Making the Most of Online Discussion: A Retrospective Analysis

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Discussion forums are often a primary tool used for teaching and learning in asynchronous online courses. In this article, the author shares her experiences using discussion forums to promote learning, teacher presence, and community. In a retrospective microanalysis of discussion forums posts and interactions, the author identified five major purposes for discussion forums. Here, she details the rationale, mechanics, and interactions yielded for each type. Specific language of forum prompts, as well as teacher and student posts and interactions, are provided so that readers can, if interested, apply and/or modify the forum types.

I was a reluctant online teacher. I knew how to teach in brick and mortar classrooms, with movable furniture, white boards, handouts, projectors, and occasionally, shared snacks. I used technology to enhance my teaching, not replace it. Online teaching was a new frontier for me. I was skeptical about being able to build and facilitate rich relationships, meaningful interactions, and a sense of community in an online classroom. In my teaching, I depended on students' reactions, body language, nuanced cues, and sentient facial expressions to determine my own course of action as their teacher.

In this article, I discuss my reflections and analysis of my teaching and interactions with my students in the discussion forums of an online graduate course. Online discussion forums are a rich source of information about a course, as suggested by Meyer (2004): "the written record of online discussions is a boon to researchers and faculty who wish to better understand the dynamics of online course work" (p. 102). My goal in sharing my experience is to reflect constructively on my own teaching to improve my effectiveness while also offering support and advice to colleagues who are pondering or pursuing online teaching. Teaching, after all, is always a journey of becoming.

The popularity of social media demonstrates how conversations can develop and flourish in virtual spaces. Communities of people rally for causes, debate political viewpoints, share recipes and parenting advice, insert worldviews, and fund innovative projects and relief efforts. How can higher education institutions and instructors leverage the power of online conversations to enhance student learning, community, and satisfaction?

As more higher education courses are taught online, faculty are challenged to create virtual learning environments that use discussion to support student learning and success in online spaces. While many faculty may feel reticent about facilitating discussion online, the virtual environment brings many benefits to bear on discussion: asynchronous learning provides students time for reflection, research, contemplation, and careful articulation of thought before contributing an idea. In threaded discussions, students can return to ideas and concepts and continue to revise their thinking throughout the course. Many faculty who have taught online have noted that the online environment facilitates more substantive discussion than is likely or possible in the face-to-face classroom (Baglione & Nastanski, 2007). Other characteristics of asynchronous online learning include opportunities to research; share substantiated ideas; recognize well-developed ideas and abilities (e.g., writing persuasively) demonstrated by peers; prepare thoroughly; and reflect, synthesize, and identify patterns. Online learning can also effectively accommodate the needs of diverse learners (Brewer & Brewer, 2015; Keller & Mangan, 2010; Milliron, 2010).

Mandernach, Forrest, Babutzke, and Manker (2009) examined student learning in face-to-face, asynchronous online, and synchronous online classes and determined that discussion alone, regardless of delivery, does not significantly impact student learning. Instead, they found that instructor interactivity was most critical, regardless of where or when the discussion took place. Online instructors often act as planners, role models, coaches, facilitators, and communicators, with the communicator role being the most critical to the success of online discussion (Heuer & King, 2004). Two decades ago, Berge (1995) identified four different roles that instructors play in facilitating computer-mediated discussions: pedagogical, social, managerial, and technical. So, how do online teachers apply these findings and practice multiple roles when teaching their courses and facilitating discussions?

Course Context

The course I taught and analyzed is a graduate course for students pursuing an initial teaching credential. Students enrolled in the course had undergraduate degrees in content fields (e.g., English, history, business) related to the teaching license they were seeking. The course, Successful Schools for Young Adolescents, provides a comprehensive study of middle level education (MLE), including its history and ideology. Additionally, it focuses on the developmental

Table 1
Number of Discussion Forums and Posts by Purpose

Purpose	Number of forums of this type in course	Total number of discussions and replies
Substantive Content Discussions	14	1,169
Virtual Coffee Shop	1 (persistent link)	214
Voluntary Product Sharing	4	64
Team Collaboration Forums	2	496
Skill/Question (Scaffolding)	2	83
Totals	23	2026

characteristics of young adolescents and the implications of those characteristics for middle-level schooling. I have taught this course four times, and this was the second time I taught it online.

I have studied and written about the importance of cultivating community in the online environment (Smith & Maiden, 2015) and therefore spend a great deal of time establishing a welcoming environment for learning. I use my university's learning management system (LMS) to deliver an asynchronous course designed for my students, primarily working adults who need flexibility in their study schedules.

Within the LMS, I use discussion forums as my primary method for interacting with students and ask that students use them extensively to interact with each other. In general, I use discussion forums to help students discuss course concepts and build a professional community. In my retrospective analysis of the discussion forums, I discovered that I use discussion forums for five different purposes, which are presented in Table 1. In the following sections, I discuss the purpose, method, and outcomes of each of the five types.

Substantive Content Discussion Forums

Purpose. Most research about discussion forums has examined content-focused discussions, such as those that focus on a text, lecture, or major course topic (Baker, 2011). Content discussion forums provide opportunities for students to demonstrate, share, and build their understanding of course concepts and to integrate an idea from earlier in the term with new ideas introduced in subsequent weeks. While content-focused discussions are key to the asynchronous online course, they are not sufficient for optimal online learning.

In my course, most of the consideration and examination of course content happens within the discussion forums. As a result, I spend significant time reading students' postings and providing both a quick rating and content-specific feedback that reacts to, and expands on, their ideas. For example, I might introduce another idea or resource, explain a practical application of a concept the

students are considering, or ask them to justify their positions using evidence from the text or other research.

Method. The expectations for the discussion forum are that students post mid-week and respond to multiple classmates on multiple days. I encourage them to think about our university's guidelines for face-to-face classes, that for each hour spent in class, three to four hours are spent outside of class. Applied to our online course, this means that students should plan to spend approximately 12-15 hours per week on the course. I ask them to think about how they might distribute this time in their schedules, and I explain that I generally spend time in the course each morning and each night. I emphasize that effective posts exhibit relevance to topic, personal opinions and comments, contribution to learning community, and interactions within the learning community, and these expectations are shared with students through a rubric. In addition, students are expected to write professionally. Finally, I ask students to end their posts with "something worth responding to" to invite additional conversation. If they have stated a point, they might invite others to disagree or change their perspective. If they still have questions, they might ask those questions so that others can respond. I explain that the discussion seems more natural and less forced if they invite responses rather than summarize their ideas or thoughts at the end of a post. Though I review these expectations with students in the syllabus and an introductory course video, I communicate with students that the "spirit of this law" is more important than the "letter of this law." In other words, I emphasize that my goal is for them to be in the course often, interacting with course concepts and with each other (see Brown, Roediger, & McDaniel, 2014).

Assessment. The content forums are the only forums that are graded. I use formative assessment to provide feedback to students about the quality of their weekly posts. Within the post, I use a drop-down menu and a custom scale to assign student posts a rating: goal, meets standard, needs improvement, or missing/absent. If, for example, they receive a rating of "goal," they know that if they continue to post at that level, they will receive the highest rating when I assign

Table 2
Number of Discussions, Responses, and Highest Exchanges by Week and Topic for Content Discussions

Placement in course	Topic	# of discussions	# of responses	Highest number of posts within a single thread
Week 1	Defining Middle School/Middle School Philosophy and Organization	33	72	9
Week 2	Middle School Concept: Historical Perspectives and Rationale	27	114	11
Week 3	Founders of the Middle School Movement	26	84	11
Week 4	Middle School Manifesto	26	64	9
Week 6a	An Exemplary Middle School Case Study	26	69	6
Week 6b	Prominent Middle School Leaders, Part II	31	31	4
Week 7	Prominent Middle School Leaders, Part III	26	29	4
Week 8	Middle School Curriculum	31	76	7
Week 11	Middle School Advisory	22	72	9
Week 12a	Intramural and Interscholastic Sports in MS	24	41	6
Week 12b	Gender Differences in MS Sports	23	37	5
Week 14	MS and opposing world views	24	58	8
Week 15	Specialized Middle Level Teacher Preparation	24	15	4
Week 16	Lessons Learned: The MS Expedition	23	41	7

a summative grade for their "Commitment to the Community of Practice." The weekly formative ratings are not calculated as part of the grade but are used when I assign the summative grade. Students are directed to review the rubric and ask for additional feedback as needed.

Sample discussion prompts. Effective and appropriate discussion prompts are an important part of course planning and design and influence the depth" of students' learning. Meyer (2004) applied four content analysis frameworks to a set of discussion forum posts for a course and determined that the nature of the question (or prompt) influenced the depth of learning exhibited in student responses. Here is an example of a content-focused prompt for my course:

Middle level education has a deep and rich history related to curriculum. Four of the five founders were national leaders in curriculum. Many of the leaders interviewed in the Legacy Project cite the greatest disappointment of the Middle School Movement as its inability to influence the implementation of an appropriate curriculum for young adolescents. This week, we'll discuss perspectives on the ideal middle school curriculum as described by the founders and prominent leaders. It would be appropriate for you to further research the authors so you can understand their perspectives. Most of them eventually became professors and academics. It is also interesting to note the dates of publication and timeline of this kind of innovative curriculum thinking.

This week, all of you will read three selections that are alike and then you will choose additional texts to inform your own perspective and our collective discussion. In your initial post, please identify the individual reading you did and then make 4-5 statements of ideal middle school curriculum principles. Provide citations for your stated principles. These statements (yours and those of others) may be used in your upcoming DRMS Project and philosophy statement. Hang on to your own principle statements and feel free to borrow the great work of your colleagues as they offer it to the conversation.

In your responses, remember to push the conversation forward so that we all continue to learn and challenge each other. In your own teaching, you will need to advocate for sound practices, particularly related to curriculum. You will need to be able to state and support a position.

Other types of prompts I use include asking students to pose their own question, providing a list of discussion questions and asking students to choose one to answer, asking students to distill an authority's viewpoint to a series of short statements, and articulating a scholarly view on a publicly-debated topic.

My role. In the content discussions, I serve in the roles described by Heuer and King (2004): planner, role model, coach, facilitator, and communicator. As planner, I write prompts that are aligned to course goals and that guide students to deeper understandings of course concepts as they analyze, synthesize, and articulate, in the case of the example, curriculum principles. To manage the discussion forums, I set aside time each day to provide content-specific feedback. In this way, I also serve as a role model to students as we work alongside each other giving substantive feedback. I coach students with my questions, asking them to expand their ideas, consider an alternative viewpoint, or consult another resource. I am particularly attentive to these roles near the beginning of the course, when I serve as the primary facilitator of the discussions. As the course continues, other students assume functions as role models and coaches. The social function enters the discussions as students seek to build connections with each other's knowledge and experiences and as they identify those who are like-minded, as well as those who have differing perspectives or experiences.

Analysis of content discussion forums. We had 14 substantive content discussions over 16 weeks in this course. Each discussion yielded an average of 26 initial posts from students in the course. Table 2 provides summary data for the substantive content posts.

Documenting and analyzing these data have helped me to determine which prompts yield better discussions and increased student interactions. While the number of posts students make has been linked to higher exam scores and overall course performance (Carstens, Wright, Coles, McCleary, & Williams, 2013), increasing the quantity of posts is not my only teaching goal. In Weeks 6b and 7, for example, the number of replies is low by comparison to many other weeks and topics. Though students contributed fewer posts, I can see in course reports that students viewed the writings of "early posters," perhaps to guide their own thinking. This analysis helps me to see where the function of "role model" is beginning to be distributed among students in the course. I also further examined those discussions with the highest number of interactions to see if I was one of the responders in those exchanges in order to analyze the possibility that students are more likely to join a conversation when I contributed. Overall, in about 67% of the highest exchanges, I was one of the respondents. However, the trend changed over the course of the semester. In the first half of the course, I was a responder in 100% of the exchanges with the highest number of

replies, but in the second half of the course, I was a respondent in only 29% of those cases.

Students whose initial posts yielded a higher number of exchanges had a higher average final course grade and were less likely to drop the course. At the end of this course, the mean grade average for the set of students was 92.31, while the average grade for students whose initial post yielded one of the highest exchanges was 95.18. It is also important to note that approximately 28% of the original 32 students dropped or did not complete this course. However, none of the posters whose discussions yielded the highest exchanges dropped the course.

One of my colleagues calls content discussions the "bread and butter" of her online course. Indeed, content discussions are the essential, sustaining element of the course. They are the place where students and I generate and revise our understandings of course concepts, integrating readings and others' perspectives into our emerging and deepening understandings. Students can rehearse their articulation of ideas in ways that help them to be more confident in those ideas when they transition into their profession. As their teacher, I can monitor their writing and introduce ideas to "complicate" their understandings. I am both expert and co-learner, and am often inspired by the content of their posts. As the semester progressed, students became advocates, activists, and authorities in middle level education. The content-focused forums provided the basic forward rhythm for the content learning in the course.

Virtual Coffee Shop Discussion Forum

Purpose and method. The Virtual Coffee Shop forum provides a continuous communication channel between me and my students and among students, and it is a place for us to connect. These connections may come in the form of student or teacher questions, announcements, resource sharing, or support seeking. In the forum settings, I used the "forced" setting which automates an email for each Coffee Shop post and response. I use the Coffee Shop for all announcements, and I invite students to participate with this single, persistent prompt:

> In my courses, I usually include a virtual coffee shop as an interactive space for us to share ideas, thoughts, questions, and wonderings. The coffee shop is open 24/7. Click on the Virtual Coffee Shop forum above or the coffee shop photo below to start or join the conversation. Welcome!

I used the Virtual Coffee Shop to make beginning-of-the-semester announcements, welcoming students to the course, asking them to complete a questionnaire so that I could personalize course content based on their

experiences, orienting students to the course and LMS, and providing information about library resources. Throughout the course, I used the Coffee Shop to announce synchronous meetings, offer popular media articles and resources related to course topics, share examples of exemplary schools in the news, and announce to the students that one of the individuals we had studied passed away. At the end of the course I made announcements and offered support related to the final exam and other culminating assignments.

Analysis of Virtual Coffee Shop forum. There were 81 discussions in the Coffee Shop and 133 replies. Of the 81 discussions, 37 were professor-initiated, and 44 were student-initiated. Fourteen different students started discussions in the Virtual Coffee Shop.

I was more likely than students to initiate postings at the beginning and end of the semester. I was the initial poster in about 59% of the first twenty and last twenty posts. In the middle, I was the initial poster about 30% of the time. This trend suggests that students may need more guidance from me as they were getting started and completing the course.

Students initiated Coffee Shop discussions related to political actions introduced and/or taken related to education in our state, requests for guidance about how to be an effective substitute teacher, and questions about assignments. They shared screen-casting and citation building tools they had found and provided advice about the state licensure exam. One student, often the first to access course materials each week, let us know if a resource was not opening correctly or a quiz link did not work. I encouraged him to post in the Coffee Shop, which he was reticent to do at first. He did not want to point out my "errors." I encouraged him to post so that when I fixed the problem, I could respond to the entire class, letting them know that the issue had been resolved. When students emailed me with questions about assignments, I asked them to post them in the Coffee Shop to ensure that everyone could receive the information. I use the Coffee Shop in the same way that I might use announcements or discussions of assignments in a face-to-face class. Students appreciate the transparency of this approach.

Here is an example of a student post in the Coffee Shop. She titled the post "Not So Graceful Exit":

> Someone shared this blog post on my Facebook feed. It moved me. And (to be honest) makes me anxious about entering the profession. I know as a parent I get frustrated at parent-teacher conferences because all they seem to do is show me results from all these tests (so many acronyms!) that at one point I finally just have to ask, "But how do YOU think my daughter is doing?" It is my sincere hope that testing mandates and NCLB regulations are changed within our teaching tenure.

In my response to this student, I referred to postings from other students in the class to invite conversation and community, and I cited authorities we had read:

> Hi, Mary…This is definitely a difficult article to read, but the reaction of this teacher's colleagues and supervisors also made me really sad. They didn't beg her to stay; instead, they wished they could go with her.
>
> I just have to believe that the ground is swelling with wonderful, courageous thinkers and activists who are going to join forces and say, 'No more!' Perhaps the article that Sarah posted speaks to the promise of hope?
>
> I saw a bumper sticker the other day that also made me sad. Richard Melton, are you reading this? Instead of First in Flight as the NC motto (challenged by states like Ohio, by the way), it said North Carolina: First in Teacher Flight. Ouch.
>
> Howard Johnston [a prominent leader we studied] once talked to me about the movie, *Monuments Men*. I still haven't seen it, sadly. Here is a summary of who the Monuments Men were: The Monuments Men were a group of men and women from thirteen nations, most of whom volunteered for service in the newly created Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives section, or MFAA. Most had expertise as museum directors, curators, art scholars and educators, artists, architects, and archivists. Their job description was simple: to save as much of the culture of Europe as they could during combat. These men not only had the vision to understand the grave threat to the greatest cultural and artistic achievements of civilization, but then joined the front lines to do something about it. Howard said the movie made him also think about education...middle level education, progressive education, education as a Common Good, as a human enterprise. Like the Monuments Men, we have to ask ourselves, "What is worth saving?," and, "What are we going to do about it?" I wish the answers and action were simpler.

In another exchange, a student posted about her "bafflement" with the complexity of an assignment, stating that she was having difficulty thinking about all the pieces at once and planning how to get started. She also expressed some frustration about working in a group. After answering each of her questions, I added this note at the end of my response:

> Thank you again, Tammy, for your questions, and for posting them here so that our communication is open and transparent - and everyone sees the

responses. Let me know if I can do something to make this information more centralized for you. Some groups have made great progress, and I invite them to respond with suggestions of what has worked well.

A student in a different group offered Tammy supportive information about how her group had started their project, divided the tasks, collaborated using Google Hangouts and Docs, and outlined their white paper.

The Coffee Shop serves a social function and invites students to be self-directed learners and community members. Theories of student motivation influenced my development of the Coffee Shop. Citing a constellation of new thinking about the human condition, Daniel Pink (2009) writes: "Human beings have an innate inner drive to be autonomous, self-determined, and connected to one another. And when that drive is liberated, people achieve more and live richer lives" (p. 73). I do not coerce students to participate in the Coffee Shop discussions. Rather, I *invite* them to participate. I don't choose the topics, especially once the course is underway. The Coffee Shop allows students autonomy to post and to share and relate to each other and to the course. The Coffee Shop is effective because it is *not* graded or required.

Voluntary Product Sharing Forum (VPSF)

Purpose and method. I also use discussion forums to invite students to share drafts of their work in a Voluntary Product Sharing Forum (VPSF). I use this forum as a means to provide formative feedback to specific students who volunteer their drafts, as well as a resource for students who view the work that is submitted and then returned with feedback. I explain that students are not required to share drafts, but those who do by a certain deadline are guaranteed specific feedback from me. I use track changes and comments functions in the word processor, as well as the rubric, to

provide feedback. The "catch" to volunteering is that the feedback I provide will be posted to the forum and viewable by the entire class. Students who do not wish to post their drafts to the VPSF can use virtual office hours to discuss a paper or assignment.

Hattie (2009; 2012) extensively studied influences on student achievement for K-12 and post-secondary students and found that the method of delivery (e.g., f2f, online) is not a significant factor in student achievement. Rather, what is most important are the ways that teachers "make their success criteria clear, the degree of challenge and feedback, and the quality of the interactions among students and the teacher" (p. 86). The VPSF can expand students' understanding of criteria for success on assignments and offer criterion-specific feedback.

One benefit of the VPSF is that all students receive additional information about the rubric or grading criteria. I focus most of my feedback on grading criteria in the rubric and provide explanations of how students' writing is related to the assessment criteria. Once my feedback is available, students continue to share and give feedback to each other. I also provide feedback to help students strengthen technical aspects of their writing. Because students view this feedback, this forum becomes a teaching tool. For example, I often comment on students' application of APA (American Psychological Association, 2010) Style Guidelines. In my feedback, I provide specific instruction and offer a resource that further explains the guidelines. In this way, other students can see my expectations related to APA Style Guidelines and can access additional information to compose or correct their own work. Compared to my older methods of giving feedback on individual papers, errors and misunderstandings are greatly reduced.

Analysis of VPSF forum. I set up three voluntary product sharing forums for each of the three major assignments. The number of shares, views, exchanges, and feedback for each assignment are provided in Table 3.

Table 3
Number of Shares, Views, Exchanges and Feedback for Voluntary Product Sharing Forums

Assignment	Products Shared	Views	Exchanges	Teacher Feedback	Student Feedback or Comment
Publication presentation	12	985	52	7	19
Philosophy paper	10	605	28	5 (some 2x)	7
Developmentally-Responsive Middle School Project	3	95	0	0	0

The data in Table 3 are presented in the order in which the assignments were due. Not surprisingly, the first assignment, the Publication Presentation, yielded the most shares, views, feedback, and comments. The forum for the second assignment, the Philosophy paper, received 605 views, with many students looking at the sample papers and my feedback. The final project only had three shares. For this project, students worked in groups, so three shares represents nearly half of the students. Because students were in groups, they likely used the samples as a resource, but they invested their energy in their own group's project.

The first student who posted in the VPSF shared her screencast publication presentation and received the following feedback and questions, mostly about the technical aspects of the presentation, from a peer:

I've watched your video twice now (one time to see the order in which you presented your ideas and articles, for inspiration!), and I really like your presentation. Your narration is clear and slow (I will have to slow down!) and works as a great guide to your video. The slides are clear, well organized, and not overcrowded… I was able to both download the video and watch it embedded in the browser. Did you upload the video to your google drive or just post the video in the uploads box? How large was your initial file if you remember?

She also received this feedback from me:

"Thank you so much for sharing your project and video with us. It is great to have an example posted with video and audio for our consideration. In your video, your voice is great. Mitch is right. The pacing was perfect, and your inflection was great. It is clear that you wrote a careful script for your video that is closely aligned to the evaluation criteria I provided. The narration supports the visuals nicely. I am wondering if the 15-slide limit was difficult for you. I wonder if I need to modify the assignment when it's a video to focus on time rather than slides? I'd love your perspective on that.

"In terms of the criterion related to "provided an authentic, meaningful learning experience for colleagues," I think your video really hits the mark. I could see asking faculty to view the video prior to a faculty meeting and then discussing the application of some of the ideas you raise - or then asking faculty to read one of the articles you highlight and discuss it in small groups. They could discuss how their school is meeting the four types of needs mentioned in the article you highlighted - and how they could improve their programming. There are many possibilities for follow-up, and this video could be a great prompt and preparation for that.

You provided the right level of specifics and overview for each publication, and you demonstrated an ability to link the publications to concepts in the course. I like how you made the publications relevant by discussing specific elements that "stood out to you."

You also provided a nice discussion of how the work included in the publications might be extended and what curiosities you might pursue as a result of reading the publications.

One slight improvement that isn't really in the rubric but that would improve the video would be to provide some type of conclusion or summary statement… The video ended a bit abruptly with the conclusion of the final slide.

Well done, Kelly - and thanks again for your contribution. When you are ready, you can upload your video in the assignment area."

This was the first constructed-response assignment due in the course, and while the VPSF is completely voluntary, it had 985 views. Fourteen students shared a draft of this project with the class. The five who shared drafts prior to my deadline for early review received criterion-specific feedback from me. Two more received brief feedback from me. All students who shared drafts before the project deadline received feedback from at least one peer. In all, there were 52 voluntary exchanges about this project. Two unexpected outcomes resulted from this forum. First, one student who is particularly skilled with the creation of video and audio media making started a discussion in this forum, providing technical suggestions and support for this project – more support than I could provide (see, for example, Razak & Yee, 2010; Willis, Davis, & Chaplin, 2013 for more benefits of online peer learning). His suggestions helped other students experience more success, and he became our expert on screen-casting and audio capture. In addition, having students share early drafts allowed us to troubleshoot technical issues with this assignment. For example, some students had files that were not "shared" in a way that their peers could access. Others received feedback that helped them improve visual and/or audio quality. The students worked together to help each other improve their work and achieve success. Admittedly, some of the students focused their feedback more on the technical aspects of the project than the content aspects. However, this allowed me to focus my attention on the content of the projects and provide feedback specific to the criteria.

The second forum in this category was provided for students to post a paper in which they were to

articulate their emerging philosophy of education. Though it was to be a scholarly work, it was also a personal reflection. I was the first person to post in this forum. Functioning as coach and role model (Heuer & King 2004), I wanted to provide an expanded view of what this assignment might look like and encourage a creative but scholarly approach. I also wanted to share my process for distilling beliefs and ideas. I attached my draft to this post:

> Hi, everyone. I thought I might share a draft of a philosophy paper I've been writing. It's certainly not aligned to your assignment or draft, but I think it does demonstrate a bit about "voice" in a philosophy statement. I hope that your philosophy statement will be uniquely yours though, like mine, it will draw from many wonderful ideas of others. In my work as a public school teacher and administrator - and in my current work on search committees and as a mentor of faculty, I read quite a few philosophy statements. Sometimes, they are so vanilla, so common and generic, that they could be true of anyone. I certainly don't mean to add extra pressure. I actually want to give you some freedom to express yourself uniquely.

> I am currently a participant in a Leadership Academy, and last week, I had to do an exercise identifying my core values. Somehow it was very slow, painful work - and yet a week later, I find that I keep returning to the hand-wringing I was doing to get that wording right. I think philosophies and core values matter because they ground us in beliefs that we can return to when we find ourselves trying to make decisions.

> Anyway, mine is definitely still a draft. I've written many of these in my career actually, but as I work through these with other faculty and with you, I want to keep revisiting what I'm saying, what I'm believing.

> Philosophically and pedagogically yours,
> TWS

One student responded to my post:

> Thank you for sharing. I have a lot of quotes and ideas that I wanted to incorporate but was not sure how to do it. I love that your inspirations are so varied (from a children's book to a president). I was starting to get a bit bogged down in trying to write my philosophy paper and I think this and some of my readings from this week in both your class and my diversity class have been the "kick in the pants" I needed.

In my view, the VPSF improves students' success on assignments and may reduce their anxiety by providing additional interpretations of the criteria for success. As a teacher, I want to make success criteria clear, provide substantive and specific feedback, and foster positive interactions among my students (Hattie, 2015).

Team Collaboration Forums

Purpose and method. The team collaboration forum provides a space in the course for students to communicate about group projects. Both of the collaboration forums that I set up were for the culminating project for the course. Though college students tend to dislike group projects, many professors (including me) see the value in collaboration. In their careers as teachers, my students will need to work with other professionals to accomplish goals. In online classes, there can be even more challenges to group projects. A simple web search about "group work in college" yields many articles and blogposts advising students how they can "survive" group work. A frequent suggestion is to establish clear methods of communication in the group.

The Team Collaboration forum serves this purpose in my course. I ask my students to put all their communication into the team collaboration forum. This way, I can monitor participation of group members, seeing who is and is not contributing. I can prompt students who aren't contributing, noting their lack of visibility in the collaboration space. Students who fear that others might shirk group responsibilities are willing to move their communication to this forum because they know that the transparency means increased accountability of group members who are silent or absent in the collaboration.

Analysis of Team Collaboration forums. This forum yielded more views than any other discussion forum or resource in the course. There were 3365 views, 89 discussions, and 307 contributions or exchanges in this forum. The next highest number of views was the Virtual Coffee Shop with 2,454 and the syllabus with 1,554.

I found that some students and groups were beginning to email each other outside the course, and it was causing some confusion. Some group members weren't sure where they needed to find materials when they were using email, cloud storage, and the course LMS. I suggested that even if they used outside collaboration tools (e.g., Google docs), they should use the team collaboration forum for their primary communication. In that way, it became a one-stop shop. Links to other sources could be posted in the forum. Here is an excerpt of a student post in the collaboration forum:

> Updates—Here's a summary:
> o Brittany is working on the overall mission statement

- o   Sam is working on the philosophy statements for each individual component, except physical activity and wellness.
- o   Mark is working on a philosophy statement about physical activity and wellness.

We still need to flesh out Grouping Practices and Contribution to Overall Success of School.

Though I did not participate as much in this forum, I could watch the conversations and "see" the projects emerging. Since I set the posts to come to my email, I could monitor them throughout the day or at a designated time each day, offering resources or suggestions as needed to particular groups. If multiple groups needed guidance, I could start a discussion in the Virtual Coffee Shop.

Overall, students reported a more positive view of the group assignment than I have experienced in previous instances, even in face-to-face courses. They stretched their collaboration muscles in ways that, I believe, are healthy to their professional development. This forum served as an effective communication and collaboration hub for this final project.

Skills Forum

Purpose and method. The final discussion forum that I used involved asking students to develop and demonstrate a skill in a low-stakes way before they were to practice that skill on a graded assignment. This was an effort to scaffold the first assignment as well as the final, culminating assignment and to troubleshoot potential problems that might prevent students from being successful. To help students provide effective feedback, I posted examples and modeled providing specific, criterion-based and best practice feedback.

Analysis of Skills forum. In the first skills forum, I asked students to create three presentation slides and offer peer feedback. In this example, one student offers his expertise as a graphic design teacher:

If I can give a word of advice, as a teacher of graphic design; be wary of using images as a background. While it might seem like a good idea, often times the words in a presentation become hard to distinguish from the background, especially with light on light and dark on dark color schemes. This is why a lot of graphic design is done on a solid color background. Readability should be the primary goal.

This student let her classmate know that she couldn't access his presentation but also told him how to fix the problem:

Steve, the link seems to work, but I had to request access. Under the part where you had the option to share the slides, I think there was an option to share with anyone who has an Appalachian email address. You may have to adjust that and then repost the link.

In several cases, students commented on what made the slides technically effective and visually appealing:

Great slides, I like the use of the black and white photos. This keeps it simple and clean. I also like how you chose to only include one quote on each slide. This makes for a great talking point for each slide and keeps your audience from focusing too much on the slide and not on what you have to say.

Students also sought feedback regarding the technical aspects of their slides:

Allison: Could someone comment and tell me if they can see my slides or not? I've never used this software before so I want to make sure I've done it correctly!
Reagan: I can see your slides! They look great.

In all of these cases, the peer feedback and advice improved the quality of students' assignments and established group norms and expectations about effective presentations. Students also learned how to share documents using cloud storage and hyperlinks. This made later collaborative work run more smoothly. What I really appreciate is that the suggestions and advice did not always come from me. I set up the space for students to develop their skills, and as an added bonus, students could also serve as mentors to their classmates, sharing their expertise to help each other.

Findings and Conclusions

Using discussion forums for these five purposes yielded positive outcomes for students and for me. In the content discussions, students demonstrated depth of understanding of course concepts. They exercised their abilities to voice informed opinions in diplomatic ways, a skill that I believe will be increasingly important to teachers in our state and nation. In the Virtual Coffee Shop students became a community of learners and professionals. By sharing and responding to each other's work in the Voluntary Product Sharing Forums, students gave and received feedback, and they had the chance to understand more clearly the criteria for success on assignments. In the Collaboration Forums, they worked in teams to apply course concepts and communicate about their work. The Skills Forum allowed students to develop skills that would be

essential to success later in the course. Students supported each other in building these skills.

I was active in all the forums and in a variety of ways. This is perhaps (and admittedly) the luxury of teaching a small, graduate course. I found that the community I feared giving up when moving my course online could be cultivated in virtual spaces as well. My time invested in the discussion forums seemed to make a positive difference in my students' experiences, as is evidenced in these two sample comments from my end-of-course student evaluations:

> Student 1: Dr. Smith is truly inspiring. Her enthusiasm and engagement in the subject inspired the same enthusiasm from her students. Having her participate in our discussion forum made me feel that what I had to say really mattered to her, and it was great to hear feedback in this way. Her take on discussion forums was very mentor oriented, and I really appreciated that.
>
> Student 2: I feel that the discussion forums were a great source of learning and sharing. Even though I have never met my classmates in person, I really think we got to know and understand each other. The discussions were lively and informative, and Dr. Smith participated and facilitated in a way that kept everyone interested.

My story would be incomplete if I did not also acknowledge some of the challenges the students and I experienced. First, teaching with attention to these discussion forums takes a lot of time. I spent time nearly every night and on weekends checking the forums and giving students feedback and direction. Sometimes they were stuck and needed my help to push through an assignment at night or on the weekends when they were not working at their jobs. Also, there were definitely a few students who did not engage. As I mentioned previously, 27% of these students withdrew from the course. Some of this attrition was due to the nature of the program: a graduate program for teachers pursuing initial licensure. It was challenging to balance the rigor and expectations of a graduate course with the needs of working adults at the beginning of their profession. Some students also felt that there were too many discussion forums. The students were gracious in providing some specific suggestions for changing some of the discussion forums. Now that I have analyzed the course materials, I will analyze students' suggestions and begin making improvements in the course.

I am not sure that online teaching and learning is the answer for every institution, program, or teacher. However, I have seen firsthand its power to bring together and raise up communities of learners from geographic and demographic expanses. I have observed prospective and novice practitioners become advocates and activists as they have shared and co-constructed ideas and meaning in online discussion.

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