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Authors:

Farhang Mossavar-Rahmani, Ph.D.

National University

Cynthia Larson-Daugherty, Ed.D.

President – Spectrum Pacific Learning Company

Managing Threaded Discussion

Abstract

"Modern online learning includes offerings that run the gamut from conventional didactic lectures or textbook-like information delivered over the Web, to Internet-based collaborative role-playing in social simulations and highly interactive multiplayer games" (Center for Technology in Learning, 2009). Threaded discussion is a tool that, if used and managed properly, could play a major role in the success of online programs. In our university, faculty that want to teach online courses are encouraged not only to use threaded discussions, but use it in a way that stimulates discussion and problem solving, promotes critical thinking and helps students better understand the concepts and theories in the subjects they study. In this article we will review the critical factors that help both students and faculty get the optimal use to enhance the learning experience from threaded discussions.

Introduction

According to the study done by the U.S. Department of Education (2009), students who took all or part of their instruction online performed better, on average, than those taking the same courses through face-to-face instruction. There are many factors that contribute to this success; among them are the management of an online course and the use of the threaded discussion as an effective tool. However, both research data and anecdotal comments from faculty suggest that most students are not as keenly interested in using the threaded discussion.

At National University faculty who wish to teach online are encouraged to use threaded discussions and grade students on how they perform in that environment. In our research (Appendix - A) and discussion with both students and faculty, we have identified several factors that can contribute to the success or failure of the threaded discussion. In this paper a focused exploration in six categories is undertaken in an effort to further understand and identify enhanced learning opportunities and the use of online technology tools.

1. Technology
2. Selections of topics
3. Organization of topics
4. Management of the Thread/provide guidance
5. Feedback
6. Assessment/grading

Definition

In this study the threaded discussion refers to electronic methods of communication in which particular software is used to interact between instructors and students in an online learning environment. The software normally allows the users to communicate with each other by posting their comments within a topic's thread, sort the message by date, subject-heading, name etc.

1. **The Role of Technology - Learning Management System**

Online learning has had tremendous growth since 2002 and continues to show signs of being a growth area in the academic sector. According to a study done by Elaine Allen and Jeff Seaman (2008), over 3.9 million students took at least one online course during the fall 2007 term; a 12 percent increase over the previous year. And when compared to the 1.2 percent growth of the overall higher education student population, the significance of the move toward online education is even more apparent. Several factors may have contributed to this growth, such as lower costs, ease of access, convenience, location, and vast improvements in technology.

In recent years, various learning management systems (LMS) and course management systems (CMS) have developed to help support and increase the effectiveness of online education. Today, there are over a dozen systems available (i.e., eCollege, Blackboard, Moodle, Angel) and with them come various features and capabilities (edutools.com).

Since both LMS and CMS are a critical communication component to facilitate interactions among the parties involved; a "sampling" from the marketplace comparison Exhibit A – Comparison Table has been created to understand what is available to support this facilitation.

LMS/CMS "Discussion Thread" Tool Review/Comparison

The following Exhibit A- Comparison Table, presents a brief narrative review of the

system's features and functionality (edutools.com, 2009), and its ranking when compared to

others in the marketplace.

One of the most comprehensive in the marketplace is ANGEL, which was recently acquired

by Blackboard. In a close second are Blackboard and Desire2Learn. Following suit is the

increasingly popular Moodle, which appears to have a very progressive road-map that is

more driven by individual licenses and customization that a unified approach would enhance,

like Blackboard.

Exhibit A – Comparison Table *(some excerpts taken directly from edutools.com)*

System	System's Features
(1) ANGEL 6.3	The most comprehensive and flexible in threaded discussion options is ANGEL. The software includes support for discussion forums. Discussions can be viewed by date, by thread, by title, by author, by group, by the type of post. Students can categorize posts as problems, explanations, scientific explanations, comments, evaluations, or summaries. Instructors can associate a discussion with any course content. Discussions can be shared across courses, departments, or any institutional unit. Instructors may create separate discussion environments for small groups. Groups can be open to all or only a select set of students. Instructors can determine the level of involvement (read, write, or post anonymously) for students. Only the instructor may delete posts. Posts can include attachments, an images or URLs. Posts can be either plain-text, formatted text or html. The threaded discussion software includes a formatting text editor. Discussion threads are expandable and collapsible to view an entire conversation on one screen. The entire discussion can be saved or printed for off-line reading. Instructors can set up discussion forums so new posts are sent to the email of each student. Students can enable or disable posts to be sent to their email. Instructors can limit discussions to specific time periods. The discussion forums can include a moderation function (screen all posts).

(2) Blackboard Academic Suite	Fairly robust and noted by most to offer "enough" to do the job; akin to Desire2Learn**. Discussions can be viewed by date and by thread. Instructors can associate a discussion with any course content. Instructors can enable or disable anonymous posting, and determine whether student posts are re-editable. Posts can contain URLs, file attachments and may contain HTML. The threaded discussion software includes a formatting text editor which can create mathematic equations. Instructors may create separate discussion environments for small groups of students and teaching assistants. Discussion threads are expandable and collapsible to view an entire conversation on one screen.
(3) Derire2Learn 7.4	Discussions can be viewed by date, by thread, by title or by author. Instructors may create separate discussion environments for small groups. Discussion threads are expandable and collapsible to view an entire conversation on one screen. Posts can include attachments or URL. Posts can be either plain text or html. Instructors can enable or disable anonymous postings. The entire discussion can be saved or printed for off-line reading. . Discussions can be shared across courses, departments, or any institutional unit. Instructors can associate a discussion with any course content. Instructors can limit discussions to specific time periods
(4) eCollege AU+	The software includes support for discussion forums. Discussions can be viewed by date, by thread, by author, by group, and by topics defined by the instructor. Instructors can associate a discussion with any course content. Instructors may create separate discussion environments for small groups. Instructors can limit discussions to specific time periods. Only the instructor may delete posts. Posts can include attachments, an image or URL. The entire discussion can be saved or printed for off-line reading. Discussion threads are expandable and collapsible to view an entire conversation on one screen.
(5) Moodle 1.5.2	The discussion tool supports a social constructionist pedagogy model. Discussions can be viewed by date, by thread, by author. Instructors can split discussion branches from the main discussion into a new discussion. Instructors can determine the level of involvement (read, write, or post anonymously) for students. Posts can include attachments, an image or URL. The discussion tool includes a formatting text editor. Posts may be peer reviewed. Students may receive posts to the discussion forums as daily digests of subject lines or whole posts as email. Students can subscribe to forum RSS feeds.
(6) WeCT Campus Edition 4.0	Discussions can be viewed by date, by thread, and by title. Instructors can determine the level of involvement (read, write, or post anonymously) for students. Instructors may create separate discussion environments for small groups. Posts can include attachments and URLs.

Exhibit "A" Notes: #2 Desire2Learn 7.4 and #3 Blackboard are fairly similar - **See comments under Blackboard Academic Suite; As eCollege moves away from its legacy system to .NeXT it will easily be a contender to tie for #2 if not a keen competitor in this capacity for #1 Angel; #5WebCT was bought by Blackboard several years ago

As Exhibit A – Comparison Table illustrates, practically all management systems provide the same basic services. In addition to discussion threads, the ability to exchange/share files, post notes, utilize a whiteboard space, and, in more advanced settings, offer real-time/synchronous chats that further enhance and support the interaction among students and between faculty and students. The following is brief description of each:

a. Discussion threads (asynchronous activity): Discussion forums are online tools that capture the exchange of messages over time, sometimes over a period of days, weeks, or even months. Threaded discussion forums are organized into categories so that the exchange of messages and responses are grouped together and are easy to find.

b. File exchange (asynchronous activity): File exchange tools allow learners to upload files from their local computers and share these files with instructors or other students in an online course. Note: File attachments to messages are part of Internal Email and Discussion Forums.

c. Online journal notes (asynchronous activity): Online Notes/Journal enable students to make notes in a personal or private journal. Students can share personal journal entries with their instructor or other students, but cannot share private journal entries

As noted, from a general perspective, the capabilities across the most commonly used LMS platforms related to communication tools are clearly similar (edutools.com, 2009). As such, the proposition may create a pathway to how evident the instructor's role is in an online course. Specifically, how the instructor utilizes the tools and purposefully engages the

students in meaningful asynchronous interactions that stimulate learning. Therefore, the opportunity may be to triangulate the optimal way to facilitate learning via the instructor, the technology, and the students.

Technology Challenges and Opportunities

If this research was conducted three years ago, the list of challenges and opportunities would be rather extensive. However, due to progressive product road map commitments by system vendors, the list has grown much shorter. Historically, one of the biggest challenges around the technology has been the ease in viewing threads posted by an individual student and across students whom have responded to a query by a faculty member. The difficulty has been less with individual posts than it has been with reviewing all the posts a student has made on a specific subject: their own and to others, as well as the engagement back and forth with the instructor in this period. The ability to review, provide commentary, and in many cases a grade, for the depth and breadth of the post was rather limited by the faculty. This difficulty for faculty may have allowed feedback that was not as clear as either the faculty member or the student would have liked.

However, educational institutions have rallied and pushed vendors to have technology roadmaps that move faster. As a result, key vendors in the marketplace (i.e., eCollege, Blackboard) have made (and are continuing to make) updates to streamline this critical ability to analyze posts, to view an individual student's single post or collective posts, to view a student's post and interactions with others, to view entire class posts, or segmented topics by group/class. This specific tool presents a tremendous opportunity for students to interact with each other as well as with faculty.

2. Topic/Question Selection

Like the classroom, the selection of questions and topics are critical in the effectiveness of the thread of discussion, and the level of participation, by the students. Each faculty may have a different approach in selection of the questions. According to McKeanchie (1994) questions can be designed in the following format:

- Application and Interpretation questions. Rather than dealing with factual questions, discussions need to be formulated so as to facilitate relationships, applications, or analysis of facts and materials.

- Problem questions. A problem may arise from a case or it may be a hypothetical problem.

- Connective and casual effect questions. Which involve attempts to link materials or concepts that otherwise might not seem related. One might, for example, cut across disciplines to link literature, music, and historical event.

- Comparative questions. As the name suggests, ask for comparisons between one theory and another.

- Evaluative questions. These types of questions ask not only for comparisons but for a judgment of the relative value of the points being compared, for example, "Which of two theories better account for the data?"

- Critical questions. The intention is to examine the validity of an author's arguments.

No matter how one designs the questions, students need to be informed of the purpose of the threaded discussions and how studying and answering these questions can help them

understand the subject matter better. While selecting questions, other factors also need to be look into. Factors like:

- How many topics/questions are appropriate (can they be broken into subtopics?)
- How closely each topic/question is related to the subject assigned for the week.
- Whether the topic/question can help students better understand the theories discussed in the book or lecture.
- Can topic/question help students understand the learning outcome for the week better?
- Does the topic/question stimulate critical thinking?
- Does topic/question encourage participation?
- Is topic/question open ended enough?
- Does topic/question allow for reflection?

3. **Organization of Topics**

Topics can be organized in variety of ways. No matter what method is used, the goal should be to help participants/readers to:

- Understand the structure and goals of the discussions
- Trace it to the original contributor
- Avoid fragmentation of a discussion
- Keep conversations on track

4. **Managing the Threaded Discussion**

Like the classroom, effective management of the threaded discussion requires a great deal of planning and patience. The following are critical factors that we believe may have an impact on the success of the threaded discussion:

a. Starting discussions. Discussions can begin by answering posted questions, talking about the problems encountered from the reading, or from the assignments of the week. While unorganized discussions may be good for breaking the ice, if continued it can create problems for both the students and the faculty. If students wish to mingle, the best solution is to create separate threaded discussions for their conversations.

b. The level of faculty participation and the way that it is done.

Faculty should provide leadership and create an environment where students can willingly participate in the discussion without being forced (either for points or losing one). Among other things, faculty should ensure that students:

- Learn how to learn from the threaded discussions

- Know how to participate in the discussion

- Provide positive and constructive comments

- Respond in a timely manner

- Feel they are in control

- Are comfortable working with other students

- Know how to follow discussions online

c. Lack of student participation. The reasons for a lack of student participation in the threaded discussion are not very different from the reasons why students don't participate in the classroom. These reasons vary from a lack of knowledge or interest in the subject, to a fear of being wrong or a belief that he/she is not learning. Faculty should first identify the cause and then respond to it in the proper way.

d. Group assignments. When there is a group assignment, the number of students in a group (between 5 to 7) and their backgrounds are important. Hence, groups must be elected wisely.

Furthermore, faculty members need to develop clear expectations about the level of individual contribution in the group as well as how the group as a whole will be evaluated. Other factors that faculty members may need to consider are:

- Level of work for the online class

- Evaluation and timely feedback

- Whether to allow anonymous posts

- Should students be allowed to edit or delete their own posting?

- Use of sites in posts

- Use of attachments

- How many times students are expected to login during a week

e. Use of online discussion tools. It is necessary that the faculty should be very comfortable in using available discussion tools. Live chat can be effective, especially when it is conducted with a clear agenda and in an organized manner.

d. Civility in discussion. Students should be reminded that the objective is to be collaborative, not combative. Also they need to know that even an innocent remark in the on-line environment can be misconstrued. Therefore, they should proofread their threaded discussion responses carefully before posting them and they should try to ensure that others will not take their posts as a personal attack. It will be useful if the course outline reminds students with a statement such as: "Be positive in your approach to others and careful about your words. Since we cannot see each other, it is hard to tell if you are bashful, bored, sarcastic, or just kidding. Use these discussions to develop your collaborative teamwork and interaction skills."

f. Quality of the comments and responses. Faculty may provide certain guidelines regarding the quality of the students' comments or responses to others questions.

g. Other factors. The following factors also have some impact on the threaded discussions:

    a. Level of work for an online class. Based on our findings, the level of work in an online class is important factor to its success. Faculty members need to balance how much of the works need to be done in the threaded discussions and how much on other class activities.

    b. How to follow discussions online. The issue of leadership. Students usually learn more by giving help rather than receiving it

    c. Encouragement of student participation (helping them understand the merits of being involved in the threaded discussions), and

    d. link threaded discussions to the learning outcome of the course

5. **Evaluation and feedback**

    Since faculty members are using the threaded discussion as a tool to promote learning in the classroom, a percentage of the total grade should be allocated to the threaded discussion. Additionally, at the beginning of the course the rationale for the selected percentage should be explained to the students. Faculty members need to clearly define their criteria for grading student performance in the threaded discussions. Some of these criteria could be: tracking time, quality of response, number of postings, level of engagement, evaluation of learning outcomes.

6. **Assessing the Discussion**

    There are many different ways that one can assess student work on the threaded discussion. One approach is using holistic rubric. In doing so, the faculty member should determine the rubric and provide students with what he/she expects to see (for example, if the level of participation is

a) inadequate, b) adequate or c) excellent). For each level the faculty should provide criteria for measuring participation.

Faculty members may use the sample rubric below; however, they should clearly identify a rubric that aligns with the proposed best practices and share this with the students to clearly set expectations for learning, participation, and grading.

	Below Expectation	Good	Exceptional
Level of Participation			
Quality of Comments			
Level of Collaboration			
Timing of Posting			

Conclusion

With the internet's continual growth as a learning forum in higher education, identifying how to create an engaging and effective learning experience is more important than ever before. We have had the opportunity to reevaluate what we do in the traditional onsite classroom that was often driven by the lecture (targeting auditory learners). The internet initially provided the opportunity to reach both auditory (audio lecture files) and visual learners (text and images). The outcome after less than a decade of online learning in the early part of the new century was the ability to really reach out and engage the three primary learning styles: audio, visual and hands-on (kinesthetic) with online learning. To that end, it started the mission of evaluating technology as a conduit to the learning process and ensuring faculty/institutions were administering the most effective learning opportunities online.

Today we find that one of the most commonly used tools in online learning is the asynchronous discussion threads. As such, it is necessary (if not critical) to provide a forum for identifying the best practices around learning engagement with discussion thread technology tools. The review, research and premise offered within this article propose just that by focusing on six categories, or "factors," that, if employed methodically, can enhance the learning experience:

1. Technology

2. Selection of topics

3. Organization of topics

4. Management of the thread/providing guidance

5. Feedback

6. Assessment/grading

Clearly there is opportunity in both the academic sector and the online learning industry to identify plausible and applicable "best practices" to ensure both learning is taking place. To that end, we steadfastly understand this is an evolutionary process and, as engineers and learning professionals continue to collaborate linking learning and technology will allow for further innovation and present opportunities for best practices to change. Until that time, standards, albeit temporary in today's world, are essential.

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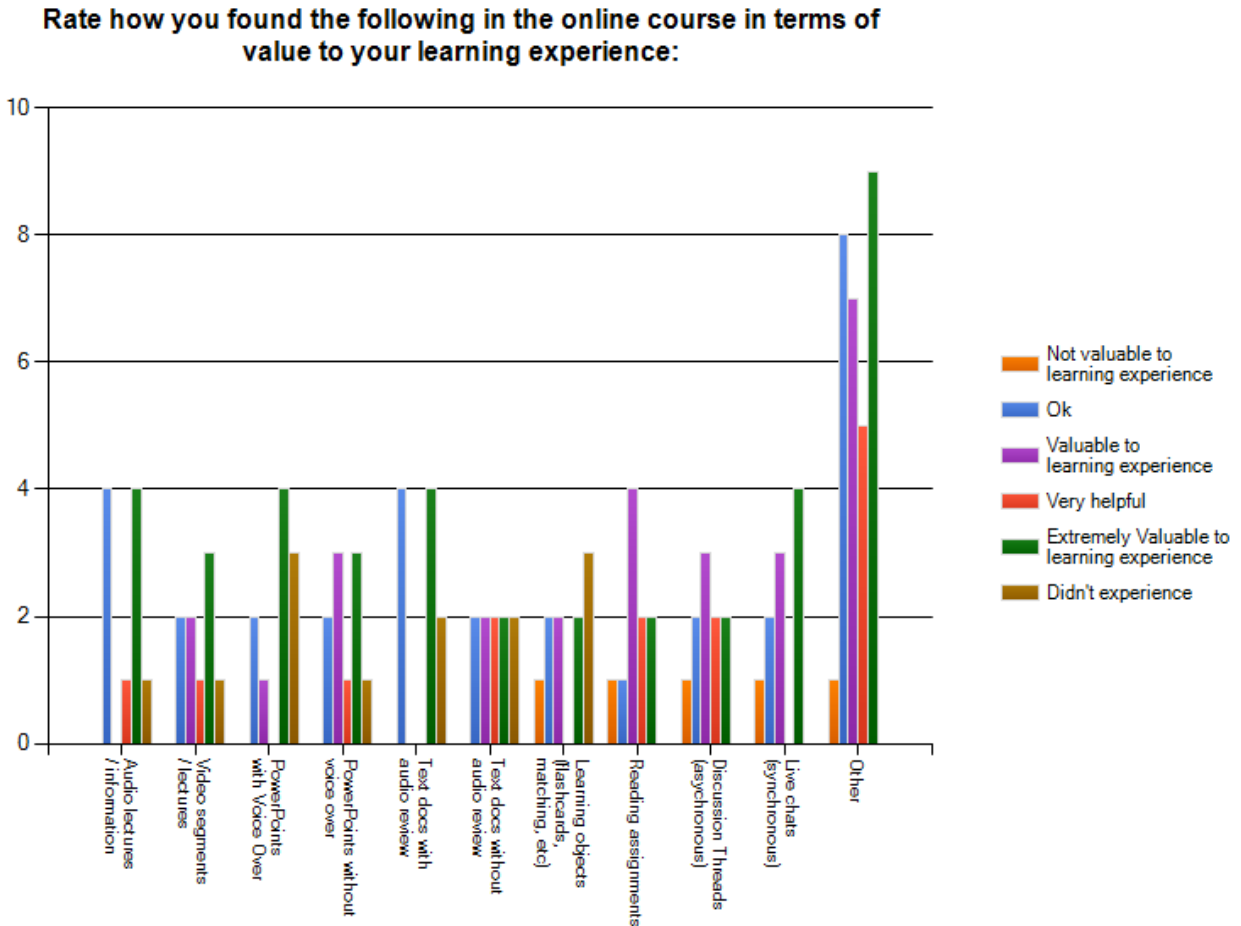**Inside Higher ED**: http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2009/06/29/online

Manage Smart:

http://www.managesmarter.com/msg/content_display/training/e3i2df59a4510784944a60f13a6c7

59bcec

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Rate how you found the following in the online course in terms of value to your learning experience:
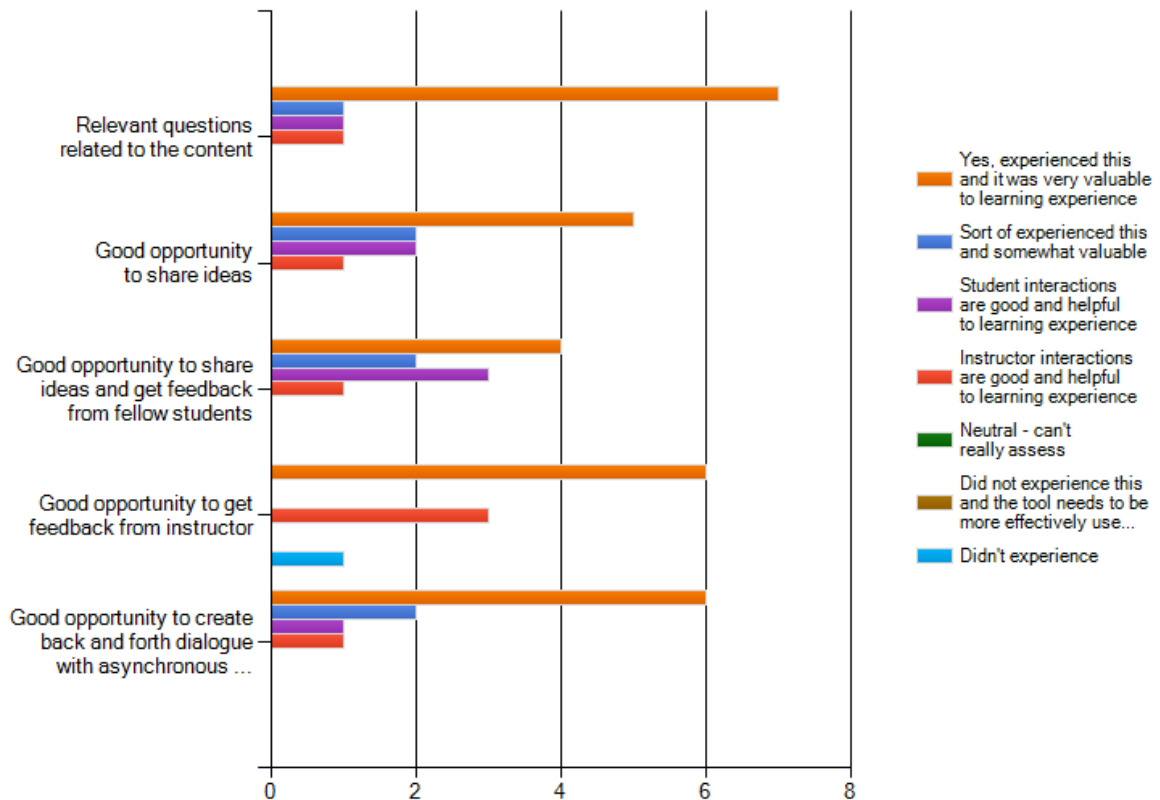
Appendix

Appendix - A

Based on our review of existing data and our own recent survey, the most common reason for taking online classes continues to be "flexibility." Given the choice of fully onsite, fully online or a mix of onsite and online (hybrid) for a given course, students in the survey (which is consistent with research data available) identify hybrid as the optimal choice.

Qualitative feedback from survey respondents (current online students)

1. Discussion threads and power points are the best to get key points across. Large papers sometimes take too much time/focus on one specific thing when really you may miss out on other aspects.
2. I particularly like the research and writing assignments because they provide hands-on experience and the opportunity to study real-world scenarios.
3. Online learning has been a new method of learning for me and is a bit more demanding than in class. Discussion Threads have to be well thought out, before posting. In-class sessions at times don't give everyone an opportunity to present their ideas or to reinforce what they have learned that week (too many students, not enough time). The only very difficult aspect to online learning I have experienced is that I am about 3-4 sentences behind what the instructor has said in an online session, and because we can only focus on our listening skills (not visual), it takes quite a bit longer to reply to any questions in depth. Nearly impossible. The only thing we can do is to acknowledge that we can hear the lecture and respond with very short answers. It must be frustrating for the instructor, but actually our minds and body cannot quickly react. It's as though one is blind, and we are relying only on our other senses.
4. We need more professor input throughout the week to guide the discussion.

Based on our survey, the student experience regarding the discussion threads was noted as fairly positive overall. In part this can be linked to National University's long history with online learning (over a decade) and developed use/experience with the threaded discussion as an effective learning tool for the online environment.

Rate how you found the following in the online course in terms of value specific to discussion threads:

Legend:
- Yes, experienced this and it was very valuable to learning experience
- Sort of experienced this and somewhat valuable
- Student interactions are good and helpful to learning experience
- Instructor interactions are good and helpful to learning experience
- Neutral - can't really assess
- Did not experience this and the tool needs to be more effectively use...
- Didn't experience

Do you believe you had a positive learning experience in this online class (meaning you both learned about the subject and engaged in a positive learning process)and technology tools that allow for engagement were utilized to enhance/help the experience

- Not at all
- Very little
- To some degree
- Mostly
- Yes, very much
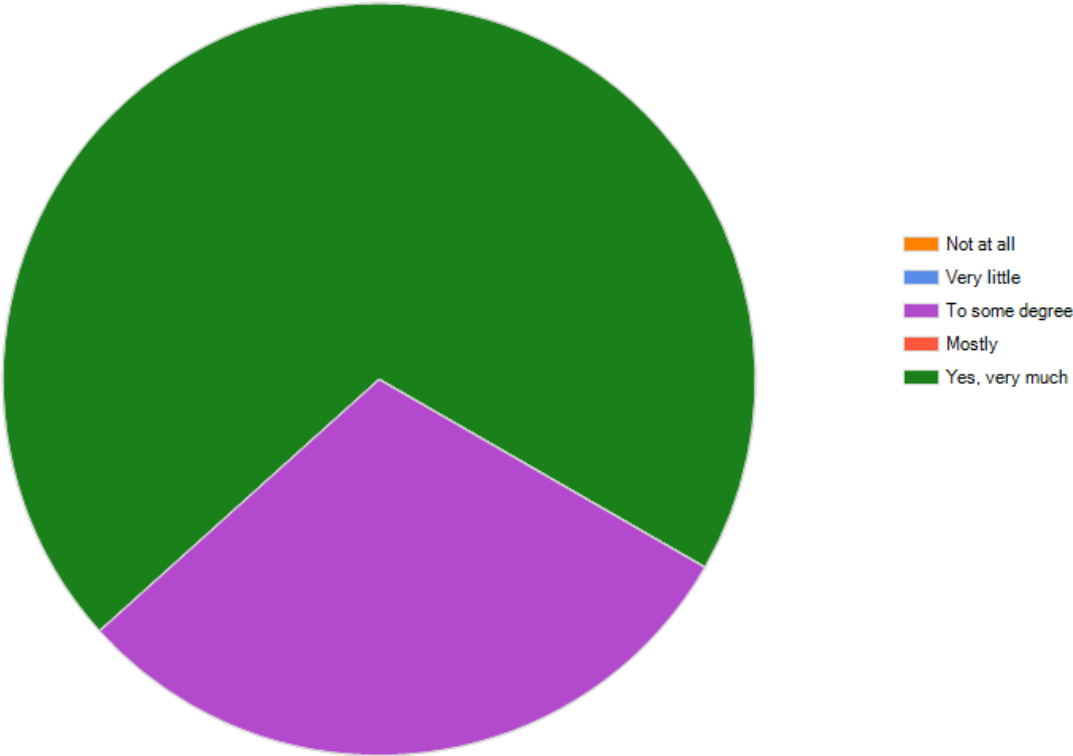
The survey feedback was mainly positive about the online learning experience. The feedback for improvement centered on clearer, more robust feedback and use of rubrics – how the student will be graded – setting expectations and then providing clear feedback to guide the learning experience.

Author Bios

Contact Information:

Dr. Farhang Mossavar-Rahmani

Professor – School of Business and Management – National University

National University   La Jolla, CA 92037 USA

fmossava@nu.edu

Over 30 years experience, Dr. Mossavar is a Professor in the School of Business and Management at National University since 1998, prior as an adjunct from 1986 to 1998. He has taught more than 260 courses in various areas of finance and economics. He has served as a financial consultant, most of them are from small businesses that are interested in expanding, restructuring, fundraising or going international. Has started and ran many successful businesses (insurance, import-export, currency exchanges). He's well published in the areas on finance, marketing, and a growing area of expertise online learning curriculum development, teaching and research.

Dr. Cynthia Larson-Daugherty

President, Spectrum Pacific Learning Company

Adjunct – National University La Jolla, CA 92037 USA

clarson@spectrumpacific.com

Dr. Larson offers 18 years combined experience in both corporate and academic environments with an emphasis in integrating employee learning and development, organizational change and technology. She has a Doctorate in Educatin from The George Washington University, Master of Arts in Liberal Studies and Bachelor of Science in Mass Communication both from Towson University. Since 2003, Dr. Larson has overseen all aspects of SPL's daily operations. SPL focuses on e-learning solutions and services, provides web solutions and student concierge services. Dr. Larson worked with her team in 2003 to create the effective e-learning model (e2L) which has beocme the benchmark for engaging and effective online learning development and delivery. Prior to joining the National University System, Dr. Larson worked for the Federal Reserve Bank , Chevy Chase Bank, and has also consulted in commercial banking, manufacturing, retail, construction and development, healthcare, and electronics distribution.