

EVIDENCE AND ADVICE FOR USING ONLINE DISCUSSION TO PROMOTE CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

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The role of technology in higher education continues to draw interest as a topic of general discussion and research. The heightened interest in distance education and its role in serving institutional missions and affecting organizational cash flows is an important driver in the proliferation of research on web-based learning tools. Accordingly, much of what we know about web-based tools focuses on how these tools facilitate distance education, in general, and how distance education compares to traditional face-to-face instruction (Dacko 2001; Eastman and Swift 2001; Ponzurick, France and Logar 2000). The author explores the comparative advantages for using asynchronous online discussion, versus traditional face-to-face in-class discussion, as a vehicle for promoting greater critical thinking skills in all higher education environments. Critical thinking is defined as "the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action" (A draft statement by Michael Scriven and Richard Paul for the National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking).

Results of an ongoing study are presented to compare student reactions to online versus in-class discussions. Data is drawn from students in both traditional face-to-face classes, which use both online and in-class discussion tools, and from students in totally web-based classes. The research examines student perceptions of the effectiveness of discussion as a learning tool. In general, students believe that online discussions provide greater quantity and quality of input to the discussion, and that the online format encourages more critical thinking about the topic material. The findings do not vary significantly based on demographics of the student population.

The author recognizes that not all online discussions are created equal. The results of the research are based on a common structure the author uses in the

design and implementation of online discussion as a pedagogical tool. Accordingly, the author presents guidelines for designing successful online discussion exercises. The guidelines are firmly grounded in design principles for the use of instructional discussion to promote higher levels of learning (Goldenberg 1993), but the broader discussion includes additional suggestions for adapting these principles to the online environment.

In sum, the author argues that online discussions provide unique advantages to traditional face-to-face discussions. The technique is preferable when the goal is to *develop* students' critical thinking skills, rather than test them in a more time-constrained environment. The asynchronous format allows students more time to formulate cohesive and informed arguments. The historical record of the discussion adds a sense of permanency to the discussion that arguably produces a greater sense of accountability, and facilitates review of the material for other learning/evaluation processes.

Dacko, Scott G. 2001. Narrowing skill development gaps in marketing and MBA programs: The role of innovative technologies for distance learning. *Journal of Marketing Education* 23(3): 228-239.

Eastman, Jacqueline K. and Cathy Owens Swift. 2001. New horizons in distance education: The online learner-centered marketing class. *Journal of Marketing Education* 23 (1): 25-34.

Goldenberg, Claude. 1993. Instructional conversations: Promoting comprehension through discussion. *The Reading Teacher* 46 (4): 316-327.

Ponzurick, Thomas G., Karen Russo France, and Cyril M. Logar (2000), "Delivering graduate marketing education: An analysis of face-to-face versus distance education," *Journal of Marketing Education* 22(3), 180-187.