

Increasing Student Participation in Class Discussions in a First-Year Writing Course

Yvonne Rutford, Assistant Professor of Writing / Yuhong "Tom" Tu, Assistant Professor, Instructional Designer, University of Wisconsin-Superior

Research Question

To what degree is the level of engagement in face-to-face classroom discussions an indicator of the level of engagement in asynchronous online discussions?

Background

The initial research questions posed by Rutford and Tu was "Can the use of asynchronous online discussion boards effectively increase student participation in subsequent face-to-face class discussion in a low-participation group of students?" Research was focused on first-year writing courses (WRIT 102).

In Fall 2014, however, students in WRIT 102 showed high levels of comfort, confidence, and participation in class discussions from the start, a vastly different picture from that during Fall 2013, when the research project was conceived. As a result, the research question was revised to the following: **To what degree is the level of engagement in face-to-face classroom discussions an indicator of the level of engagement in asynchronous online discussions?**

Examining this question will provide a better foundation for future exploration of the correlations between F2F and asynchronous participation and whether one can be used to increase participation in the other.

Methods

Research Design/Procedure: Qualitative case study conducted in two sections of WRIT 102 taught by Rutford in Fall 2014.

1. Self-Perception Survey: A 2-question anonymous survey about the students' self-perceptions of their level of comfort and confidence in speaking up during class discussions.
2. Third-party Observation: On the same day of the survey, Tu observed a discussion-based class session in both sections covering the same content topic to assess the students' level of participation in F2F class discussions, prior to implementation of an asynchronous online discussion board.

Methods, cont.

3. Student's Online Participation Rating: Students participated in an asynchronous online discussion board the week after the self-perception survey and the third-party observation. Quantity and quality of original posts and responses to others' posts were rated by both researchers individually and then discussed to agreement the few variations in their ratings. Rubric for rating is shown in Figure 1, below.

0	1	2
Posting/response is brief, with lack of specific references to the reading or to other posts; vague; little to no substance.	Posting/response shows some level of engagement and development; some specific references to the text/topic and/or others' postings.	Posting/response provides in-depth discussion with specific references to text/topic and/or others' postings; postings are thought-provoking.

Figure 1: Discussion Participation Rating Criteria

Findings

The results show a correlation between the level of engagement in face-to-face classroom discussions and the level of engagement in asynchronous online discussions in classes where the self-perceived and observed level engagement is high.

1. Self-perception Survey (See Figure 2):
 - 73% of survey respondents (both sections combined) indicated they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "Thinking over past classes I've taken, I generally feel comfortable and confident speaking up during class discussions."
 - 73% of survey respondents (both sections combined) indicated they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "In this WRIT 102 class, I feel comfortable and confident speaking up during class discussions."

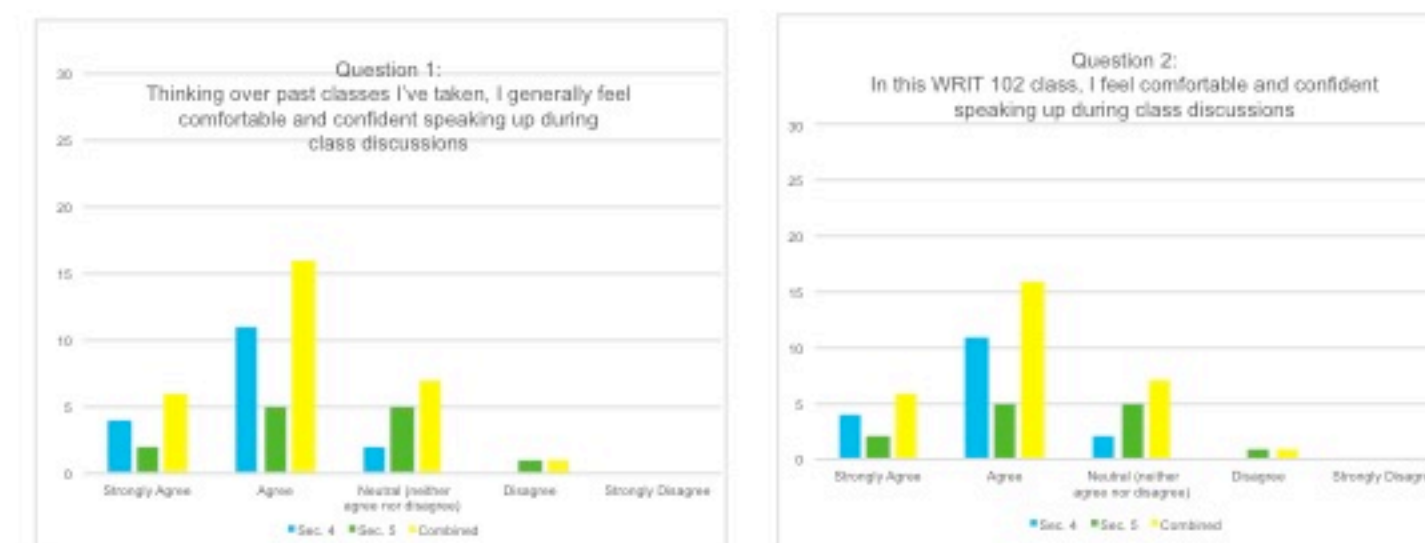


Figure 2: Self-perception Survey Results

2. Third-party Observation: "Overall, the students were actively engaged with the lecturing, discussion, and group presentations."

Findings, cont.

3. Students' Online Participation Rating:
 - In WRIT 102-004, 18 of 22 students participated in the online discussion. Among initial posts, 15 were rated "2," 3 were rated "1," and zero were rated "0." Among the responses to others' posts, 19 were rated "2," 5 were rated "1," and 5 were rated "0."
 - In WRIT 102-005, 17 of 21 students participated in the online discussion. Among initial posts, 17 were rated "2," zero were rated "1," and zero were rated "0." Among the responses to others' posts, 17 were rated "2," 10 were rated "1," and 2 were rated "0."

Implications of Research Findings

While this study has shown a correlation between high-participation students in face-to-face discussions and asynchronous online discussions, the question remains whether asynchronous online discussions can be used to increase subsequent face-to-face discussions in a low-participation group of students.

A brief survey of literature provides some insight into this remaining question.

- Martin describes the online disinhibition effect as "an effect that prompts online users to communicate with less constraint than in face-to-face discussion" and goes on to ask, "is there any reciprocal impact on subsequent discussion in the [F2F] environment?"
- Vess found that "students in [a] hybrid class [. . .] did indicate that participation in online discussion enhanced their engagement in face-to-face in-class discussions," but noted, "[t]here remains a need for further research on how to transplant documented advantages of asynchronous discussion into the hybrid classroom."

Our study establishes a correlation in participation rates between F2F and asynchronous online discussions among high-participation groups of students and provides a preliminary basis for further exploration of the correlations and differences in participation rates among different groups of students and ultimately, ways to "transplant documented advantages of asynchronous discussion" into the face-to-face setting.

References

- Martin, K. H. (2013). Leveraging Disinhibition to Increase Student Authority in Asynchronous Online Discussion. *Journal Of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 17(3), 149-164.
- Vess, D. L. (2005). Asynchronous Discussion and Communication Patterns in Online and Hybrid History Courses. *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. Communication Education*, 54(4), 355-364.