

Participatory Online Activities Showcase Analysis

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My current thoughts on how people learn in online learning environments

Based on the readings and coursework thus far, I believe that engaged learning, which Conrad and Donaldson (2011) state is another name for constructivism, is the key to learning in an online environment (p. 1). Conrad and Donaldson (2011) posited that the “collaborative acquisition of knowledge is one key to the success of creating an online learning environment” (p. 3). They further noted that “each learner’s actions contribute not only to individual knowledge but to overall community knowledge development as well” (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011, p. 3). My participatory online activities showcase (POAS) group had an opportunity to apply what we had learned thus far in the course to engage our peers and help them learn. To do so, we focused on designing activities to keep the learners engaged and to facilitate collaborate learning.

Learning activities must involve real-world content and learner-learner interaction to keep learners engaged and to foster learning. Manwaring et. al (2017) found that the “location of the learning activity is less important to engagement than the actual pedagogical elements an instructor designs and the student perception of the learning experiences” (p. 30). Moore (1989) noted that “quality in teaching and learning relies on three types of interaction: learner-content, learner-learner, and learner-teacher” (as cited in Gayol, 2010, p. 207). Real-world content and learner-learner interaction are essential in any learning environment, but in an online environment, I believe that they are vital to keep learners motivated, actively learning, and feeling as though they are connected with other learners and the instructor.

A supportive online community must be developed for effective online learning. Our extensive readings on social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence confirm that “the development of a mutually respectful and intellectual community” is essential to “effective

learning” (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016, p. 47). Since our POAS group planned activities for week twelve, our peers were connecting, communicating, and collaborating, having gone through Conrad and Donaldson’s first three phases as my group co-facilitated for phase four (2012, p. 15). The mutually respectful intellectual online community was well established by this point in the course. This fact made it easier to develop appropriate activities for peer engagement.

What went well and did not go well based on how people learn in online environments

My group’s topic was learning analytics, a rather dry topic but one that related to the learner’s lives as students, teachers, and future course designers and instructors. With this strong relevance to learner’s lives, we focused our instructional design on real-world content and helping the learners make connections between the content and their work and goals. Both our synchronous and asynchronous activities asked the learners to reflect on the readings and their own experiences to evaluate the use of learning analytics and its sources.

For the asynchronous activities, we required posts on two topics. Discussions can be designed to encourage critical thinking or support students in their own reflections and inquiries (Boettcher and Conrad, 2016, p. 53). We asked the students to think critically and reflect on their experiences and readings. Discussion question 1 involved the most important application of learning analytics. Discussion question 2 asked the learners to examine their own activity in the learning management system (LMS) to evaluate the appropriateness of LMS data to gauge learning engagement. To evaluate our discussion questions, I looked at whether the learners were engaged. Factors I considered were participation and evidence of reflection and critical thinking. I then considered whether there was evidence of learning from other learners.

All but one student participated in the required discussion board posts for each discussion question. The student has also failed to participate in other weeks, and therefore, the lack of

participation was not a reflection on the learning activities that we designed. Participation in the asynchronous activities was good, but it could have been better. One problem in getting numerous discussion threads active was the fact that a number of students posted after the deadline. This gave other learners less time to read, reflect on, and respond to the posts. This problem was not unique to Week 12, and therefore is not a reflection on the learning activities that we designed. However, few learners interacted with the discussion boards beyond the class requirements. As shown in Table 1, discussion question 1 appeared to have more activity with more total posts and a larger number of students participating more than required. There was room for improvement in the participation for both discussion questions. To encourage timely posts in the future, I would re-emphasize the expectations for the asynchronous component in the prior week.

Table 1 Discussion Post Activity

	Discussion 1	Discussion 2
Timely initial posts	11	11
Untimely initial posts	4	4
Peer comment posts	21	18
Facilitator posts	19	14
Instructor posts	6	3
Students posting greater than the 3 required posts	4	1
Initial posts with evidence of reflection	12	14
Initial posts demonstrating little effort	3	1
Students who did not post	1	1
Students who did not respond to two Peers	6	7
Total posts	67	54

My second factor is quite subjective--did participants put thought into it their posts? In my subjective evaluation of responses to the discussion questions, I feel that most learners put thought into the issue when posting. However, a small number did not expend much effort. Discussion question 2 appeared to be more successful in the number of students putting thought

into their initial post. This discussion question focused more on personal experience rather than the readings. Analyzing their own behavior may have been easier or more appealing.

As to learner-learner interaction, the first discussion question was particularly active, especially with regard to the question of intervention with college students. Dr. Yamagata-Lynch provided scaffolding to give information to guide our responses and thoughts on that issue. In addition, we heard from learners using their perspectives as students, parents, instructors, and K12 teachers. There was evidence of learners learning from each other through these interactions. However, with discussion question two, learning appeared to have taken place primarily through learner self reflection prior to the initial post.

To determine the success of the synchronous meeting, I examined whether learners were engaged and whether the synchronous session resulted in critical thinking and learning through interaction with other learners. Our strategy for the synchronous session involved avoiding extensive lecturing to keep the attention of learners. Our overview of the asynchronous activity could have included a brief article summary. We decided not to include a summary, but in the future, I will take advantage of this opportunity to reinforce the concepts from the articles.

Because we were trying to keep learners engaged through interacting with each other and real-world problems, we spent the bulk of the session in the breakout activity and reporting back. My team members and I did not go into the breakout groups because we did not want to stifle activity, but this also meant we were not able to gauge whether the time allotted was appropriate. We also had trouble determining participation levels within the breakout groups due to our absence. All groups were successful in finding the information we requested and in forming opinions regarding the LMSs. In the main session, learners learned from other learners by sharing experiences as teachers, students, and college administrators. Students appeared to learn

more from each other's experiences and sharing the questions that they were struggling with than from the readings or our presentation.

Conclusion

Overall, our activities kept the learners engaged as evidenced by participation and critical thinking. Learners evidenced critical thinking in the discussion boards and when they reported back from their small groups and commented each other's reports. Learners shared their thoughts and opinions on learning analytics and the LMSs in both formats. Strong opinions resulted regarding the quality of the LMSs, and students overall seemed to doubt the value of learning analytics. In both formats, learning from other learners was evident. We were successful in engaging the learners and in facilitating collaborative learning.

References

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