Using Relevance to Facilitate Online Participation in a Hybrid Course

Linking online discussions to graded course assignments theoretically increases student participation and learning

By **Rebecca V. Frazee**

University enrollments are swelling with a new generation of students who expect campus-based courses to be supported by Web-based resources and communication tools. Instructors have begun meeting the demand by using Web-based tools such as online discussion boards to support face-to-face instruction. However, attempts to use these online communication tools are often accompanied by struggles to boost and maintain enthusiasm and participation among students.

In the study briefly reported on here, I worked with an instructor who was using Blackboard to support a classroom-based introductory course in educational technology. I was a graduate teaching assistant and co-taught the class. Using a control group and a treatment group, we set out to study the effectiveness of a simple strategy designed to enhance the relevance of the online discussion. We examined students' perceived relevance of the required online discussions and how those perceptions related to actual online participation and satisfaction.

Relevance plays a large part in learning and motivation. Research has shown that relevant information and experiences can improve achievement and perceived motivation, predict a student's commitment to and effort toward a particular goal, and increase the likelihood that learners will try a variety of learning strategies. According to John Keller's Attention-Relevance-Confidence-Satisfaction (ARCS) model of motivation,

instructional designers and teachers can use relevance-enhancing strategies to make instructional content and delivery more familiar or more aligned with learners' goals.

The strategy we used was to modify the title of the discussion prompts so that the title made an explicit connection to a particular course assignment. We hoped that this simple strategy would increase student participation and satisfaction with online discussions.

Context of the Study

Participants included 22 upper-division undergraduate and master's students enrolled in an introductory educational technology class at San Diego State University. For more than half of the students, the course was a requirement, whereas some students were taking the course as an elective. The class consisted of a three-to-one ratio of women to men, with ages ranging from early twenties to mid-fifties. There were at least four students for whom English was a second language.

Halfway through the semester, we broke the class into two discussion groups of 11 students each for the purpose of online discussions. Students met in class once a week over a 16-week semester and had ongoing access to the online course management system outside of class, where they could find course syllabi, lecture notes and slides, links to further resources, example assignments, grading rubrics, and practice quizzes. Students could also use the

Blackboard system to communicate with the instructors and students via e-mail and participate in synchronous chats and asynchronous electronic discussion groups.

I worked with the instructor to design the required online discussions. Both the treatment and control groups received identical weekly discussion prompts that varied in the amount of direct relevance for students (that is, the degree to which the prompt related directly to a graded assignment). We classified the discussion prompts as either "outcome" or "enrichment" and alternated them weekly to examine the impact on participation.

"Outcome" prompts, typically considered to be more relevant, concerned specific concepts or skills needed to complete a graded course assignment or exam. In this case, discussions revolved around performance analysis and the design of job aids and training, all of which were related to a class assignment.

"Enrichment" prompts, traditionally considered less relevant, related to general course concepts covered in the readings or discussed in class. Enrichment discussions included readings from course texts, instructional theories and strategies, and professional development in the field of educational technology.

Furthermore, for each discussion prompt, a descriptive title was used to indicate the focus of the particular discussion thread, for example, "Looking at Everyday Job Aids." However, to further increase "directedness" and perceived

relevance of the online discussion for the students in the treatment group, the treatment group's discussion titles included additional explicit language indicating a direct relationship between the discussion and a course assignment. For example, the title of the discussion thread for the treatment group was "Preparing for Your Job Aid Assignment: Looking at Everyday Job Aids." Though the titles were different, discussion prompts were identical. Table 1 shows examples of online discussion prompts used in the course.

Participation in online discussions was recorded by examining digital archives of students' online asynchronous discussions over a six-week period to see how they responded to various online discussion prompts. We also administered a survey in class after six weeks of online discussion, with 37 items regarding satisfaction and relevance of the online discussions as they related to class assignments, application outside of class, and personal interests. The survey also captured students' attitudes about self-efficacy and confidence regarding technology use, as well as perceptions of individual effort.

Findings

On average, students in both groups found the online discussions to be somewhat relevant and somewhat satisfying, with declining participation over time. The treatment used in this study to increase relevance was a goal-oriented motivational strategy that focused on the utility of the online discussions (that is, the explicit title linking the discussion to "preparing for" a course assignment). Contrary to expectations, this strategy did not produce significant differences between the control and treatment groups in terms of perceived relevance, satisfaction, self-efficacy, or participation in the online discussions.

There could be several explanations for these findings. For example, it is worth noting that there were some significant differences between the groups, with students in the control group reporting greater ease of access to technology and less intimidation regarding Web-based resources. The group differences in

Table 1	

Sample Discussion Prompts

Type	Example Weekly Prompt
Outcome	*Control group title:* Taking a Closer Look at Job Aids *Treatment group title:* Preparing for Your Job Aid Report: Taking a Closer Look at Job Aids *Discussion prompt:* Find a JA in your home or work place or community. Describe the job aid, based on what you've read in the *Handbook of Job Aids*. For instance: ■ Who's the audience? ■ What function or purpose does it serve? ■ When would it be used? ■ What type of format does it use? ■ What title would you give it, or does it have? (e.g., "How to Program the VCR") ■ What do you like about the job aid? ■ How would you improve it? In your opinion, do you think a job aid is an effective and appropriate solution to address the performance need in this situation? Why or why not? Would instruction work better in this situation? Why or why not?
Enrichment	*Control group title:* Readings from *Beyond the Podium* (Ch. 8) *Treatment group title:* Preparing for the Exam: Readings from *Beyond the Podium* (Ch. 8) *Discussion prompt:* According to Chapter 8 in *Beyond the Podium*, "informal learning happens just about everywhere, as people live their lives." The book gives several examples of informal learning, reasons that drive it, and how it can make a difference in learning and performance. Discuss one or two examples of informal learning that you've experienced. What were your reasons for pursuing it? What were some of the benefits you gained from the experience? How have your informal learning experiences been similar to or different from the more formal training and education you've had?

ease of access and intimidation could have affected perceived relevance and satisfaction, and participation.

For whatever reasons, the utility-based strategy used in this study did not provide added motivation for this group of students. First, the simple title used as a treatment might not have been robust enough to result in statistically significant differences given the study's small sample size. Furthermore, because the class was mostly graduate students in the field of educational technology, the content may have been intrinsically meaningful to the learners, so participation and relevance were already high. Possibly the online discussions were not very meaningful to students because they were not established as an integral part of the class from the beginning; rather, they were introduced halfway through the semester.

Instead of focusing only on utility, future studies might include other strategies to enhance relevance, such as boosting attainment motivation or familiarity. Furthermore, to increase the likelihood of higher participation, future studies might benefit from establishing the habit of using weekly discussions at the beginning of class.

Comments

Though overall participation in the online discussions declined over time, I observed that English as a second language (ESL) students in this study participated regularly online. They also participated more online through synchronous chats and asynchronous discussion boards than they did in class. The ESL students may have felt more confident participating in online rather than in face-to-face discussions. When asked about participating online, one ESL student said, "You don't need to be embarrassed on [*sic*] asking 'stupid question' cause [*sic*] it's online."

When asked what she would tell a new student about the online experiences in this course, another student responded, "They are an excellent way to enhance learning and prepare for assignments and tests, and a chance to interact with the professor and TA. Office hours are hard to make, and online

experience just makes sense, especially given the edtech subject matter."

The small sample in this study does not allow these findings to be generalized to other instructional design classes or to other classes using online discussion boards. Although students in this study reported only moderate satisfaction with the online discussions, such discussions can provide many benefits, including helping students make connections between what they are studying in class and what happens in real life and helping them prepare for course assignments.

Online discussions also facilitate interaction between students and instructor because face-to-face class time is so limited, and the nature of online discussions provides a safe environment in which ESL and other students who might otherwise feel intimidated in a classroom setting can feel confident asking questions and participating. In this study, we instructors got to know the students better through the online discussion, which was promising and encouraged us to continue to refine the discussions for future courses.

The complete study can be found online at <http://members.cox.net/rebeccafrazee/usingrelevance.htm>. *e*

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