Using Platform Structure to Organize and
Stimulate Effective Discussions Boards

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Abstract: In this paper, the author examines the link between six components of platform structure[1] and the effectiveness of discussion boards, arguing that intelligent and creative use of these components can lead to more engaging and enlightening discussion threads, which in turn make for more effective discussion boards. Opportunities for further research are also offered.

Introduction

There has been little debate about the importance of discussion boards to online education, as studies support the conclusion that communication and interaction are important antecedents to online learning effectiveness (cf. Frederickson et al., 2001). But if the goal of online education is to create spirited and instructionally sound discussions, how do we get students excited about participating in discussion boards when they face an environment loaded with virtual games and You Tube.

In the past, most literature focused on the discussion threads or the content of the posts themselves. While important, there also needs to be a greater emphasis on stimulating substantive student interaction before they even open a single post. More specifically, the focus of this paper we will examine the role of discussion board structure in stimulating engaging and enlightening thread discussions.

Critical Thinking

Getting students to think critically is seen as key to the online learning experience (Palloff and Pratt, 2001). Further, Brookfield (1987) argues that among other things critical thinking is a process, not an outcome; that manifestations of critical thinking vary according to the contexts in which it occurs; and that it is emotive as well as rational. Interestingly, it is possible that all three of these components of critical thinking might be manipulated by how the discussion boards are structured.

For example, McCracken (2002) contends that online learners are not passive receptacles waiting patiently for information to be 'downloaded' to them. Instead, to be successful learners, students must be active, self directed, disciplined, motivated, and participative.

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[1] Platform Structures refer to the affordances provided by WebCT, Blackboard and others. While instructors often cannot choose their platform, their feedback can lead to changes in the design of the platform.

She further argues that online instructors need to promote ongoing communication and interaction, which in turn encourages learning by in part ensuring that the online environment is stimulating and instructional sound. Finally, she contends that communication and interaction can be enhanced by skillful design and use of all the tools available to them. The assumption being that this would include the skillful development and use of discussion board structures.

Platform Structures

In this section we will examine specific ideas on how platform structures could lead to more effective discussion boards. In examining these ideas, the author received the permission from several highly respected online programs to use snapshots of discussion boards from their courses.[2] These snapshots are from actual courses and the discussion boards have not been altered.[3]

There are a number of ways in which platform structures might be designed to better stimulate the quantity and quality of student participation and interaction. This would include the following six components:

1. Are the multiple layers to a discussion thread clearly visible?
2. Are the relationships among the posts clearly identified?
3. Are the instructor's posts clearly identified?
4. Can students easily enter and edit a subject line?
5. Is there a logical ordering of the posts?
6. Can the instructor change the order of the posts?

Are the Multiple Layers to a Discussion Thread Clearly Visible? and
Are the Relationships Among the Posts Clearly Identified?

By 'Number of Layers' the author means the degree to which the platform indents each response. For example, Appendices A and B are examples of limited platforms that provides two layers. One is for the initial posts and the second layer for all responses, whether that response was to the initial post or was a reply to a response to the initial post. Appendices C and D show cascading platforms that keep indenting so long as the post is a direct response to the post immediately above it.

As for the relationships among the posts, the author means: Are there any physical markers, outside of layering, that would indicate the relationships among the posts? (See Appendix C)

These two components should provide participants with the opportunity to visualize the overall structure of the discussion board. Among other things, this would include helping participants to easily visualize four dimensions of an online discussion:

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[2] The author would like to thank the participating programs for their assistance in this project.
[3] The exceptions are that all surnames and identifying markers have been removed and all examples are shown in black and white, while the actual screens are in color.

1. Who started the discussion.
2. Who is replying to whom.
3. The degree to which a thread has attracted the attention of others.
4. Whether the responses have progressed in a linear manner, or have branched out into sub-discussions.

For example, in the discussion thread on *Burger King in Taiwan* which appears in Appendix D, we can see that the initial post elicited several direct replies, and in turn, some of those replies led to sub-threads.

It is argued that the degree to which a participant can easily visualize the four dimensions of an online discussion the more likely they will be able to make smart decisions about the degree to which they will participate in specific discussions. In addition, if a participant realizes that their posts will not be buried in a less visually appealing discussion board, the more likely that they will post engaging and enlightening entries. Finally, a more visually appealing discussion board should allow for more fruitful moments of reflection. It should be easier to visualize the varied discussion threads, and therefore makes it easier for students to recall the contents of each discussion thread. Therefore, it is argued that the use of cascading platforms, and markers indicating the relationships among individual posts, would lead to more effective discussion boards.

Are the Instructor Posts clearly identified?

As a facilitator, the instructor must weigh their posts carefully; in terms of when, where and how often they post. This is because student participation is affected directly and indirectly by the manner in which the instructor posts his contributions. The assumption being that this would include the degree to which instructor posts are easily identifiable. Among other things, if it is easier to recognize that the instructor is engaged, then it is more likely that the students will become engaged. On the other hand, if it is easier to recognize that the instructor is dominating the discussion board, then it is more likely that their actions will hamper the interaction among the students, and therefore make the discussion boards less effective. In addition, by observing the behavior of an instructor's posts, students can often get an idea about what topics are of more importance and therefore will adjust their posting habits. Of the four examples in this paper, only the platform displayed in Appendix C clearly indicates instructor posts by boldfacing them (instructor posts are also of a different color from all other posts).

Can students easily enter and edit a subject line?

Of the four examples, all except for the platform in Appendix C allow participants to input a subject line in an input box that is separate from the main message box. Instead, in the platform found in Appendix C, the first few words of the post become the default subject line. Subject lines are important, for among other things, they can: 1) indicate the topic of the discussion thread; 2) indicate the type of post (lead, clarification, counterpoint, focus, sub-topic or BTW); 3) attract attention to specific discussion threads

with a creative headline; and 4) indicate to what degree the discussion thread has morphed into tangents or has spun completely off topic (Iaquinto, 2008). All four of the dimensions that are inherent in subject lines can help organize and stimulate more engaging and enlightening discussion threads. This, in turn, will lead to more effective discussion boards. It should be noted that if use of subject lines is not done judiciously, confusion would inevitably reign, as can be seen in Appendix B.

The Logical Order to the Posts

Most platforms will enter new posts (of the same layer) directly below the very last post, Whether or not this has become the default standard is debatable. But at least one platform (Appendix D) follows a different approach. New posts (at the same layer) are place directly atop of the last post. Therefore, in order to scan the timing of posts of the same layer, one would have to scroll up the page rather than down the page. In this author's own experience, "scrolling up" is a task more prone to errors, especially when there was a need to review the timing of similar postings from separate individuals; and in trying to link the genesis of similar discussion threads located in separate sections of the discussion board. This author feels that both of these outcomes made for less effective discussion boards

Editing the order of the posts

One of the roles of being a facilitator of discussion boards is acting as a shepherd. For example, one chore is to make sure that initial posts are on topic. And if the posts are not on topic, one should try to get the participant to make an additional post that is more in line with the discussion material. In addition, as a shepherd, instructors must ensure that discussion threads do not stray too far off-topic, or if they do that those post are clearly marked as such. Finally, it would also be beneficial if all similar discussion threads are located in the same area of the discussion board. Unfortunately, given the asynchronous nature of discussion boards, and the fact that even the most active instructors only check their boards a couple of times per day, it is not unusual to find two nearly identical discussion threads in separate places in the discussion board. Unfortunately, in the platforms listed in the Appendices, none offered the instructor the ability to combine those discussion threads that are similar in content but separate in location. It is argue that given the instructor the ability to move posts around the discussion boards would help reduce duplicate discussion threads and therefore make the discussion board more effective.

Conclusion

In this presentation, the author has examined the potential role of platform structure in organizing and stimulating more effective discussion boards. It was argued that manipulating specific components of the discussion board could lead to more engaging and enlightening discussion threads, which in turn would lead to more effective discussion boards. Further empirical research would need to be performed to assess just

how much and in what ways do the six components of the structure of the discussion boards impact the effectiveness of the discussion boards.

References

Brookfield, S. D. (1987). Developing Critical thinkers: Challenging Adults to Explore Alternative Ways of Thinking and Acting, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Fredericksen, E., Pelz, W., Pickett, A., Shea, P., & Swan, K. (2001). *Student satisfaction and perceived learning with on-line courses: Principles and examples from the SUNY Learning Network*. Retrieved July 23, 2007, from: http://www.aln.org.

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McCracken, H. (2002). *Promoting Learning Effectiveness in Virtual Classrooms*. TCC 2002 Conference
http://kolea.kcc.hawaii.edu/tcc/tcon02/presentations/mccracken.html

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APPENDIX A

Week 1, Topic 3 Discussion: "Class Announcements" (Robert
    Re: Week 1, Topic 3 Discussion: "Class Announcements" (Maryann
. .   Re: Week 1, Topic 3 Discussion: "Class Announcements" (George
    Re: Week 1, Topic 3 Discussion: "Class Announcements" (George
    Re: Week 1, Topic 3 Discussion: "Class Announcements" (Kimberly
    Re: Week 1, Topic 3 Discussion: "Class Announcements" (Terrence
. .   Re: Week 1, Topic 3 Discussion: "Class Announcements" (George
    Re: Week 1, Topic 3 Discussion: "Class Announcements" (Diane .
    Response to Discussion: "Class Announcements" (Lawrence
. .   Re: Response to Discussion: "Class Announcements" (George
    Re: Week 1, Topic 3 Discussion: "Class Announcements" (William
. .   Re: Week 1, Topic 3 Discussion: "Class Announcements" (Deborah
. .   Re: Week 1, Topic 3 Discussion: "Class Announcements" (George
. .   Re: Week 1, Topic 3 Discussion: "Class Announcements" (Robert
    Re: Week 1, Topic 3 Discussion: "Class Announcements" (Saverio
    Re: Week 1, Topic 3 Discussion: "Class Announcements" (Anthony
. .   Re: Week 1, Topic 3 Discussion: "Class Announcements" (George
    Re: Week 1, Topic 3 Discussion: "Class Announcements" (Sidney
    Re: Week 1, Topic 3 Discussion: "Class Announcements" (Loren
    Re: Week 1, Topic 3 Discussion: "Class Announcements" (Jennifer
    Re: Week 1, Topic 3 Discussion: "Class Announcements" (Deborah
    Re: Week 1, Topic 3 Discussion: General Comment on "Class Announcements"
    Re: Week 1, Topic 3 Discussion: "Class Announcements" (Jennifer
    Re: Week 1, Topic 3 Discussion: "Class Announcements" (Asuka :
    Re: Week 1, Topic 3 Discussion: "Class Announcements" (Sidney
. .   Re: Week 1, Topic 3 Discussion: "Class Announcements" (Robert
. .   Re: Week 1, Topic 3 Discussion: "Class Announcements" and HTML
. .   Re: Week 1, Topic 3 Discussion: "Class Announcements" and HTML
    Re: Week 1, Topic 3 Discussion: "Class Announcements" (Kathleen
    Re: Week 1, Topic 3 Discussion: "Class Announcements" (Nikhil
    Re: Week 1, Topic 3 Discussion: "Class Announcements" (Joel
    Re: Week 1, Topic 3 Discussion: "Class Announcements" (Yale
    Re: Week 1, Topic 3 Discussion: "Class Announcements" (Christine

APPENDIX B

Week 2, Topic 2 Discussion: "Managing Your Syllabus" (Robert
.   Terrence's Questions "Managing Your Syllabus" (Terrence
.   Re: Week 2, Topic 2 Discussion: "Managing Your Syllabus" (George
. . .   Re: Week 2, Topic 2 Discussion: Syllabus Upload? (Christine
.   Sid's Response to "Managing Your Syllabus" (Sidney
. . .   Deborah ▆▆▆▆▆▆' comments to Sid's Response to "Managing Your Syllabus" (Deborah
.   Diane's Week 2, Topic 2 Discussion: "Managing Your Syllabus" (Diane
. . .   Re: Diane's Week 2, Topic 2 Discussion: "Managing Your Syllabus" (Diane
.   Something about Plagiarism (Anthony
. . .   Re: Something about Plagiarism (Christine
. . .   Re: Something about Plagiarism (William
. . .   My Drop Box: Re: Something about Plagiarism (Terrence
. . .   Re: My Drop Box: Is 20% an Acceptable Amount of Plagiarism? (Christine
.   Re: Week 2, Topic 2 Discussion: "Managing Your Syllabus" (Lawrence
.   Maryann Lamer Re: Week 2, Topic 2 Discussion: "Managing Your Syllabus" (Maryann
. . .   Re: Maryann Lamer Re: Week 2, Topic 2 Discussion: "Managing Your Syllabus" (George
.   Syllabus question Re: Week 2, Topic 2 Discussion: "Managing Your Syllabus" (Jennifer
. . .   Re: Syllabus question Re: Week 2, Topic 2 Discussion: "Managing Your Syllabus" (George
.   Deborah ▆▆▆▆▆▆' Response to: "Managing Your Syllabus" (Deborah
. . .   Re: Deborah ▆▆▆▆▆▆' Response to: "Managing Your Syllabus" (Maryann
.   Saverio's "Managing Your Syllabus" questions and answers (Saverio
. . .   Re: Saverio's "Managing Your Syllabus" questions and answers (George
.   Response to Week 2, Topic 2 Discussion: "Managing Your Syllabus" (Kimberly
. . .   Webliography- Week 2, Topic 2 Discussion: "Managing Your Syllabus" (Kathleen
. . .   Re: Webliography- Week 2, Topic 2 Discussion: "Managing Your Syllabus" (Maryann
.   Re: Week 2, Topic 2 Discussion: "Managing Your Syllabus" (Yale
. . .   WebCT and Web Outlook Express (Terrence
.   Jenny's Response to Week 2, Topic 2 Discussion: "Managing Your Syllabus" (Jennifer
. . .   Response to Jenny from Aska (Asuka
. . .   Jenny to Aska (Jennifer
.   Re: Week 2, Topic 2 Discussion: "Managing Your Syllabus" (Christine
.   Re: Week 2, Topic 2 Discussion: "Managing Your Syllabus" (William
.   Re: Week 2, Topic 2 Discussion: "Managing Your Syllabus" (Joel
.   Nikhil's Week 2 - Syllabus Response (Nikhil

APPENDIX C

▷ ☑ **In this week's readings the au**	☑	CaptJohnR	2 Nov 07 5:44 PM MST
└ ▷ ☑ **Capt,**	☑	JildaN	2 Nov 07 6:31 PM MST
└ ▷ ☑ **Exit Strategies**	☑	**Anthony**	3 Nov 07 12:23 AM MST
└ ▷ ☑ **The reality of watching the ot**	☑	Lydia	3 Nov 07 3:32 PM MST
└ ▷ ☑ **Lydia,**	☑	JildaN	5 Nov 07 5:07 PM MST
└ ▷ ☑ **If a corporation "drops prices**	☑	CaptJohnR	3 Nov 07 10:57 AM MST
└ ▷ ☑ **John,**	☑	Carey	5 Nov 07 3:39 PM MST
▷ ☑ **Because so much success of a c**	☑	Toi	3 Nov 07 2:22 PM MST
└ ▷ ☑ **Toi,**	☑	Kary	3 Nov 07 6:41 PM MST
└ ▷ ☑ **Reacting/overreacting**	☑	**Anthony**	3 Nov 07 11:19 PM MST
└ ▷ ☑ **Professor,**	☑	Lori	4 Nov 07 6:05 PM MST
└ ▷ ☑ **Lori,**	☑	Kary	6 Nov 07 2:50 PM MST
└ ▷ ☑ **I think some of Team Erie's su**	☑	Sharon	5 Nov 07 2:39 PM MST
└ ▷ ☑ **Sharon,**	☑	Carey	5 Nov 07 3:41 PM MST
└ ▷ ☑ **Carey,**	☑	Lori	6 Nov 07 5:47 PM MST
└ ▷ ☑ **Lori,**	☑	Carey	6 Nov 07 7:20 PM MST
└ ▷ ☑ **Professor**	☑	Toi	5 Nov 07 10:21 PM MST
└ ▷ ☑ **Hi Toi,**	☑	Sharon	5 Nov 07 2:48 PM MST
└ ▷ ☑ **Sharon,**	☑	Toi	6 Nov 07 4:34 PM MST
└ ▷ ☑ **Toi,**	☑	JildaN	6 Nov 07 2:28 PM MST
└ ▷ ☑ **Jilda,**	☑	Toi	6 Nov 07 4:52 PM MST
▷ ☑ **All,**	☑	Kary	3 Nov 07 6:33 PM MST
└ ▷ ☑ **I believe that an in depth ana**	☑	Lolita	3 Nov 07 7:59 PM MST
└ ▷ ☑ **Lolita,**	☑	Kathi	6 Nov 07 7:41 AM MST
└ ▷ ☑ **I believe that an in depth ana**	☑	Lolita	3 Nov 07 7:59 PM MST
└ ▷ ☑ **Damn the torpedoes**	☑	**Anthony**	3 Nov 07 11:22 PM MST
└ ▷ ☑ **I believe aggressive style mus**	☑	CaptJohnR	5 Nov 07 7:51 AM MST
└ ▷ ☑ **Ok, I agree... but give me an**	☑	**Anthony**	5 Nov 07 9:23 AM MST
└ ▷ ☑ **I totally agree. If the strat**	☑	Lolita	5 Nov 07 3:20 PM MST
└ ▷ ☑ **Kary,**	☑	Carey	5 Nov 07 2:44 PM MST
└ ▷ ☑ **Kary,**	☑	JildaN	5 Nov 07 5:15 PM MST
└ ▷ ☑ **Kathy,**	☑	Toi	5 Nov 07 10:32 PM MST
└ ▷ ☑ **Hey Kary,**	☑	Kathi	6 Nov 07 7:35 AM MST

APPENDIX D

☐ ⚑ 𝟎 Subject	Authored By	Date
☐ Burger King in Taiwan--wierd???	Tony	Nov 21, 2007 1:49 A
☐ Re: Burger King in Taiwan--wierd???	Daniel	Nov 21, 2007 11:39
☐ Re: Burger King in Taiwan--wierd???	Lori	Nov 21, 2007 11:50
☐ Re: Burger King in Taiwan--wierd???	Lauren	Nov 21, 2007 4:24 P
☐ Re: Burger King in Taiwan--Healthy options	Helene	Nov 23, 2007 9:05 P
☐ Re: Burger King in Taiwan--Healthy options	Joshua	Nov 24, 2007 12:01
☐ Re: Burger King in Taiwan--Healthy options	Julie	Nov 24, 2007 5:29 P
☐ Re: Burger King in Taiwan--wierd???	Lynn	Nov 21, 2007 7:06 P
☐ Doing a search	Tony	Nov 23, 2007 12:47
☐ Re: Burger King in Taiwan--wierd???	Joseph	Nov 24, 2007 11:08
☐ Re: Burger King in Taiwan--wierd???	Brenda	Nov 24, 2007 12:30
☐ Re: Burger King in Taiwan--healthy choices	Brett	Nov 24, 2007 12:40
☐ Innovation and logistics	David	Nov 21, 2007 12:19
☐ Strategies for Competition	Brett	Nov 20, 2007 10:15
☐ Re: Strategies for Competition	Ann	Nov 22, 2007 10:28
☐ Re: Strategies for Competition	Brett	Nov 24, 2007 12:35
☐ Re: Strategies for Competition	Daniel	Nov 24, 2007 2:54 P
☐ Re: Strategies for Competition	Julie	Nov 24, 2007 5:40 P
☐ Avon Calling	Alicia	Nov 24, 2007 9:07 P
☐ Playing Field	Thomas	Nov 20, 2007 9:42 P
☐ Re: Playing Field	Tomislav	Nov 22, 2007 11:03
☐ Re: Playing Field	Julie	Nov 22, 2007 7:01 P
☐ Re: Brand names and Samsung	Peter	Nov 23, 2007 9:27 P
☐ If you're not Asian, become Asian	Barry	Nov 20, 2007 9:00 P
☐ Re: If you're not Asian, become Asian	Ann	Nov 22, 2007 10:30
☐ Put all your marbles in or do not enter...	Barry	Nov 22, 2007 12:15
☐ Re: Put all your marbles in or do not enter...	Julie	Nov 22, 2007 7:04 P
☐ Re: Put all your marbles in or do not enter...	Lynn	Nov 24, 2007 11:34
☐ Re: Put all your marbles in or do not enter...	Tony	Nov 25, 2007 7:21 A
☐ Strategies for Competing in East Asia	Helene	Nov 20, 2007 8:47 P
☐ <No Topic>	Brenda	Nov 20, 2007 8:28 P
☐ Insider	Alicia	Nov 20, 2007 8:36 P
☐ Korea Disney	David	Nov 20, 2007 8:06 P
☐ Re: Korea Disney	Alicia	Nov 20, 2007 8:12 P
☐ Re: Korea Disney	Daniel	Nov 21, 2007 11:50
☐ Play the American Card	Alicia	Nov 20, 2007 8:01 P
Re: Play the American Card	Daniel	Nov 21, 2007 11:54