Everyone’s Story: Using Hermeneutics to Foster Classroom Interaction, Group Discussion, and Collaboration in Blended Learning Environments

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Abstract: Online education has the potential to provide an ideal forum for providing equity of access for students. Grounded in hermeneutic philosophy, this study highlights significant factors that promote a culturally relevant and collaborative online learning environments. Research methods include a thematic content analysis of interviews, emails, journal reflections, as well as face-to-face and online discussions. The setting of this study is one blended-learning, graduate level qualitative research course in a Canadian university. The overall aim of this study is to provide information regarding graduate students’ priorities for managing their own learning. Findings suggest that as graduate students become critical agents of their own online experience, they bring a wealth of diversity into the forum. Further, online discussion-based classrooms that encourage culturally collaborative environments inevitably also promote personal expression and self-expression.

Keywords: blended-learning; hermeneutics; collaborative; online discussion; equity.

Objectives

This is really about the stuff of agency. It is about the stuff of connection. It is about the stuff of understanding. It is about being in the dialogue somehow. (Giroux from Cooper, 2014)

Online learning and discussion board forums are rapidly becoming an integral part of most higher educational programs. In this article, we address factors that are key to graduate students’ effective participation in online collaborative learning forums. The study examines the microcosm of one graduate level blended classroom, with a view to determining the factors that impact students’ participation in a blended-learning collaborative discussion forum. Key reflective elements can inform a macrocosm of other online forums (Cooper & Yendall, 2015). The study highlights significant ways that the online environment can begin to be shaped by equal participation which overtly values the agency of the participants. There are a number of “practitioner-as-researcher” studies (Bauman et al., 2003), in which the researcher is both a participant in the study and an observer, particularly in blended learning and discussion forums.

This university course in which this study is situated explored the autobiographies, philosophies, and methodologies of key leaders in qualitative research. Videotaped footage of discussions with these scholars framed the students’ discussion and reflection. These interviews are part of the Interpretive Imagination Forum (IFF), a platform used for online discussion. The IFF is designed to provide a forum for personal expression and self-reflection within a blended learning environment. The IIF may be seen as a repository of 15 hour-long digitally videotaped interviews. These interviews provided students with a foundation to explore relevant themes, theories and concepts. The organization of this dataset, as part of a larger 7-year study, allows scholars to explore interrelatedness of themes,
theories and methodologies. This forum became a dynamic learning instrument which enriched participant discussion and reflection (Cooper, Hughes, & Shamji, 2015). Using a dynamic video-based repository as a foundation for scholarly discussion and reflection as an example, correlations can be made to the value of other similar media-rich platforms for critical inquiry. In this research study, the participants and researchers reflect critically about their own agency and the way they interact within the framework of the available technology, expressing perceived limitations and benefits to this forum of learning as they become an integral part of the discussion.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in hermeneutics (Gadamer, 1975) and narrative research principles which encourage the use of practitioner as researcher (Bauman et al., 2003). As stakeholders, both the researchers and participants are aware of this study and the goal of improving online collaborative discussion in this and other blended learning classes. The researchers are currently involved in a blended graduate level course on qualitative research with 17 graduate level students at a Canadian university. This study takes place at the midway point of the 12-week course. In the IIF discussion forum, self-reflection is encouraged through weekly double-entry journal posts. Hermeneutic questions (Smith, 2010) are used as a theoretical framework to encourage collaborative online discussion in these weekly posts.

Today, virtual discussions have various formats. These virtual environments can bridge geographical and even socio-economic boundaries. Yet, educators must be careful not to privilege dominant paradigms through a forum which, while it has the benefit of being able to transcend many physical barriers, can also create new challenges based on visual and even textual representations taken in or out of context (Vander Valk, 2008, p. 208; Zuberi, 2001). In studying online discussion in a forum with diverse learners, the researchers have chosen to emphasize self-reflected elements of engagement and agency. This exploratory study is the first part of a mixed methods investigation of discussion elements within blended and online classrooms, whereby critical self-reflection and equitable and collaborative exchanges are reinforced.

In this study, the researchers adopted the premise of the hermeneutic circle: as individuals interpret the world through their own place and time, and also undertake to understand the stories of others. Within these reflective questions was the latitude to allow the students to uncover the “limitations of their own understandings and, in doing so, move towards deeper and more complex understanding of themselves and others” (Cooper, Hughes, & White, 2016).

Methods and Data Collection

The researchers, in collaboration with the research participants and as part of this study, examined how participants’ experiences inform the current online discussion. The researchers used a hermeneutic framework which emphasized the use of language in the interpretive process (Smith, 2010). Double-entry journal postings, guided with questions grounded in hermeneutics, encouraged students to critically look at their own autobiographical context through email, blog-type posts, in-class audio-recorded traditional discussions and online discussion; all with an option to opt out. The professor, the teaching assistant, and all of the students in the class participated in this discussion.

The following questions were posted within the course:
1. In what significant ways does your own autobiographical context inform your discussions?
2. Do you notice any changes in your own online discussion during the course of participating in a face to face classroom environment?
3. What do you think could be some of the reasons for any changes?
4. How could your own online discussion be better facilitated so that you think more critically about your own ideas? How could the online discussion best encourage you to comment and probe more critically about the ideas of others? Discuss which ideas are most relevant to you.
5. Imagine: if the discussion were only online. How would you want to represent yourself online to your peers? What are some of the factors that you think informs this decision?

The information from the interview responses as well as emails and other discussion correspondence was qualitatively analysed based on thematic content (Krippendorff, 2006). At this point of preliminary research, a diagrammed content
analysis was not necessary: researchers simply wish to become more aware, as participant researchers, about how the IIF may be more conducive to collaborative exchanges that promote critical discussion.

Grounded in a hermeneutic framework, these questions asked students to imagine how their ground-up, personal experiences may relate to the stories of other students engaging in online discussions. Responses from the discussion questions were augmented by short in-class and email responses and grouped thematically. A number of themes were common to participants’ discussions. Thus, these themes represented a good starting point to reflect about the online communication forum within a blended environment.

**Results**

Most students expressed a balance of positive and negative feelings about communicating online. Considerations of time were both positive and negative. Students like the idea of having more time to reflect:

“I’m very much an introvert… I like to take the time and reflect before I speak… and so that online community gives me that space to do that” and “In class I kind of… doubt myself… having that time to kind of consolidate it, think about it, you can come up with something that you feel better about and more competent in saying online.”

Online learning also gave students the space to be “more logistical” and complete assignments, such as in the morning, when they were at their best, or working around job schedules. Online, some students preferred asynchronous collaboration. Online responses that were too rapid can preclude more collaborative participation: sometimes students expressed that when given an immediate response, “[it] sort of throws me off… I don’t expect students to respond as fast online… I feel kind of scared.” There were also comments about the foreboding aspect of words being frozen in time:

“When you post something it feels like there is more accountability to it, it’s out there is can be read anytime afterwards. Whereas if it’s something that’s spoken in the moment, it’s more forgiven… I didn’t eat before I said that; or, I still had my coat on… I take more time to do that [post online]. I’m kinda slow”.

Further, time was a factor in establishing online connection: “getting to know people via words alone requires time”. Words in most responses reflected the need to feel connected as an online presence to classmates: “it becomes more comfortable”, “practice and involve(ment)… makes me comfortable”.

Without prompting, students introduced the idea of motivation. Connecting personal experience to the discussion gave one student “motivation to contribute and care”. Self-motivation was a factor for one student who stated: “The feeling or desire to accomplish and what I feel like accomplishing will serve as my motivation in participating”. This student expanded a thread in the in-class discussion by sharing experiences in an online forum using Google Docs with a chat feature on the site. The engagement from this exercise is inherent in the completion of a class assignment: “as we are talking we are completing an assignment but we are also able to ‘paint on the same canvas’ so to speak.”

Too much external gate-keeping and instruction seemed to detract from motivation. Courses which have very prescribed sequences for posting and replying were cited by several as quickly becoming just a meaningless exercise to compete for marks. One example from a different course was a discussion perceived as “very very methodical and dry and academic… it became like something you didn’t care about, something you just did… you didn’t care if anybody commented… you could read it but it wasn’t anything passionate.” Courses which give very little direction, and encourage exploration of ideas around topics in the online forum, are appreciated by students as “involving… you care about the comments and engage in a little more back and forth.” The fact that the guided journal entries assigned in the IIF were “open and fluid allows me to just say what’s on my mind… it’s helping get over that fear… reluctance perhaps.” Students are hesitant to be “critical… it doesn’t seem fair to write that [something critical] when something was written as a self-reflection.” Students largely indicated they wanted to be more personal and expressive. A goal was for the online forum to become “something different… more of a conversation”.
Collaborative dialogue is hard because “not everyone is online at the same time”. Too much interchange can also be frustrating: a short, real time discussion of six students in another course was “stressful”: it is hard to feel connected or part of the conversation which can quickly spiral out of control even when remaining ‘on topic’. No guidance was also a problem. Students indicated the need, especially at the beginning of discussions, to have teacher direction that was “explicit” and that includes “what kind of posts to provide in response to other people”. Another student suggests “a guided big idea question for each discussion” which can help to focus the broadly defined self-reflection required about the issues.

Students had very definite ideas not only about the way they want to represent themselves but about the form of their introduction to their online peers may take. Responses included: “I don’t necessarily feel the need to represent or introduce myself online to my peers. I prefer to jump into the conversation and let [my] arguments or posts speak for themselves” to students desiring an avatar, video, PowerPoint or asynchronous Skype or WebEx chat.

One student expressed difficulty adjusting to both the online culture a new experience in the country. She expressed she needed to “consider many things…words, culture, approach and finally ideas”. She reflected that if the discussion was only online she would be “the very unfortunate person not to introduce myself to my peers.” Perceived lack of connection to the online environment is also an issue, the concern, that one will want to enter into a discussion and “sometimes no one will even comment”. The relation of the personal, or in some cases the online persona, to the discussion prompted the most latitude and expressions of the most individuation.

Technical considerations were broad in scope. Students agreed that one portal for all learning would be helpful. Students want more variety in modes of expression incorporated into the platform and suggested basic improvements around organization and design. All students were quick to list several improvements: technical considerations can make online discussion more accessible to different learning styles and personalities and ultimately more collaborative. The construct of a blended learning discussion is dynamic: it’s “interesting to see what the commenting and criticality was at the start when we didn’t know each other and we didn’t know exactly who you were looking in the eye…and now…towards the end of the semester…where there is more trust in strangers.”

This study was preliminary and prompted introspection by the creator of the forum: “I’m at the beginning stages of thinking through this…but what about being self-critical? …more self-reflective?” Overarching the conversation is a necessity to admit there is a facet of storytelling. Prompted by the class discussions about meaningful discourse and the meaning and choice of language and terms of expression, one student wondered in reflection about the veracity of how we represent ourselves: “I would dare to say that more people are not completely vulnerable on the Internet but we should aim to create a space where people might be willing to show their whole selves a bit more.” Online participants are informed by literature that we do not create this space on an innocuous landscape, complacent and devoid of background, “as if technologies scarcely existed” (Sinclair, 2004, p.1).

**Scholarly Significance**

Within a hermeneutic perspective, often what is not spoken is key to understanding reflective discussion. The students participating were graduate students invested in education, interested and informed about the value of collaborative exchanges of ideas. These students did not bring to the forum purely social ideas of conversation, revolving around feeling like they belonged to part of a group, despite the preponderance of literature about the relevance of personal engagement. A shared space was not emphasized as a social platform or space, but an academic community of reciprocal learners. In contrast, words around being “comfortable” and the affordances of “time” are prioritized. Students wanted an online identity: to represent themselves online in a way that makes sense to them, although this expression takes on a variety of preferred mediums of communication.

An added dimension to the discussion was the visibly differing students who expressed familiarity along diverse cultural backgrounds, often including Canada and at least one other culture and/or country. Within the microcosm of a classroom, a macrocosm of a vibrant scholarly population gave a degree of depth and scope to this preliminary study which can be further investigated in follow up work.
What factors do graduate students feel are key to their participation in an online collaborative learning forum? In what way does the current instrument, the IFF, allow for students to become critical agents with the scope for personal expression and self-reflection within a blended learning environment? The answer to how an online community forms and promotes collaborative and equitable expression begins to take substance when informed by the comments of a microcosm of a class of students who self-report their desires to become a more integral part of a collaborative online community. Online discussion space is optimally a comfortable space where all can express ideas and struggle to deconstruct concepts in ways that transcend time and space. Ideally, as one student expressed, the online discussion “develop[s] its own culture…the culture becomes something different…a conversation and not just posting.”

Future studies about online learning can begin to practically incorporate some of the students’ ideas into online forum environments. Researchers can then more systematically identify if certain concepts or affordances impact discussion. The role of self-agency has not yet been thoroughly explored within discussion and holds promise for future investigation. Delineation based on perceived cultural barriers and affordances can also be examined, with care taken not to make biased assumptions about a group but to give suggestions based on a richer more culturally collaborative environment. In fact, a new dimension of this and other online forums may potentially encourage students to express more vividly, within their own unique autobiographical story, how their background and identification with smaller communities informs their discussion and adds to the collective story. This study aims not only to support development for the IIF forum, but also support other blended environments seeking to foster classroom interaction, group discussion, and collaboration in blended learning environments.

References