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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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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

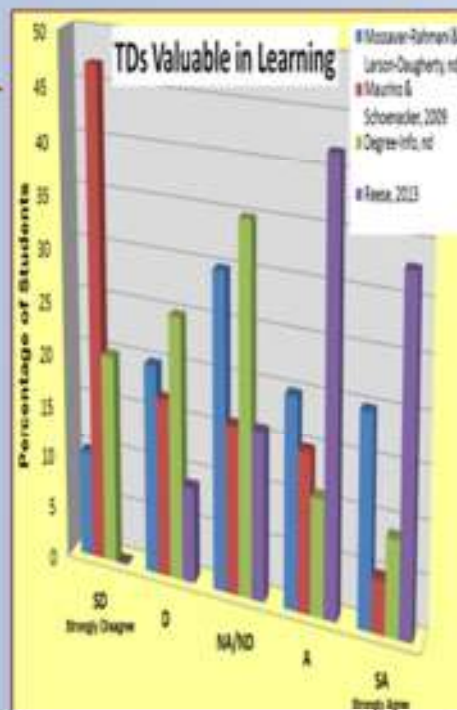
Research Agrees:

- 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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