# Enhancing the Online Classroom: Transitioning from Discussion to Engagement

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**Abstract**

The discussion board is a tool used in online teaching that allows students to share ideas and facilitate learning. Research suggests that while the discussion board has been an enlightening experience for online students, there is concern that the online classroom has become stagnant and in some cases boring and ineffective. This paper proposes possible solutions for enhancing the online classroom experience by transitioning from discussion to engagement.

## Introduction

Online learning has steadily moved into the forefront of higher education. Years ago, individuals facing social and economic difficulties were limited in their choices to obtain a university degree (Motte, 2013). The emergence and flexibility of online learning opened opportunities for students to obtain an education without relocating. Even brick and mortar schools offer courses through the online environment; in some cases, offering hybrid programs of study using a combination of online and face-to-face instruction. Crawford-Ferre and Wiest (2012) stated that in a recent study conducted by Schrum, Burbank, Engle, Chambers and Glasset, a majority of 2-year and 4-year public institutions offered online courses. The authors remarked that even more surprising is the increasing use of online instruction over face-to-face instruction with 100% public institutions planning to incorporate online courses into their long term growth plans (p. 11). As a result, many students are migrating to the online classroom due to its flexibility (Hall, 2015; Reese-Durham, 2014). However, what remains is the necessity for students to interact with instructors and peers through classroom discussions (Hall, 2015). In the traditional classroom, face-to-face classes are used for student interaction. Alternatively, in the online environment, the discussion board serves as the mode for increasing student engagement.

The discussion board is the online equivalent to the traditional classroom where students interact with peers through written communication. Similar to the traditional classroom, online students share their ideas and opinions. However, the discussion does not develop automatically; students rely on instructors who serve as catalysts to create the proper atmosphere that promotes student engagement (Dennen, 2005). Instructors are also responsible for delivering course content using various methods of engagement (Mooney, Southard, & Burton, 2014), along with guidance and feedback as needed.

Research suggests that while the discussion board has been an enlightening experience for online students, there is concern that the online classroom has become stagnant and in some cases boring and ineffective (Du & Xu, 2010, San Millan Maurino, 2007). This paper proposes possible solutions for enhancing the online classroom experience by transitioning from discussion to engagement.

## Benefits and Challenges of Online Discussion Boards

The online classroom presents a platform for students to participate in a discussion without interruptions and at their convenience within an allotted time frame (Blackmon, 2012; Hall, 2015; Motte, 2013). There are several advantages to using a discussion board. According to Hall (2015), students thrive better in the online classroom because they have a chance to be heard; they do not have to compete for attention or feel overlooked. Additionally, Hall states that there is a reduced level of direct instruction since students "own" the discussion board and do not feel threatened in the online environment. Motte (2013) noted that learning and interaction is increased because students are more willing to share their personal and work experiences and observe different viewpoints. This is an area that is often lacking in the face-to-face classroom experience (Reese-Durham, 2014). Students are allowed to review and reflect before responding to the discussion question (Reese-Durham, 2014), and instructors integrate their knowledge and experiences with course content (Brooks & Jeong, 2006). With the flexibility of the online classroom, students have time to respond thoughtfully and without interruptions (Blackmon, 2012; Hall, 2015; Mooney et. al, 2014; Tallent-Runnel et. al, 2006). Furthermore, a collaborative setting such as this presents an environment that encourages students to share and examine ideas (Curry & Cook, 2014). There is more conversation in the online classroom than in face-to-face interaction (Reese-Durham, 2014). Since writing is the key instrument used for communication, students and instructors get to know each other through prose (Motte, 2013), uncovering personality, wit, and intellect. However, according to Motte (2013), it is very important for instructors to guide and facilitate the process by focusing on content and substance; while Hall (2015) insists that asking probing questions with limited instructor involvement will build critical thinking skills and encourage students to respond likewise.

Alternatively, there are disadvantages that can place limitations on the discussion board. Numerous studies share concern that only basic facts are shared on the discussion board. They suggest that discussion boards lack depth, content, and contain limited student responses to peer posts (Brooks & Jeong, 2006; Hall, 2015; Mooney et. al, 2014). Students use "I agree", "one sentence" answers, or the same comment multiple times, which diminishes the discussion. Also, when responding to their classmates, some students fail to take the time to introduce or use critical thinking skills. In most cases, students post to meet the minimum requirements for participation; they do just enough to get by while others disappear from the discussion after making their initial post (Kim, Wah, & Lee, 2007, Mooney et al., 2014). These students show that they are not committed to the discussion by the lack of substance and higher level thinking in their responses. However, instructors share the responsibility with students in this area. Motte (2013) attributes discussion board ineffectiveness to instructors who choose to "dominate" the discussion. Often times, this behavior overwhelms students resulting in disrupting the balance needed to encourage student interaction. Asking closed-ended questions enables "yes/no" answers and will limit higher level thinking! Thus, it is important for instructors to interject "reflection, synthesis, and application" into the discussion (Mooney et al., 2014).

Despite shortcomings involved with the use of discussion boards, it is an important tool used to facilitate learning in the online environment. So, how can instructors create online environments focused on enhancing student engagement and encourage students to remain engaged?

**The Five Finger Introduction**

The Five Finger Introduction is an excellent icebreaker for online classrooms. It can be used on the discussion board to increase student interaction and bonding. According to Orr (2015), it is a very simple exercise to implement and can be altered to meet instructor's needs. Each finger on the hand represents a question or a prompt:

**Thumb** – What is "thumb-thing" you would really love to discuss or learn about today?
**Index finger** - Introduce yourself: name, major, give a one-word description of you as a student.
**Middle finger** – Someone you look up to.

**Ring finger** - Someone you love.
**Pinky finger** – Something you need to be a "little" more or "little" less of …


*Figure 1*. The Five Finger Introduction was adapted from From koala to kangaroo: Getting your students hopping with active learning in the classroom [Webinar] by S. Orr, 2015, Retrieved from http://www.prolibraries.com/teamup/?select=session&sessionID=832

**Assigning Students as Facilitators**

Assigning students as facilitators increases high levels of discussion and student engagement (Reese-Durham, 2014). This approach might be uncomfortable for an instructor; however, students are presented with an opportunity to build proficiencies in communication, critical thinking, and leadership. Reese-Durham (2014) emphasizes that it is important to model the strategy in the beginning and demonstrate the expectations.

The instructor leads the process on the discussion board by providing a topic and requires the students to respond to the initial question and to their classmates. Additionally, the instructor should respond to each student asking questions to extend the discussion. After the first week, the instructor should assign a topic to each student. In a specified week, the student assumes the role of facilitator. Everyone participates; students are either facilitators or participants. Questions (prompts) are due from facilitator on an assigned day (i.e. Thursday afternoon), while responses are due from participants on a different day (i.e. Saturday night). The facilitator is responsible for initiating replies to each participant during the week.

It is important for the instructor to create a rubric to grade the process (Reese-Durham, 2014). The rubric measures two areas: First, the facilitator, who is responsible for setting up, managing, and maintaining ONE discussion based on the week's readings and secondly, participants who are responsible for choosing and participating in ONE discussion by responding at least two times. Well above Standard – 4 is met when the facilitator **replies to each participant** in the discussion at least once, but engages in ongoing dialogue with several participants. While the participant earns a 4 if they have **5 or more posts** (i.e., participate in 3 or more discussions with multiple posts in multiple discussions, or engages in an ongoing dialogue with participants in 2 or more discussions). Other parts of the rubric include Above standard - 3 points, Standard: Minimum requirement - 2 points, and Below Standard-Unacceptable – 1 point. Each student gets a chance to become the facilitator. At the end of the course, the instructor should require students to provide feedback through a survey. According to Reese-Durham (2014), the outcome of this exercise will demonstrate "higher-level student engagement". Similar findings were shared by Blackmon (2012), who recapped the

Baran and Correia 2009 study endorsing the use of student facilitators instead of instructor led discussions to increase student interaction.

**MANIC Discussion Strategy**

In the MANIC discussion strategy, instructors are tasked with building critical thinking skills by promoting discussions with substance in the online classroom. Curry and Cook (2014) developed the MANIC discussion strategy to "promote a flurry of activity – meaningful activity" on the discussion board. The authors believe that this strategy promotes "deeper student interaction" in all areas of the course – from the course content to interpersonal relationships.

The first step involves the instructor introducing the discussion topic. This step is a standard practice for online discussion boards. However, in the second step, for each reading or question, students respond answering the following questions:

- What was the **Most important** thing in the reading?
- What was something you **Agree** with in the reading?
- What was something you do **Not agree** with in the reading?
- What was something you found **Interesting** in the reading?
- What was something you found **Confusing** in the reading? (Curry & Cook, 2014).

As the students answer these questions, they are required to quote from the text and provide a detailed explanation of their viewpoint. The authors stated that "for each week's assigned readings, students are responsible for two things: a) Their own MANIC responses (they MUST answer all five questions to get credit), and b) at least five meaningful responses to their classmates" (Curry & Cook, 2014, p. 5). The instructor has a choice to change the number of responses required. When responding to classmates, the student has the option to select one of the MANIC comments and provide feedback. Students who decide to respond to more than one comment do not receive additional credit; the goal is to increase participation.

While there has been no first-hand knowledge on the effectiveness of MANIC discussion strategy, Curry and Cook (2014) used the method and achieved positive outcomes in a Basic Composition course (English), English Composition II course, and a graduate level course in distance education. According to the authors, the strategy is easy to implement; however, for the strategy to work well, instructors must be actively involved in the process. Curry and Cook's suggestions to avoid disruptions are as follows:

1. *Don't assume students understand the strategy*. Instructors must train their students to follow the steps. Guide students through several times so that they understand how the process works.
2. *Provide examples*. Model the behavior so that students understand the requirements. Show them how to select a quote and respond effectively.
3. *Explain expectations*. Let students know why it is important to follow the steps and that they do not have to respond to all questions on the peer responses.
4. *Participate Heavily – Especially Early On*. Remain engaged early in the discussion until students become comfortable. The strategy can be difficult for students to grasp immediately.
5. *Help students explain "Why?"* Show students how to include specifics on why they selected the quote or other information. This step will increase student success in the process.
6. *Guide students through contradicting examples*. For example, when one student's Agree is another person's Disagree, and a discussion is created. Providing guidance and an example of how to handle this situation is always the best approach.
7. *Remind students that this strategy is an Academic Conversation*. (i.e. "Yes", "good point", or "I agree" will not work in this environment).

Curry and Cook (2014) also suggest modifying the MANIC discussion strategy to use in other areas such as covering multiple chapters of a textbook, responding to videos, or presentations.

**Creating Workspaces**

Lane (2014) noted that the discussion board is designed to encourage participation, yet, in most cases, the discussion prompts lack depth and encourage more "me too" responses rather than higher level thinking. The author recommended that the discussion board should be extended from conversation and social-bility to a place of "con-struc-ti-vist activity". What does this mean? Students are given a choice to locate primary sources on the internet, post and comment, then use the resources to create historical theses on the board. Students operate in a structured environment that allows them to explore their own topics. Lane (2014) stated, "In order to educate students to be media literate, educators have to engage students in the process of accessing, analyzing, evaluating, producing, and communicating using multimedia". Lane used this method in a history class.

Lane (2014) suggested these steps for creating workspaces. First, create a discussion board each week that contains instructions and a sample source with full citation and commentary. Students then find primary sources on the web, post, and provide commentary. The instructor showcases excellent examples from students with the students named. Citations are important and the instructor should model the format. Students must include the name of the author, title, date written, and an active link to the page source. It is mandatory for students to use full citations, thus, they have to use sources that meet these requirements. With the focus on the American Psychological Association writing style (APA) and getting more students to use it effectively, this solution may be a great practice activity to get students to feel more comfortable in using it. Students should only post items and write papers on topics they find interesting.

Workspaces help students cultivate skills that many researchers argue are missing from the online discussion board (Lane, 2014). These skills include critical thinking and judgment, increased written communication and internet savvy, research expertise, and collaborative proficiencies. Students work together building a collection of resources but work individually to complete their analytical assessments. A bonus in this process is the building of relationships; students are willing to help each other with technology thus forming a bond. However, Lane points out that it is important to keep students focused on the task:

1. Schedule of posts and research keeps students focused. They adjust quickly to the pace of the class and are less likely to forget to do their work.
2. Posting theses, writings, and drafts on the board for the whole class to see places pressure on students to do well.

As a result, students discover which sites are truly primary sources on their own based on experiences searching the internet, instead of the instructor providing suggested websites to use. According to Lane (2014), "by combining sources of their own choice with strict rules for analytical writing (thesis, evidence, conclusion), this method encourages intellectual development in critical thinking and learning the tools of written communication as well as history".

There are a few challenges to creating workspaces. Students who are not technology savvy may have trouble using this process. Also, it may be necessary to create a "Help" forum so that students can assist each other. Finally, grading can be a challenge due to the amount of information shared and presented in the class.

**Effective Feedback – Using Rubrics**

It is important to note that some assignments are simply icebreakers – activities to increase student engagement, like the Five Finger Introduction or Creating Workspaces activity. While these methods may require structure, assessments are optional. However, using a rubric is necessary when

implementing the MANIC Discussion strategy and Assigning Students as Facilitators strategy (Curry & Cook, 2014; Reese-Durham, 2014). The authors noted that it is important to share student expectations and grading criteria before the assignment begins to increase learning outcomes. This viewpoint is shared by Wiggins (1998) who insists that transparency between instructors and students must exist to increase student achievement.

A similar stance mentioned by Schaefer and Sustersic Stevens (2016) suggests that rubrics present opportunities to help instructors evaluate course outcomes, student performance and engagement, communicate expectations of quality work, and provide students with positive feedback. They indicate that this step is critical because instructors are frequently charged with the responsibility for assessments, yet face a grueling challenge when assessing student learning.

Schaefer and Sustersic Stevens (2016) state that creating a rubric should involve three important components:

1. *Identify Evaluation Criteria* – Develop criteria to ensure learning goals are met. Using the Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives is recommended to develop measurements for learning achievement.
2. *Define Standards of Performance* – Develop specifics on quality, purpose of assessment, and include examples to model.
3. *Specify Benchmarks for Learning Goal Achievement* – Create measurements to identify when expectations are met and when change is necessary.

Feedback from rubrics should be used to improve student achievement, course outcomes, and program effectiveness. Sites such as Rubistar (www.rubistar4teachers.org) can be used to create rubrics for discussions as well as other online classroom activities.

**Conclusion**

Each method present instructors with an opportunity to enhance the online classroom experience by transitioning from discussion to engagement. Why is this important? In 2015, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) in conjunction with Hart Research Associates, did a companion survey of employers and college students on career preparation. The report revealed that college students believed they were prepared in areas employers disagreed with:

When it comes to the types of skills and knowledge that employers feel are most important to workplace success, large majorities of employers do NOT feel that recent college graduates are well prepared. This is particularly the case for applying knowledge and skills in real-world settings, critical thinking skills, and written and oral communication skills — areas in which fewer than three in 10 employers think that recent college graduates are well prepared**.** Yet even in the areas of ethical decision-making and working with others in teams, many employers do not give graduates high marks (Hart Research Associates, 2015).

Online classrooms are the future of learning. With the increasing use of the technology to foster learning environments that expose students to real-world experiences and meet the needs of hiring managers (Hall, 2015), it is important for instructors to use innovative methods to increase student engagement. Use of the methods discussed will help students develop interpersonal, written and oral communication, leadership, analytical and critical thinking skills. Instructors have the opportunity to transition from merely introducing a discussion topic to creating more dynamic and engaging online classrooms. Hopefully, these efforts will motivate students to expand their learning capabilities, and more importantly, develop skills that will increase employability.

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