Should Discussion Forums be Eliminated from Online Courses?

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Introduction
- Distance education is increasing in popularity in higher education
- Online discussion forums or discussion boards are one pedagogical tool that is often used in online classes (Crawford-Ferre & Wiest, 2012).
- Talpin & Wojik (2010) concluded that online deliberative discussions impacted participant learning.
- Some recent studies, however, have suggested that the use of online discussion boards are outdated or irrelevant for student learning and therefore should not be included in online courses (Jayaratne & Moore, 2016; Moore, Warner, Jones & Bachelor, 2016).
- This study challenges those findings.

Research Questions
1. How do students in an online multicultural competence course perceive the use of online discussion boards?
2. Should online discussion forums be eliminated from online classes?

Methods
- Document analysis
- 163 final reflection essays written between Summer 2014 and Spring 2015 (6 semesters)
- Reflection questions:
  - In what ways has this course helped you to develop a better understanding of your multicultural self and cultural others?
  - From your perspective, describe your stages of your growth from the beginning of the semester until now?
- Used Nvivo to assist with data analysis
- Searched essays for those that talked about discussions
- Coded those essays for themes

Findings
- 62% (101) of students mentioned the course discussions as a part of their reflections
- An additional 6 students used a form of the word “discussed”, but it was unclear if they were referring to the discussion forum or using the term generally
- 91% (92) students who mentioned the discussion board found it useful

Relevant themes:

New Perspectives
“The discussions, especially, I figured I would grow extremely tired of. Again, the discussions became very helpful and eye opening. I liked that everyone had their own opinion, so I got to read a perspective from many different angles.”
“...but I was shocked to read in the discussion that some don’t believe that racism exists. It is this ignorance or naivety that also contributes to the problem”

Self-Awareness
“The raw materials that were taught in the class didn’t really do anything for me, I knew most of it anyway. It was the discussions, the questions that lead to deep thought, the movies, videos, articles that changed the way I not only see others but the way I also see myself.”
“I have learned that despite how open minded I think I am, I still judge others based on their background.”

Voice
“I learned to try to communicate and have my voice be heard. I feel as though I gained a lot through the discussion boards. I was able to here the thoughts and opinions of my classmates in a safe learning environment. It felt as though the forum was a safe place where students felt comfortable voicing their opinions.”

Negative Cases
- 5 students indicated the discussion board was not useful
- Would have preferred face-to-face interaction
- Was not opposed to student-to-student interaction, just did not like the nature of this discussion board

Better Understanding of Topics
Challenged Beliefs
“...but I was shocked to read in the discussion that some don’t believe that racism exists. It is this ignorance or naivety that also contributes to the problem”

Process and Structure

Similarities across Cultures

Implications and Further Study
- In designing online courses, instructors should consider the type of course and course objectives when determining whether to include a discussion forum
- Although Jayaratne & Moore (2016) surveyed students and found they did not prefer discussion forums as an instructional activity, the present study presents findings that suggest students benefitted from them in this course
- Further studies should be conducted to determine the usefulness of student-to-student interaction in various course contexts

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References available upon request