

## 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Virginia Tech-CIDER Conference on Higher Education Pedagogy

### Engaging Online Students: Threaded Discussions - Hit or Miss?

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#### Abstract

**Abstract:** Online education pioneers recognized that instructor/student interaction was lacking. Faculty-led asynchronous threaded discussions (TDs) seemed to solve the problem. Subsequently TDs were shown to encourage engagement, metacognition, instructor/student interaction, student participation, promote social presence, and enhance student satisfaction (Maurino, 2006), which encouraged student retention (Saba, 2000). Initial online degree programs were aimed at adult learners, who actively engaged TDs. By 2005, however, online education had become an integral component of undergraduate education. It is within this group that TDs seemed to have lost their luster. Undergrads reported that TDs are just a series of messages and that there is no social presence or sense of community. They complained about the lack of nonverbal clues leading to misunderstandings and misinterpretations and about the lack of dynamic interactions in asynchronous discussion (Meyer, 2003). While a review of the literature confirms that that when TDs work they fulfill their earlier promise, it also shows that in undergraduate education TD effectiveness is increasingly rare and that instructors complain of the extra time required. A comparison of four recent student surveys shows disparate results in both effectiveness and student satisfaction. A review of best practices emphasizing the ubiquitous and highlighting promising innovations is aimed at mitigating the *hit or miss* of TDs.

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# Engaging Online Students: Threaded Discussions (TDs) - Hit or Miss?

Bob Reese, PhD., Health Psychology, Jefferson College of Health Sciences

## HISTORY

1998 LMS\* & VLE\* →  
Higher Ed

\*Learning Management Systems & \*Virtual Learning Environments

- Target:  
**Masters & Adult Learners**
- Problem:  
**Lack of Engagement**
- Solution:  
**Asynchronous TDs**

Student/Instructor Interaction  
Engagement & Metacognition  
Replaces Class Discussion  
Student Participation  
Sense of Community  
Student Satisfaction  
Student Retention

2005 Online Ed → UG Ed

- Problem:  
**TDs Effectiveness ↓**
- UGs Complain:**  
Lack Dynamic Interactions  
Lack Non-verbal Clues →  
Misunderstandings &  
Misinterpretations  
No Sense of Community  
Just Series of Messages
- Instructors Complain:**  
Does NOT map to Class  
Discussion  
Too Much Time Spent  
For Poor Results

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

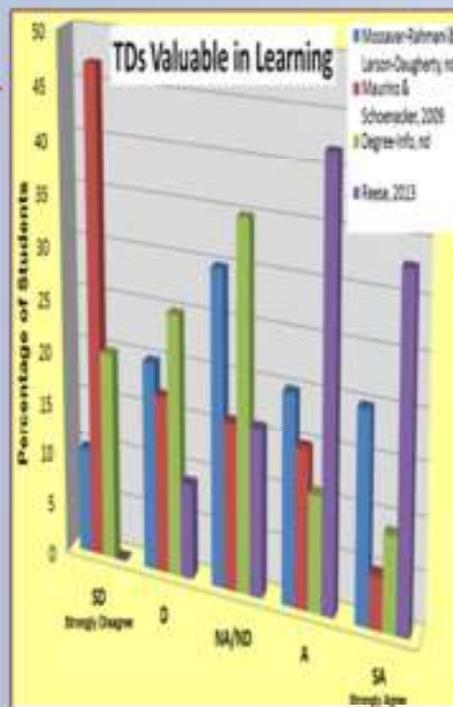
Research Agrees:

- When TDs "work" they fulfill earlier promises
- Effectiveness becoming more rare



## COMPARISON:

4 Student Surveys:  
Mixed Results



Differences in Survey Results

? Traditional College & University  
vs. "Online Universities" ?

(Univ. of Phoenix; National Univ.)

## BEST PRACTICES

- Structure the activity
  - Provide clear guidelines for posting
  - Set Netiquette Guidelines
- Make the activity interesting
- Require participation
  - Assess/Grade/Evaluate posts
  - Peer grading
- Form Learning Teams/Groups
  - Keep them small (5-7)
- Don't settle for just opinions
  - Create an area for informal discussions.
- Require a hand-in assignment (deliverable).
- **BE INVOLVED**

## NEW TECHNOLOGY

- Wikis
- Blogs
- Webinars

**ANECDOTAL**



All eventually have  
same challenges:  
**ENGAGEMENT**

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