from others if you are unsure about what is being said.
- Having fun with ideas and interactions as a way of learning more effectively or building community.
- Taking risks, being a bit self-disclosive, getting involved! e.g. I believe ... I feel ...

In addition to these nine steps, a flowchart was provided as a further guide to a self-evaluation of contributions prior to posting them online.

Discussion Topic Seven

The topic of the seventh discussion was available for students to see from the start of the paper. The purpose of the topic was to allow the opportunity to explore and express some fears and concerns about what they see happening in schools with the integration of telecommunications. The topic initially consisted of two statements as discussion starter:

The world of telecommunications is threatening to overwhelm schools, teachers and children. It is not that teachers mind change, they just don't like being changed!

It is not a question of whether or not we will adopt telecommunications in our schools. It is a question of how well you and I will do this.

As Topic Seven was going to ask students to step outside their comfort zones and explore different ways of contributing to discussion by adopting an assigned role, it was decided that there would only be a self-assessment of discussion contributions. It was anticipated that this would allow students greater freedom of exploration and expression without any perceived fear of an evaluation by the two lecturers as had been the case in the previous six discussions.

Preparing the roles

The task of preparing the roles was undertaken by both the lecturers after considering the types of roles that had been evident in earlier discussions in this class. Eleven role descriptions evolved over a period of several weeks as we thought about what we had seen happening in the class discussion and what we would like to see happening in the future. Eleven roles, each with a brief description, were developed. It was decided that each student would see a full list of all the eleven different roles and descriptions. Who had been assigned each role, apart from their own, was kept a secret to add a sense of mystery and intrigue. The following are the eleven roles that were developed for the six groups in this class:

Story Teller

You love to tell stories and make the “theory” or concepts come alive and relevant for the other members of your group. You know how to present a story or case study which helps to bring a ring of reality to some of the topics and issues. The “theory” or concepts come alive and relevant to the group members when you contribute.

Devil's Advocate

You argue against a cause or position, not as a committed opponent but simply for the sake of argument or to determine the validity of the cause or position. Often you raise the worse case scenario even though you might not believe it to be the case.

Because you keep challenging the group they do not always like your constant demands for answers but you do not give up!

Literary giant

You have a really good grasp of some of the literature about teacher change and want to ensure that the ideas being discussed are closely linked with what the current writing in this area is saying. You will also want to help the group make connections between the reading and their personal/professional experiences by asking them some questions.

Eternal Optimist

You always seem to look on the bright side of any suggestions. "Of course we can do it, nothing will get in our way." Obstacles are just minor irritations to be dealt with so that you can move on to bigger and better things. In the discussion you try to put a good light on anything that looks vaguely negative.

Eternal Pessimist

You always seem to look on the dark side of any suggestions. "Well of course it is never going to work is it!" There are always one hundred and one reasons you can come up with to put a dampener on the discussion. Any good ideas must be squashed immediately!

Surface level chatterer

You have lots to say but not much of it is not very relevant to the discussion. When you are asked a question directly you avoid answering and change the topic to some other totally unconnected theme. You tell jokes that may or may not be relevant.

Discussion Leader

The role of the discussion leader is to ask questions, clarify understanding, and generally make sure the discussion keeps rolling along in a productive way. You will need to ask questions that will stimulate discussion and provide opportunities for the group to share their reactions. As the leader, you should prepare some questions ahead of time to keep the discussion going. Your job is to make sure these questions get answered. Keep the group on task!

Summariser

The role of the summariser is to pull together different ideas and opinions and show the connections between the different comments made by group members. Every few days you have a habit of wrapping up the discussion by making some statements about the trends, key points, main ideas, and statements to remember in the discussion.

Equity adviser

You always keen to ensure that everybody is able to reach their potential and people feel included in the discussion activity even though they may appear to be a little anxious about joining in.

Cultural advocate

Cultural issues are paramount in your thinking and you want people's voices to be heard. You remind people that this is not a mono cultural society in which we live and we have to consider the cultural needs of groups of people other than ourselves.

Experience is everything

You believe that having had an experience you are far better equipped to face different situations. You are always telling people about your own experiences, sometimes this is useful and relevant. On other occasions you can become a bit of a bore for the group!

Assigning the roles

The task of actually deciding which roles each group member would be assigned was made on the basis of their discussion behaviour in the previous class discussions. Close attention to how each person contributed to early discussions revealed some common characteristics based on the timing of their contributions, the length, depth of reflection, ability to stay on topic and how they were able to build on earlier comments made by other members of the group. Matching a student with a particular role was generally done by asking them to play a role that was most unlike their previous behaviour in discussion contributions. For example, the eternal pessimists were asked to be optimistic and those who had previously ignored their reading suddenly found themselves being asked to be literary giants.

In their online ePortfolio, seen only by the student and the two lecturers, each student was given their role including the associated description and a relevant graphic to depict the particular activity adding additional meaning to what we were asking from them.

Student's responses to being in role

Students knew the role they would be in well before the discussion started. Several queried the role they had been given suggesting, quite correctly, that we might be deliberately choosing something that was quite the opposite from their usual mode of contributing. The devil's advocate role particularly drew some queries about what this actually meant so an example was supplied to those who specifically asked for help.

Generally the response from students to the role playing activity was very positive. Any student anxieties tended to be around whether or not they were fulfilling the role requirements. After two days one Equity Adviser asked, "I'm not sure if I'm on the right track with my role playing. I'm not picking up anyone who appears to be anxious about joining in." She was then given a positive response that highlighted how well she was doing and how she might now target some individual group members who were not contributing and invite them to join in by asking questions like "John, how do you feel about this?"

In the first three or four days of the discussion I did begin to have some doubts about the wisdom of this role playing activity as the surface level chatterers kept returning with unhelpful comments and totally ignored discussion comments with any depth and substance. Those with experiences to share went on and on interminably in some

groups with one episode to relate after another. However, before long the discussion leaders, summarisers and equity advisers started to tune in to what was needed and put the discussions back on track. Pessimists were openly challenged in ways that had never been evident in previous discussions in this class. Many students were asking questions, challenging and presenting different points of view unlike anything seen in previous discussions.

At the conclusion of Topic Seven students were asked to identify the roles of each of the other members of their group as part of their discussion self-assessment in their ePortfolios. Discussion Topic Seven was clearly an activity that was seen as fun by the majority of students. They expressed how all the way through they were matching up contributions with the list of roles and trying to guess who was who as previous familiar participation behaviours had radically changed. “When you are not being yourself, the skys the limit!” revealed one excited student. Another student commented on how she was now “able to offer relevant, interesting comments” and was more confident in discussion whilst taking on her story telling role. She even liked the way people were challenging her as she knew she was not always correct in what she was saying and the questions gave her something to think about.

One student who had previously struggled with discussion participation and was often ignored by his group, shared how he believed that his role as an Equity Adviser allowed him to move from surface learning to higher order critical thinking. He felt that role playing had given him a new understanding of the importance of discussion online.

As part of the student’s self assessment of their own discussion in Topic Seven they were also asked to see if they could identify the roles they thought that other members of their group had been assigned. Generally they were very accurate although the Surface level chatterer role was associated with more students than those who were actually assigned this role. The big challenge for some students was in trying to figure out the roles of the two lecturers as “they did not really seem to be behaving any differently.” Perhaps this was because we had not given ourselves roles although this is something we might well consider in the future?

Discussion and conclusions

This use of role plays in discussion gave students the opportunity to discuss topics outside of their former preferred comfortable roles. Using this technique to enhance interaction in an online learning environment has provided an additional framework to critique student’s discussion contributions in the future. A wider range of labels can now be attached to different comments and lead to the promotion of a wider range of responses from each student than had previously been evident.

Many students in this class have indicated that they now understand the various aspects of their discussion contributions in much greater depth. They described how they can now put clearer labels on different comments and they have more insight into what people are saying, how they are saying it and why they might want to contribute at that particular time.

The use of discussion role playing is very much work in progress. Further areas to explore include the development of an enhanced range of roles. In this class, roles were assigned so that they were as different as possible to the student’s previous discussion behaviour. Another alternative could be to let students choose their own role rather than having it assigned to them. Another possibility is to let students who have had experience with role playing to write their own role description and then try to communicate within this self-defined framework.

The transition from face-to-face discussion to asynchronous discussion is not an easy one to make and it should not be assumed that confidence and competence in one environment can easily translate to the virtual environment. Experiences in this class have shown there is considerable potential in enabling students to explore their discussion input using role playing. The power of this activity is in adding an element of fun, mystery and the chance to step outside their familiar patterns of behaviour. Role playing may well provide a useful bridge from the familiar face-to-face discussion to quality asynchronous discussion for some online classes.

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