Engaging Students in the On-Line Discussions in Hybrid Writing Classes

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Abstract
The purpose in this paper is to share the author's strategies to increase students' engagement in the on-line discussions of several hybrid writing classes at the University of Maryland Global Campus (UMGC). In regards of the purpose, the paper addresses the following areas: 1. building a classroom community, 2. identifying and correcting writing problems, and 3. building content. The paper concludes that students' engagement in online discussions can be increased if students understand the purpose of discussions, are provided with the standards for discussion posts and responses, only get credit for discussion participation if they revise, edit and proofread their posts, as needed, based on the instructor's feedback, and have enough in-class time to work on corrections.

Keywords: on-line discussions, hybrid classes, writing

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Introduction

Hybrid classes are a combination of face-to-face and online instruction, with 30% to 79% of teaching taking place outside of the classroom (Allen, Seaman, & Garrett, 2007). Hybrid learning aims to combine the features of face-to-face and online instruction; while the former provides social interaction, the latter offers flexibility in time and location and reduces the cost.

The share of students who take hybrid classes is growing. According to the report from the Education Department's National Center for Education Statistics, published in January 2019, the number of students who took hybrid classes in the United States grew from 16.4 percent in 2016 to 17.6 percent in 2017 (Lederman, 2018). According to the 2019 On-Line Education Trends Report, an increasing number of students prefer a live, scheduled component in their on-line courses: the growth from 56% of all respondents in 2016 to 60% of all respondents in 2019 (Venable, 2019). Interestingly, students who reported dissatisfaction with taking only on-line courses listed "lack or community and/or interaction with professors and classmates" as one of their concerns (16% in 2017 and 17% in 2018) (Venable, 2019, n.p.).

Asynchronous discussion boards are widely used in higher education settings and can provide several educational benefits for students. One such benefit is that in online forums all students, even those who tend to remain silent in face-to-face discussions, can participate at their own pace, which leads to more interaction with the class than in entirely face-to-face courses. For these reasons, some instructors use online discussion groups in addition to or even in place of face-to-face discussions (Rothgeb, 2018). Besides discussions, forums can be used for social purposes, made into a space for questions and answers, or turned into a platform for figuring out the processes in a collaborative project (Marbouti & Friend Wise, 2016).

However, despite the promise of discussion boards, there is substantial evidence that students do not use online discussions with the richness expected and desired. The lack of engagement in asynchronous forums is seen as a ubiquitous phenomenon; researchers also note low participation and disinterested and shallow comments (Ding, Kim, & Orey, 2017). The main concern is the phenomenon of lurking (Cesareni, Cacciamani, & Fujita, 2016) which is either not posting at all or posting simple or disjointed comments which contribute little to communication and new knowledge. One approach to dealing with lurking is "to emphasize quality and thoughtfulness of responses over quantity and frequency. Another [approach] puts the instructor in the driver's seat, steering conversations to sharper insights as they might from the front of a classroom" (Lederman, 2018, n.p.). Still other researchers introduce roles, such as "proponent" or "critic" (Cesareni, Cacciamani, & Fujita, 2016).

The purpose in this paper is to share one approach to increasing students' engagement in the on-line discussions of several writing classes at University of Maryland Global Campus (UMGC).

In regards of the purpose, the three main areas will be addressed:
1. building a classroom community through sharing experiences and opinions,
2. identifying and correcting writing problems, and
3. building content.

UMGC is a public university with a 100 percent acceptance for undergraduates. It focuses on online education primarily for working adults, with the median age around 30-35, as well as military service members and their families. The main campus is in Largo, Maryland, and satellite campuses are throughout Maryland, in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. The current total enrollment is over 91,000 students, with minority students constituting around 65 per cent (Fact Book, 2019).

The context of this study are four classes that provide writing instruction at Asia Division of UMGC in Okinawa, Japan Academic Writing I (WRTG 111), Academic Writing II (WRTG 112), Advanced Technical Writing (WRTG 393), and Composition and Literature (ENG 102). WRTG 111 and WRTG 112 fulfil the general education requirement in communication; WRTG 393 is one of the required classes in upper-level advanced writing; and ENG 102 fulfills the general education requirements in communications or arts and humanities. The total enrollment in these classes from August 2019[1] to the present was about 100 students. All these classes included on-line discussions as part of their syllabi, typically two discussions per week. All the student work used in this paper was obtained with the permissions of the students who filled out an Informed Consent form.

Results and Discussion

When introducing students to the on-line discussions, it is important to explain the discussions' purpose, such as the following:
1. building a classroom community,
2. identifying and correcting writing problems, and
3. building the content.

Below is an explanation of some strategies used to engage students in achieving the three purposes.

1. Building a classroom community through sharing experiences and opinions. To engage students in this process, discussions are brought closer to students' experiences and left open-ended. Below is an example of such prompt:

What topic are your considering for your first project? Why are you interested in this topic? What is your familiarity and personal experience with this topic?

2. Diagnosing writing problems and modeling corrections. To increase students' interest in this grammar-based activity, it is recommended to use students' own writing for modeling and correcting. Also, to avoid overwhelming students with grammar rules, it is better to stay focused on one or two problems at a time.

For example, a blanket in-class overview of the writing issues can be provided in the face-to face section of a hybrid class, focusing on one or two problems at a time. This blanket overview typically takes form of a "proofreading session. The assignment may look like this:

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[1] August 2019 is when the author started working at UMGC as full-time Collegiate Faculty.

1. Please proofread your own paragraph [a paragraph selected from a previous discussion].
2. Next, proofread your partner's paragraph [a paragraph selected from a previous discussion].
3. Compare notes.
4. Finalize proofreading your own paragraph and post it under Discussion 1 in Week 7.

Giving corrective feedback on writing is a controversial issue. Some researchers tend to view grammar correction negatively as generally ineffective for students and too time-consuming for teachers (Isnawati, Sulistyo, Widiati, & Surya, 2019). Others, on the contrary, stress the importance of corrective feedback for students' improvement. For example, Chandler's (2003) study "demonstrates that students in experimental group who did error correction made significant improvement in accuracy within 10 weeks compared to control group who did not do error correction" (as cited in Isnawati, Sulistyo, Widiati, & Surya, 2019, p. 671). The author of the present paper has empirically seen that students' motivation increases, often drastically, when they see tangible improvement in their writing after the "proofreading sessions" described above.

3. Building content. To stimulate students to build content, it is preferable to allow students choose their own topics. Topics which are close to students' experiences make research intellectually stimulating. More abstract content can be introduced in relation to pragmatic topics. For example, the prompt, *Is writing grammatically correctly still important?* can lead to an introduction of such concepts as prescriptivist and descriptivist linguistics and grammar as a social norm.

Conclusion

The median age of the students discussed in this study is around 30 year old, which is consistent with the median age of students at UMGC. According to the situated learning theory, the older students are more able than their younger counterparts to contextualize knowledge in their experience, and, therefore, they may be "more likely to learn more through social interaction in the message boards" (DiBiase & Kidwai, 2010, p. 321).

The situated learning theory "advocates learner's control (at the very least, substantial input) over not only the objectives but also the learning strategies as well as evaluation procedures" (as quoted in DiBiase & Kidwai, 2010, p. 321). Viewed from this point, discussion boards could serve as platforms for determining the objectives most suitable for learners' purposes, deciding on the content and form of assignments, and peer- and group-evaluating. In the writing classes discussed in this paper, the online discussions are used for peer- and self-evaluation (editing and proofreading). Revising, editing and proofreading are typically done in class, with enough time allotted for the purpose. As Gibbs (1999) stated, "… planning a course so that students spend enough time tackling the necessary learning activities is one of the most important things teacher can do" (as quoted inDiBiase & Kidwai, 2010, pg. 322). In view of this statement, all the writing classes discussed above are run as workshops rather than lectures.

Students' engagement in online discussions in hybrid writing classes can be increased if students understand the purpose of discussions, are provided with the standards for discussion posts and responses, only get credit if they revise, edit and proofread their posts, as needed, based on the instructor's feedback, and have enough in-class time to work on corrections.

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