

Discussion forum as a secondary coach

Chien-Ching Lee

Nanyang Technological University

ABSTRACT

Postings in the discussion forum hold a rich database of reusable resources. The discussion forum has often been used for discussion but rarely as a coach. This paper presents an implementation of the discussion forum as a secondary coach in a collaborative, active learning environment, its benefits to the students and the teachers, and anticipated problems that may arise from the implementation and recommendations on how this could be overcome.

Introduction

The discussion forum has been widely used to enhance learner-learner and teacher-learner interaction outside class hours. Anderson (2006) and Pang and Ngoh (2005), however, have shown that most students prefer to be readers rather than contributors in the forum. Furthermore, many students find that the forum is not an effective medium for group discussions due to its asynchronous nature. Instead, students feel that face-to-face discussions are much more efficient for decision-making (Murthy & Kerr, 2003; Mason, 1998). In addition, many students both feel that the forum is something they can do without because participation in the forum is usually not graded (Vonderwell, 2003), and do not see a real purpose for the activity (Graham, Scarborough, & Goodwin, 1999). Some students do not have the motivation to participate in the forum either because they feel that their peers are not a credible source of feedback on their work (Nelson & Carson, 1998). Thus, unless the instructor maintain an active presence in the forum, they do not find the forum useful.

Taking into consideration such preferences of students when asked to participate in the discussion forums, this paper will present the use of the discussion forum as a secondary coach where it is used as a knowledge database of their peers' work on similar tasks, produced just-in-time. The discussion forum is used as it provides an easy-to-set up structure which can serve the purpose of a knowledge database. In the forum, students can refer to their peers' work as many times and as long as they want, self-evaluate their work, upload their own work and revise it based on feedback from the teacher. In this sense, one motivation for students to visit the forum is based on their curiosity to see their peers' work and to ensure that they do not write something that is sub-standard compared to their peers and thus lose face.

Context

The use of the discussion forum as a secondary coach is seen in light of the heavy workload teachers have in supervising students' work. Currently, teachers provide oral feedback in groups which is repeated in other groups. Consequently, many useful examples from feedback to one group are left out when the same feedback is given to another group. In similar situations, teachers sometimes resort to giving more general comments since the same feedback has to be given a number of times. On the part of the students, they are often asked to work on something they can vaguely conceptualize because there is no database of concrete examples to fall back on or compare their own work with. Students end up doing more cycles of revision which frustrates the teachers and the students because the latter just cannot not grasp what they are supposed to produce. Given these realities in the classroom, many good resources from students need to be made available for the benefit of other students.

Implementation of the discussion forum

In the context of this paper, the idea of the discussion forum as a secondary coach comes from the teaching of *Effective Communication*, a core subject for first year engineering students at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. The discussion forum is used with regard to the Oral Presentation assignment, which is to be presented in groups at the end of the semester. Besides teaching students public speaking skills, the Oral Presentation assignment also serves the purpose of having their peers summarize the concepts they have learned in the textbook used and applying these concepts in every day situations, a task which is similar to what is required of them in the end-of-semester examination where all the questions are application-based.

The task for the oral presentation was to analyze a real-life communication issue and propose solutions to solve it. An example of a communication issue would be problems in communication between parents and their children due to generation gap. The chosen issue had to be based on topics from the textbook, i.e. group dynamics, verbal communication, non-verbal communication, communication climate, interaction skills and perception. A limit of two groups per chapter was imposed in order to ensure coverage of topics in the textbook for examination revision purposes.

In order to prepare students for the Oral Presentation assignment, students were asked to propose their communication issue by week 5 of the semester. The main aim of the 'proposal' was to help students conceptualize what they were presenting for the Oral Presentation. This was particularly challenging because they were proposing topics which had not been covered in class yet. Their main source of reference at that moment was the textbook. The proposal, which was not graded, had to include both a description of a stimulus like a sketch or video clip to establish common ground with their audience, and then their proposed analysis of that stimulus based on concepts learnt in the textbook. In short, they had to show understanding of concepts in the textbook as opposed to just telling their classmates what was in the textbook.

Four classes took part in this study with an average of 26 students per class. As soon as they registered for the course, all the students were automatically enrolled into *Blackboard*, an e-learning platform, according to their tutorial groups. Besides the textbook, students had to access all course materials and assignments for the course from *Blackboard*. In this study, I requested for a combined tutorial site so that all the students in my four classes could have access to each others' work. As it was a group assignment, there was a high likelihood for students from the same class not to have enough examples of their peers' work to refer to and compare with. Thus, a combined tutorial site would serve the present purposes better.

However, a problem that often arises with a combined tutorial site however, is keeping track of the progress of each student in each class. If there are 104 students enrolled, it is difficult to keep track of who has submitted what and who has not. Therefore, I created folders in the forum for each class and students were asked to submit their work in the folder that designated their class grouping.

I then explained to them the use of the discussion forum and how it would benefit them. Students' doubts were also clarified openly to overcome any misgivings about using the discussion forum. I also showed them how to post their work to the forum.

Teacher presence was maintained in the forum via the teacher's feedback on their peers' work, either by referring them to another group's proposal, requesting for clarification on certain unclear points in their work or direct feedback on their work if they were completely out of point. Students were not required to provide feedback on their peers' work in the forum as this was just a small study with very tight time constraints.

General observations of improvement in students' work

Generally, I found that students were greatly helped by referring to their peers' work in the discussion forum. This was regardless of whether or not groups were doing the same topic as their peers. I did not need to provide extensive feedback on the students' drafts because they seemed to be clear about what was needed. In many cases, students just had to produce two drafts before I approved their proposal.

Below is an example of a first draft from one Group A (Class 21, Jan 19, 2006). It is clear that they did not understand what was required of them as they did not follow the guidelines I provided them. In addition, it was difficult for me to gauge whether they had a clear idea of what they were presenting.

Topic: Non-verbal Communication

The topic my group will be working on will be non-verbal communication and the issue will be regarding the kind of message our body language send when speaking to another party.

The teacher's minimal feedback on Jan 19, 2006 was:

I need a context—is it interpersonal, group, public speaking or email?

I also can't gauge whether you're talking about something positive or negative. Pls refine your issue.

On Jan 20, 2006, E's group from Class 2 posted this:

Topic: Group Dynamics

Title: Dysfunctional groups

More often than not, we feel victimized when we are put into a group for an assignment. It is definitely a dilemma for the whole group of the people gathered, we would be wondering if the assignment is going to be a success or failure. In a group, especially when we are not familiar personally with the people, we would at times be too reserved to even speak our minds. Finally, the forced choice of leader is elected, and the tasks load is split amongst us. Then came trouble, should everyone fail to turn up on the next meeting date, it'll spells disaster for the ones who had prepared diligently; they would have images of past experiences with their "nightmarish" project mates haunting to strike again.

Our project would focus on dysfunctional group (in the context of project work), how an individual can affect the overall cohesion of the group. We will classify the group members into various categories and analyze how the behaviour of an individual of a particular category can influence the group. We will also analyze the effect of culture diversity on a group; how cultural differences sometimes contribute to ineffective group dynamics. Also, we will look at how group dynamics differ when context is changed, i.e. project work, short term task force and long term management work group.

The teacher felt that this was a good draft and thus requested the students in this group to use this draft on Jan 23, 2006.

The group's revised copy on Jan 26, 2006 showed a marked improvement. The students followed my guidelines, incorporated my comments and had more specific details about what they are going to present.

It is a well-known fact that body-language plays a huge role in communication. Non-verbal communication like body language is important as it is almost like a warning device when it comes to communication.

Our group will touch on the various topics:

- 1. Why it is so important to understand body-language*
- 2. What kind of signal we are actually sending out from our different body language in all the above mentioned settings*
- 3. After analyzing the different body-languages we will touch on how we should react to these body-languages.*

Below is another example from one Group G (Class 2, Jan 27, 2006) on a different topic. This group's proposal was approved after just one draft.

Topic: Communication Climates

Title: Case review of 'I Not Stupid'.

From Singaporean filmmaker Jack Neo comes this winning 2002 comedy, I Not Stupid, a film that illustrates the trials and tribulations of three young boys

in their never-ending quest for good grades in Singapore's cutthroat educational system. As classmates in the undesirable EM3 category, the three boys are labeled by society as worthless, and the resulting pressure confounds the youngsters in all their attempts to improve... (more description follows)

For our group presentation:

With referring to week 10 topic Communication Climate, for our group to present the communication climate including different types of conflicts inside this movie, we four people can do four individual analysis for different relationships in the movie. Since stability in a relationship is maintained when both partners help create a positive communication climate. This is achieved when both partners exhibit supportive behaviours rather than defensive behaviours.

We will firstly approach the problems by analyzing the behaviors in each relationship and then find out the solutions on how to manage conflicts and create the positive climate....To show what are the conflicts among them, we will play small movie clips for each sub case as a start.

One primary fear of teachers is the rampant copying that students may engage in when they have multiple examples to look at, especially their peers' work. However, prior briefing about the usage of their peers' work and plagiarism provided them with clear guidelines and incentives to be creative and responsible.

Below is an example from one Group N (Class 2, Jan 25, 2006) which was on the same topic as one Group E. The latter focused on member roles and the effect of culture on group dynamics. The former, on the other hand, chose to focus on the conflict management aspect in group dynamics.

Topic: Group Dynamics

Title: Conflict in the Team

We will be addressing the nature of conflict within a group (in our current context of project work) and will explore the ways to resolve them amicably. Some of the areas that would be looked into in the presentation are:

- 1. Leadership—the leader's role when faced with conflicts. How the leader should react when such tense situations arise within the team.*
- 2. Members—the members' roles and ways on how to express their views and approach volatile situations in a conflict.*
- 3. Making the team—how leaders and members should be working together, complimenting each other's needs.*

Benefits to the students

Students found this approach of using the discussion forum as a secondary coach useful because they had tangible models on various topics to help them gain multiple perspectives on how to work on the task given. In addition, they could immediately see how their answers differed from their peers' and this provided them with a standard to strive for. Their peers' work also helped them to revise their own work because they had a basis for things they felt should or

should not be included in their proposal. The shorter revision cycle also increased students' motivation to revise as they managed to get it 'right' sooner.

Benefits to the teacher

The main advantage to the teacher was that the students' work was reusable; saving time and improving the feedback process. Feedback to one group could be used to help more than one other group, across classes. Furthermore, students' mistakes in one semester could be re-used the next semester as authentic teaching points. As the students' work was in a soft copy, they could be put in a 'Frequently Asked Questions' format for students to preview in a discussion forum to avoid pitfalls encountered by their friends. It could even form a rich database of cases over many years.

Anticipated Problems and Solutions

It is always possible that students will copy their peers' work, especially the work of those who uploaded their drafts earlier. However, this can be circumvented by limiting the number of groups which can present or work on a certain topic. In addition, students can be warned against copying in lieu of being mentioned as doing so by the teacher in the forum and/or in class, thus losing face.

Some students who upload their drafts earlier may also feel cheated if everyone reads their work and thus benefit from it as competition to get good grades is stiff. Thus, the teacher needs to discuss with the students the rationale for using the discussion forum and how it benefits everyone in the end. Generally, what is displayed in the discussion forum is conceptual (i.e. what they are going to do for the oral presentation) and not the actual oral presentation itself (they can still change their proposal but at least they have a clear idea of what is required of them for the assignment). Thus, students should be proud that their work is frequently read.

Conclusions

In this paper, I discussed the possibilities of the discussion forum as a secondary coach, including the corresponding problems that go with such use. This paper has shown that students learn from their peers' work with minimal instruction or feedback from the teacher, attesting to the usefulness of having just-in-time, peer-produced models in learning. When the task is structured well, their peers' work can provide tangible and immediate benefits to both students and teachers. Although there are some anticipated problems with this approach, teachers can take proper care to ensure that students have clear guidelines regarding usage of their peers' work and have correct perceptions of the roles of the teachers and the students in the use of the discussion forum for learning purposes.

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