Evaluating the effects of mandatory and non-mandatory discussion posts on student learning and engagement in an online course

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Background
Although online learning is becoming more accessible and acceptable, there is still much to learn about effective pedagogy in this environment, specifically regarding discussion boards. Discussion boards function as online facilitators of conversations between instructors and students, both for online courses and hybrid courses. Discussion boards can have a positive impact on learning. For example, discussion boards can facilitate communication, encourage high-order thinking, and motivate student learning (Clary & Wandersee, 2012). This motivation often stems from a student’s perceived learning as well as a perceived sense of community (Trespalacios & Perkins, 2016).

The purpose of this study was to explore the effect of mandatory versus non-mandatory discussion board posting on student learning and student engagement in online discussions.

Hypothesis
Students required to post for a grade (mandatory condition) will have better engagement, deeper discussions, and higher grades than students with suggested posting guidelines (non-mandatory condition).

Procedure

Qualitative Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Planning &amp; Logistics</th>
<th>Clarification</th>
<th>Elaboration</th>
<th>Social Etiquette</th>
<th>Build Up &amp; Encouragement</th>
<th>Conversation Starters</th>
<th>Acknowledgement</th>
<th>Thank You</th>
<th>Well-Wishing</th>
<th>Content Sharing</th>
<th>This is what I understand...</th>
<th>Application of Content</th>
<th>Personal Communication</th>
<th>Outside Information</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Genuine Question</th>
<th>Rhetorical Question</th>
<th>Request for Information</th>
</tr>
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</table>

Quantitative Results

Comparisons of exam grades and project grades
Comparisons of posting frequency

Conclusions
• Quantitative data showed no significant difference between the grades of the two groups.
• In a comparison of 5 individuals from each group, qualitative data showed distinct differences between posting types and frequency of posts.
• Based on frequency counts from five individuals from each group, optional discussion forums led to greater student engagement in the course.

Implications
• Instructors can determine how to organize their courses regarding online discussion forums without sacrificing student achievement.
• Optional discussion forums may lead to greater student engagement. Because of this, some professors may choose to implement optional discussion boards.
• Future studies may look to assess engagement and achievement at an individual level rather than at a class level.
• Future studies may also assess student evaluation comments to determine whether students indicate a preference for one type of discussion board grading.

References

Trespalacios, J., & Perkins, R. (2016). Sense of community, perceived learning, and achievement relationships in an online graduate course. Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education, 17(1), 31-49.