

ADVANCES IN GLOBAL EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

GLO CER '21

VOLUME 4

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ISBN 978-1-955833-04-2

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ISBN 978-1-955833-04-2

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Power in the Cyberspace Using Online Discussions Boards

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Abstract

Recent technology has afforded both teachers and learners to interact in a rather safe online environment. Given the cutting-edge technology used in education, online discussion boards are being used in distance education. Wide permeation of online discussion boards in online education has been inevitable. It is then important to uncover aspects that contribute to a quality discussion in order to fashion a sound learning experience for students. While our understanding of the benefits of face-to-face and online discussions to engage students is well developed, the data do not apply to pre-service teachers' perceptions of engagement who participate in the online discussions. Several researchers explored online engagement in higher education in multiple studies. However, few researchers have addressed pre-service teachers' engagement in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) courses (Khoshnevisan, 2017). In this literature review, we revisit the theoretical framework that underpins different aspects and active players of online asynchronous discussion boards. We then present the results of the related research regarding agency, power, and the role of instructor. Finally, drawing on online/offline power transfer, and COI model, we tie the term "power" to the concept of engagement while participating in online discussion boards. To address the issue, we give some advice to both practitioners and students in the field of education.

Keywords: asynchronous online discussions (AOD), cyberspace, offline power

Recommended Citation: Khoshnevisan, B., & Alipour, V. (2021). Power in the cyberspace using online discussions boards. In W. B. James, C. Cobanoglu, & M. Cavusoglu (Eds.), *Advances in global education and research* (Vol. 4, pp. 1–10). USF M3 Publishing.
<https://www.doi.org/10.5038/9781955833042>

Introduction

Online communication for teaching and learning purposes is a long-standing interest in research and dates back to 1980s. Asynchronous online discussions (AOD) is one of the most common tools in distance education. This tool supplies students with an unprecedented flexibility. Asynchronous online discussion (AOD) boards provide students with a tool that is accessible, and students can utilize it irrespective of their location. The asynchronicity nature of AOD gives both educators and students opportunities to provide an in-depth understanding as well as insightful assessment. Notwithstanding the mentioned merits of AOD, students seem to be isolated in distance education. Asynchronous online discussion (AOD) boards appear to be a solution to tackle this challenge. AOD is defined as "a situation in which two or more people learn or attempt to learn something together" (Dillenbourg, 1999, p. 1). Researchers report to attain high-quality

collaborative learning, students should engage in collaborative learning activities persistent with their motivation (Bromme, Hesse and Spada, 2005). Additionally, being willing to join and motivated to maintain an active role in online discussions is a significant factor in determining a successful experience. Accordingly, the quality of online discussions is determined by learners' motivation toward computer-supported collaborative learning. (CSCL; Cheung, Hew & Ling-Ng, 2008; Hakkarainen, Lipponen, Järvelä & Niemivirta, 1999).

Multiple researchers have reported intrinsic motivation can impinge on the learners' participation rate in online discussion boards. (e.g., Hew & Cheung, 2008; Xie, DeBacker & Ferguson, 2006). Moreover, few studies have addressed the learners' motivation during their participation in online discussions (Xie & Ke, 2011). In addition, little research has addressed how power and agency transfers and unfolds from offline into the online world. The lack of research in these areas poses a unique challenge to the success of asynchronous online discussions in education and ESOL preservice courses, in particular.

The role of sociocultural factors has been absent in the related research. Researchers have not fully explored the way participants and instructors exercise their power and agency during their participation in online discussions and how it may inform their engagement. My intent is to uncover the online power dynamics in off-line world and dismantle the pertinent dynamics. Having dismantled the off-line power dynamics, we intend to explore how this power is transferred to online discussions. Additionally, we explore power in online discussion. To conduct the study, we turn to the term 'power' and analyze it via the poststructuralist lens, Foucault in particular.

This study appears to be an effective investigation to bridge the praxis between theory and practice. As discussed above, researchers have not yet addressed all aspects of off-line power on on-line discussions and the way students transfer this power to discussion boards. More specifically, no single researcher has, to date, explored the issue of power transfer in asynchronous online discussions regarding ESOL preservice courses. This issue seems to be missing in the field of ESOL preservice teacher.

A Priori Questions

- How is power being practiced between teachers and students as well as students themselves while participating in an online asynchronous discussion board completing ESOL courses?
- How does offline power dynamics impact on the students' participation in online asynchronous discussion boards?

Rationale

We'd rather uncover the concept of power dynamics in forums and online discussion boards with which students are familiar. In so doing, we need to turn to criticalists and poststructuralists such as Foucault to explore the related dynamics. Consequently, we would be able to redesign discussion boards in a way that we can foster a critical pedagogy aligned with the concepts such as educational equality and justice (Freire, 2000) regarding race, gender, and power indices while participating in an online discussion. There is a widely corroborated view that students of online classes achieve more and are more engaged compared to students of face-to-face classes (Dixson, 2010). However, since online learning places considerable emphasis on learners' engagement with

the material, higher achievement, and stronger engagement may occur (Wickersham & Dooley, 2006).

Background

Anderson (2006) reports how personal agency serves as a way of control of interaction in an online discussion board. This control is partly associated with the power individuals practice during the online discussion. Similarly, he asserts this agency is germane to the power of other participants. Specifically, he sought whose messages are read more frequently and when. He explored the role of the instructor and students and asserts they both play a pivotal role in having a quality discussion. He unfolds the power dynamics and integrates the role of teachers and students and the agency and power they exercise while participating in online discussions. In the same vein, he explored the perceptions and the acts of participants and instructors in online discussions. The results suggested educators can use the awareness and take advantage of socially grounded nature of online discussions to reassure an enabling interaction and discussion in online discussion boards. Notwithstanding the immediate players in online discussions, we need to take into account the social factors of offline world and the structure of the media to come up with an all-inclusive conclusion. It turns out a qualitative study in this domain is imperative.

Review of the Major Players in Online Discussions

Power

The term "power" in online discussion deals with the notion of control defined as "the opportunity and the ability to influence, direct and determine decisions related to the educational process" (Garrison & Baynton, 1987, p. 5). This is deeply rooted in the ideas of Sharan Merriam described as having a "blinding focus on the individual learner" (Merriam, 2001, p. 11). Another aspect of the online discussion is the type of structures and relationships that overshadows and/or inflicts the whole discussion. On this account, Kramarae (1998) explicates "Cyberspace can provide freedoms of various sorts, but they are designed and constrained by powerful structured forces of assumptions and goals; they are not equally friendly environments or opportunities for everyone" (p. 113). Notwithstanding the immediate situation in online discussions, Erickson (1997) states the properties of the medium, through which the discussion is orchestrated, encourages certain communicative features. These features in his analysis can bolster alternative features. He mentions two factors, i.e., institutional and social factors can impede alternative features to occur. The former factors lend themselves to policies associated with managing the discourse and the latter ones include the nature of the online community within which the whole discussion takes place. Baym (1995) notes there are other forces that may fashion online discussion and skew it in divergent ways. He stresses structural features of the medium utilized to create an online discussion are of great significance.

In multiple studies related to Computer Mediated Communication (CMC), researchers have labeled CMC with a "technological determinism". This is consistent with the works of Jones (1997) as he puts forth a full argument in rejection of "technological determinism". He notes "the particular form that an individual virtual community takes is not determined by technology but rather is dependent on its social context" (p. 10). While researches have rejected "technological determinism", one cannot ignore social forces behind online discussion boards as these forces exist

in the design process of discussion boards. Technological tools rely on the social origins. This brings affordances to the discussion while the participants may transfer the offline power dynamics to online discussions and the other online communities of learning.

The Nature of Power in Interactions

Forum interaction facilitates learning and makes students provide constructive feedback and support each other. Lecturers (the teacher or students) initiate the class and students discuss the issue in small groups to share their ideas. Anderson (2004) notes student-only forums are to a large extent socially oriented. That is why researchers suggest a social discussion board at the beginning of the semester can facilitate interaction through the whole semester. This concept is compatible with the social presence component of the Community of Inquiry (COI) model (Garrison & Anderson & Archer, 1999).

The Role of Instructor

Mazzolini and Maddison (2007) explored the role of instructor participation, the timing of the instructors' postings, and the nature of the postings by instructors and their impacts on the students' perception and participation rates in online asynchronous discussion boards. To attain that, they investigated 40000 postings from nearly 400 discussion boards. They collected these postings together with 500 university evaluation responses over six semesters. The researchers adopted a mixed method to collect and analyze the data. The results revealed the way instructors leave their posts immensely influence postings of learners. Additionally, they reported the length of the thread in the discussion boards and the rate of the students' participation is not associated with a quality discussion. Researchers deconstructed many postings from a variety of universities by a mixed method. In fully online delivery where online discussion boards are the only means of communication, encouraging reticent students to participate has posed a unique challenge for instructors. Many researchers have conducted studies regarding this challenge posed by discussion boards (Collins & Berge, 1997; Markel, 2001; Schrum & Berge, 1997; Schrum & Hong, 2002). Experienced native teachers may consider online discussions a challenge. However, novice and nonnative instructors would prefer to take some time to craft responses and formulate questions rather than responding in an extemporaneous manner in a face-to-face setting (Levitch & Milheim, 2003; Paloff & Pratt, 1999). For many online instructors, a challenge lies in how to aid learning without taking over in the process. The instructors' role can change from the sage on the stage, to the guide on the side or perhaps the ghost in the winds (Mazzolini & Maddison, 2003).

The Active Role of Teachers

The growing body of literature generally suggests instructors should play an active, visible part in forum discussions (Berge, 1995; Salmon, 2000; Salmon & Giles, 1997). For instance, Paloff and Pratt (1999) argue “‘additionally, it is important for the instructor to make thoughtful comments on student posts, designed again to stimulate further discussion. As part of this function, the instructor acts as a cheerleader and attempts to motivate students to go deeper and further with the material than they might in a face-to-face classroom’”. However, Khoshnevisan (2017) reported preservice ESOL teachers would prefer not to be interjected by the instructor. Yet, the participants in this study expressed a recapitulation of the topic of the discussion board can reassure the instructor of what students have acquired during their participation in the discussion board.

Regarding the level of the instructor's involvement in online discussion boards, Kearsley (2000) notes "one factor that strongly affects the amount of student interaction and participation is the level of instructor involvement. If the instructor regularly posts messages in the discussion forum or provides comments to students via email, this increases student involvement and participation in a course. So, a cardinal rule of good online teaching is that the instructor must participate a lot to get students to do likewise."

According to Mazzolini and Maddison (2007), frequent teacher intervention encourages greater participation of students in discussion forums. They reported the more the teacher posts, the less the students participate in the discussion. Students commented the forum is useful regardless of the teacher intervention. In terms of the instructors' posting time, half teachers posted during and the other half posted at the end of the discussion and this has no correlation with students' postings. The results of the interviews indicated teachers who posted frequently had better evaluation results and were considered enthusiastic compared with other instructors. They reported no correlation between teacher posting question and answer with surveys. The role of the teacher in online discussion is peculiar and key. The volume of teacher intervention does not determine students' success. Conversely, the students posted shorter and less frequently in case the instructor frequently posts in online discussions. Surprisingly, shorter posts do not make a board less quality.

The Effect of Society

Merriam (2001) explicated based on humanistic psychology, individuals shape their knowledge in a free autonomous way independent of others. However, Critics have pointed out there is a little acknowledgement that culture and society contribute to shaping the knowledge of every person. Merriam notes every person has a history and social institutions and structures define, by and large, the learning process irrespective of the individual learner. (p. 7).

The concept of control in distance education that Myra Baynton (1992) articulated is not restricted to certain interaction in online learning. It involves factors, either direct or indirect, germane to the institutional and social context that the learner encounters. The point that Merriam (2001) made is compatible with that of Evans and Nation and Gibson who posit a sociological debate. They delineated the impact of both agency and structure. Parker (2000) highlights the relative impact of structure and agency mentioning that "relationship between the subjective powers of human agents and the objective powers of the realities they have a hand in producing agency". Human enjoy agency to act. Agency is a power to manage efforts and take control. However, this agency is relative and influenced by the power or agency of others with whom you are in contact (either online or offline) as well as the social structures. (Parker, 2000). This last term is succinctly delineated in the metaphor of Evans and Nation (1992) where they note "open and distance educational institutions actually choreograph the lives of their students. Like all good dancers. . . students at a distance add their own interpretations and movements and sometimes they demand the choreographer that the movements be changed" (p. 9).

"Distanciation" is the term used by Giddens (1984) to explain the process that agency and structure are inextricably linked to each other. The distanciation process aids understanding the role of agency and social structure which form the nature of online learning. As opposed to prevalent thoughts, online learning fosters independence and autonomy when students engage in online

discussions, interaction with other participants overshadow the concepts such as autonomy and may direct or impinge students' autonomy during online discussions.

Jones (1998a) reiterated the political aspect of online discussions. Jones (1998b) explains "communities are defined not as places but as social networks, a definition useful for the study of community in cyberspace. . . [since]. . . it focuses on the interactions that create communities" (p. 20). Jones argues "just because the spaces with which we are now concerned are electronic there is not a guarantee that they are democratic, egalitarian or accessible and it is not the case that we can forgo asking in particular about substance and dominance" (p. 20).

In this regard, gender disparity, sexism and the like may be practiced in distance education. Herring in multiple studies (1993, 1996, 2000) has indicated the inexplicable link between gender and computer-mediated communication (CMC). She explains the ramifications that gendered nature of online discussion permeates in distance education. This, in turn, informs the structure and control in CMC ambiance. The mentioned ramifications are argued by Yates (2001) "The 'democratic' model has not won out and, as with face-to-face education situations, gender has a key role to play in structuring the interactions so as to marginalize women's contributions" (p. 27).

Race and Identity

Many researchers have conducted studies concerning the term "race" in cyberspace and have largely reached to the same findings within the area of gender research. Beth, Kolko, Lisa Nakamura, and Gilbert Rodman (2000) conclude it is likely you hide your race or identity. Even you can go one step further and masquerade your genuine identity. However, there is no escape in acknowledging your identity in the real world. Accordingly, gender and identity in cyberspace matter. It may be argued race and identity do not matter. Yet we bring our race, identity and knowledge from offline to online world. Hence, gender and race are both important as we log on. Some other researchers of the field such as Lockard (2000) deem as we log on we switch to an off position or at least a default white position as for the race and gender. Multiple studies regarding distance education have indicated how your identity unfolds as gender and race are the focus (Burkhalter, 1998). In short, social interaction on the Internet encompasses the participants' race and gender either in a direct or indirect way.

The Role of Technological Mediation

Scholars like Wertsch (1991) argue the role of the mediation such as language and computer-mediated communication context in online interactions. To explore this role and the nature of interaction, we need to explore the relation between higher mental processes and cultural, historical, and institutional settings. Higher mental functioning is associated with individual and social factors and mediated by tools (technology) and signs (language). Gee and Wertsch draw our attention to the role of social constraints that infuse human interaction. These constraints impose historical limits on the immediate meaning making process. This is compatible with Wenger's assertion that "Meaning is not pre-existing, but neither is it simply made up. Negotiated meaning is at once both historical and dynamic, contextual and unique" (Wenger, 1998).

ESOL Pre-Service Teachers

Rashtchi & Khoshnevisan (2021) explored the perceptions of ESOL pre-service teachers about the term engagement while involved in online asynchronous discussion boards. They put forth a new model for the posts that students leave on discussion boards called “Grapes Bunch Model.” In this model, students’ posts are metaphorically compared with a bunch of grapes. Each grape represents one post of students in an online asynchronous discussion board. Grapes are of different shapes, colors, and tastes. Accordingly, once a learner leaves a post, depending on the quality of a post (quality, interest, and relation) other students may skew the discussion toward one or more angles of that specific topic. Drawing on community of inquiry (COI) model, they concluded introduction discussion boards are vital to establish social presence and promoting mutual relationships at the beginning of every online course. Constant comparative analysis of the data illuminated a safe, non-threatening atmosphere contributes to exploring new aspects of the course topics. This leads to an exponential increase in the amount of the students’ participation and engagement in online discussions.

Khoshnevisan (2017) relies on Spivak’s notion of “center and margin” and explores to be and/or remain at the center, students make an effort to confirm rather than reject others' posts, write short answers, and post their ideas as soon as possible so participants discuss the topic they put forth. Our understanding is then to some extent well-developed regarding the mechanics of online asynchronous discussion boards relying on a two-year piloting on the ESOL preservice teachers' discussion boards transcript. However, He deconstructed this mechanic via COI model. This model lacks an important, oft-neglected, factor. In the absence of power, deconstruction of discussion boards might be inefficient and calls for a revisit. To that end, this literature review investigated the pertinent literature dealing with discussion boards and power.

Discussion

Power is predominantly translated into the participants’ interaction in online discussions when it comes to distance education. L. E. Sujo de Montes, Sally Oran, and Elizabeth Willis (2002) have suggested educators to take three major actions for the betterment of online discussions. First and foremost, educators should teach the students to critically reflect on their own posts and their online discussions. This is beneficial for the students on the condition that the constraints and limits of the environment let them foster this reflection. Secondly, the instructors must develop their skills and teach them “to make explicit what is implicit in people’s words, actions, and expectations” (p. 269), and finally, it is imperative for instructors to be “willing to analyze their own biases and assumptions, first when they build online courses and then when they interact with online students” (p. 269).

Khoshnevisan (2017) reiterated teachers are highly recommended to establish an introductory board to foster interaction among students. This is a tool that online power is simply analyzed and dismantled. The power is manifested in introductory discussion boards. Drawing on the Community of Inquiry (COI) model (Garrison & Anderson & Archer, 1999), introductory discussion boards can and should foster social presence. This development of social presence combined with appropriate teaching presence can culminate in a sound cognitive presence rendered as cognitive attainment. Similarly, a rich content interspersed with and contingent upon multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1995) can reassure integration of multimodal materials. The

results of online surveys implied a recapitulation of the discussion reassures a better understanding and underscore the verisimilitude of the discussions. Lastly, a teacher interjection in the middle of the discussions did not necessarily led to either awareness-raising or deeper understanding of the material.

Rashtchi and Khoshnevisan (2021) discussed that online discussion boards discussed how online discussion boards can contribute to increase both the cognitive attainment and motivational level of the participants. They also mentioned that these tools can help educators during the hard times, especially the pandemic. They also showcased how the participants' power is gained and lost in the online discussion boards. The content of the participants' posts, the frequency of the posts, and other participants' responses bring power to the participants in the cyberspace.

Conclusions

Researchers have confirmed the affordances and limitations of asynchronous online discussions (AOD). Multiple researchers have conducted studies regarding engagement, higher education and discussion boards. The only researcher (Khoshnevisan, 2017) who addressed ESOL preservice teachers did not address the term "power" and how offline power is transferred to online discussions and influenced agency and discussion development, in general. A comprehensive qualitative or arts-based research, which investigates and explores concepts such as power, agency, race, identity in the formation and development of online discussions and its impact on students' attainment appears to be essential.

Power in cyberspace is manifested in different ways. One strong manifestation of power in distance education is online discussion boards. The main players of discussion boards are the participants and the teacher. Also, social, teaching and cognitive presence are underlying factors of how and to what extent the power in the real world is transferred into the cyberspace. Additionally, the nature of power in the cyberspace is inherently different from the one people practice in the real world.

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