

ASYNCHRONOUS DISCUSSIONS IN VIRTUAL SEMINARS: MIGHT THEY WORK?

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The debating club format of the presentation

The presentation borrows from the traditional British 'debating club'. The motion is that "asynchronous seminar discussions can be as good or better than traditional classroom seminars". The motion is proposed by Ulrich Bernath and opposed by Thomas Hülsmann, both from the Center for Distance for Distance Education at Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg/Germany.

We will take a vote from the plenary in the beginning and see if the debate have shifted convictions by also taking a vote at the end.

The proposer's view

Ulrich Bernath sets the scene by describing how he experienced the asynchronous communication process in virtual seminars for professional development as well as in a graduate program. After having described the background Ulrich Bernath will stress advantages of asynchronous communication processes. His arguments emphasize that asynchronous communication facilitates reflection; this is due both to the stability of the text-based format and the structured character of the communication process (through readings and instructional inputs) and its the asynchronous character. He will refer to the 'ripple effect' (Bernath & Rubin 1999a). The possibility of expressing oneself actively in writing is a potent mode of learning. Expressing oneself anytime without competing for time gives asynchronous communication another definite advantage. Furthermore, asynchronous communication allows also to support collaborative learning in a virtual seminar. Examples and experiences can be drawn from teaching the Foundations of Distance Education course in the Master of Distance Education program, jointly offered by the University of Maryland University College (UMUC) and Oldenburg University and its for-runner, the Virtual Seminar for Professional Development in Distance Education (Bernath & Rubin 1999b, Bernath & Rubin 2001).

The opposer's view

Thomas Hülsmann, who has taught the same course also, will highlight the deficits of asynchronous discussions. Again his analysis is based on analysis of the structure of the asynchronous communication space. The analysis accepts that in asynchronous communication has one definitive advantage rooted in the very structure of asynchronous communication. 'All can speak at the same time'. Also the opposing view accepts that articulating oneself is an important mode of learning to which access is not limited as it is in a traditional seminar (characterized by turn taking). But what price to pay? The more this advantage is made use of and communication level high. All speaking at the same time almost inevitably creates a cacophony of voices which borrowing a metaphor from information theory could be referred to as 'white noise'.

Though threading provides a structuring tool to impose some structure, the asynchronous and text based character produce inevitably the following effect: the attention of participants is skewed strongly towards the message just opened. This message is of high visibility. Arguments leading to this last message are likely to be shrouded in oblivion. The effect is an 'argumentation process without history', much like a 'Markov chain', a process without

memory. This has a peculiar effect: the longer the thread, the more comments are likely to 'veer off' topic. This might have led course designers to discourage deeper thread levels (as it is the case in WebTycho where threading is only supported to level three) since the longer the thread the more unlikely it is that the message is 'on target', at least with respect to the original main topic set by the teacher.

While the opposing concedes that the format well supports reflective argumentation, it may however overdo it in two directions: first, the intermittent access times of the various participants almost inevitably erodes focus and lets motivation cool out. This produces inefficiencies: each time you access the class, especially in case of classes with high communication volume, two digit numbers of messages may wait for the participant. These messages may be distributed over diverse main topics. Having left the discussion some days ago, it is hard to reconfigure what has been the matter. Such a situation is unlikely to lead to the reflective process the 'ripple effect' wants to make us believe. (it rather corresponds to a situation where ten stones are thrown into the water at the same time, leading to quite chaotic rippling patterns). In fact, observed student behavior does not support the 'ripple hypothesis'. More often than not posting patterns of students suggest that they have specific times of access and 'batch processing' the new messages.

The reflective character of online discussion is also due to its text based character. The stability of the text is indeed facilitating analysis and reflection. But the 'darkness' of the online classroom in which participants are visible to each other only through their texts impinges on the process of argumentation. Sharp arguments are predicated on trust since they might involve a measure of conflict. Such a relation of trust is based on the distinction between argument and person. However, in text-based communication author and text merge. Being visible through the text only means that the traditional distinction between 'argumentum ad rem' and an 'argumentum ad personam' is not longer sustainable. Empirically, the anxiety to take on another person's argument is reflected in the extreme politeness of most online seminar communication and an observable reluctance to express disagreement. Hülsmann will contribute a number of observations from various teaching online courses in the same program (MDE offered by UMUC and Oldenburg University) to substantiate his points.

Wrapping up the debate

The choreography of the debate could include both participants mustering some or two supporting voices from the audience before asking for the vote.

In a final round both participants will make suggestions how to improve online discussions and to make it a better format for academic discourse. Both partners agree that improved threading would be one of the features contributing to achieving this aim.

More information on the MDE program which serves both proposer and opposer of the motion as their experiential base can be found at <http://zefnotes.uni-oldenburg.de/ASF/ASF.nsf>

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