Discussing philosophy in online courses: A comparison of technologies

This study examines the impact of varying technologies on the engagement of students in online discussions. A fundamental mode of teaching and learning philosophy has been the ability for interlocutors to discuss the material. Generally, philosophy classrooms (both brick and mortar as well as digital and hybrid) utilize a pedagogical method consisting of reading primary texts and then discussing the reading as a group, bringing forth passages that are unclear and questions that follow from the readings. Popularly known as the Socratic Method, this can be an effective mode of engaging students when face-to-face. However, it is not clear nor should it be assumed that interpersonal discussion of this sorts has a direct analog in digital pedagogy. Popular learning management systems provide discussion modules that generally ask the instructor to pose a prompt and then students "discuss" the prompt asynchronously by replying to their peers. This study focuses on the use of a novel discussion method, namely the use of Google Documents and its shared access feature, to better emulate the positive features of face-to-face dialogue.

Research Question

Is there a difference in student engagement between the use of traditional discussion board modules and Google Documents-based discussion modules?

Literature Review

This study takes as a starting position the view that the role of discussion in philosophy teaching is a benefit to the curriculum. It is plausible that there are other pedagogical methods that do not require discussion, yet the preponderance of it as a method should prompt us to consider its viability in digital forums. For example, the popular philosophy teaching blog *In Socrates' Wake*, admits that "…philosophy is a discursive inquiry, so how could students *possibly* become skilled at it without discussing philosophical positions and arguments?" (italics added).[1] Indeed, if philosophy is fundamentally discursive then it is a priori impossible to be skilled without discursive methods. The blog continues praising discussion as helping students master content, learn from each other, master disciplinary jargon, connect their own interests to course content, and provide common vocabularies with their peers. This last point, especially, is echoed by Kayler and Weller (2007), recognizing that "online communities offer students opportunities to practice newly acquired language in a supportive environment" (144)[2]. Hara et al. (2000) further recognize that online discussion provides opportunities to provide peer feedback and engage in group learning by scaffolding their learning from each other's understanding.[3] Instrumentally, of course, engaging in online discussion (beyond the philosophy curriculum) is becoming a standard method of communication in the digital age. Perhaps secondary – or even tertiary – to the benefits of online pedagogy are the opportunities for students to practice discursive methods that can be employed in their own, technology-driven, lives.

However, it is not clear that the discussion board modules provided by popular learning management systems are sufficient to recognize these benefits. Gulati (2004) takes this point up in earnest,

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[1] http://insocrateswake.blogspot.com/2012/07/the-points-of-getting-students-to-talk.html

[2] Kayler, M., & Weller, K. (2007). Pedagogy, self-assessment, and online discussion groups. *Journal of Educational Technology & Society*, *10*(1).

[3] Hara, N., Bonk, C. J., & Angeli, C. (2000). Content analysis of online discussion in an applied educational psychology course. *Instructional science*, *28*(2), 115-152.

suggesting that the informality of online classrooms provides a distinctly different set of obstacles to learning that are differently managed in more formal, brick and mortar, spaces.[4] Gulati's recognition of informality recommends that online instructors admit that:

> "online discussion is not a neutral experience…there needs to [be] an acknowledgment that some individuals may be learning informally and silently…[and that we] need to enable informal and trustworthy learning spaces, where learners feel confident and supported in working on their own and with each other"

Does that standard discussion module do this? Hammond's (2005) review of literature regarding asynchronous online discussion provides evidence that we either do not yet know or that we minimally know that the results are so varied we cannot confidently assume an answer.[5] For example, Hammond describes that "A learner's willingness to engage with other learners [in asynchronous discussion] was seen as related to preferred learning style, confidence and self-esteem, cultural background, and linguistic ability" (17). Hammond's review shows that high context learners and auditory learners will be disadvantaged, intuitive learners may not engage in discussion, that some "would find this kind of disclosure too threatening" (17), while others self-esteems were boosted. Some researchers found that confidence was boosted after having participate in discussion, while others found that gender hierarchies could pose impediments to discussion. It is not my aim to suggest that face-to-face discussion is not faced with these sorts of ambiguities, nor that there is a technological panacea to them in online discursive spaces. These literatures only show that the ideal of discussion faces many obstacles in being realized in asynchronous discussion modules. How, then, can we develop online discursive spaces that help to realize the ideal while minimizing the risks? This question guides this proposal, prompting the creative use of existing technologies to develop varying discursive spaces that may better realize the benefits of online discussion.

Methods

In order to compare the relative benefits and drawbacks of varying discussion modules, it is necessary to administer at least two treatments. The course that this will be done in is an online philosophy course – environmental ethics – to be taught by the author. The enrolled students are required to participate in both asynchronous discussions with the whole class as well as synchronous discussions with smaller groups utilizing Google Documents. Google Documents allow the participants to see, in real-time, their interlocutor's comments in a format that more reflects the informality of a face-to-face discussion. The avatar that commenters sign in with provides a visual cue of the person they are discussing with – an aspect missing from traditional discussion modules. As well, the informality of the discussion may provide a stream of consciousness that allows questions and puzzling passages to emerge organically through discussion that learners may not feel comfortable formally posting in traditional modules. However, the students will also be required to participate in traditional discussions with the whole class.

Constraints

Although the treatments are considerably varied in both the content requirements (i.e. the participants are prompted differently in both spaces) and in audience (the whole class versus smaller groups), having

[4] Gulati, S. (2004). Constructivism and emerging online learning pedagogy: A discussion for formal to acknowledge and promote the informal.

[5] Hammond, M. (2005). A review of recent papers on online discussion in teaching and learning in higher education. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, *9*(3), 9-23.

the same students participate in both forums allows me to understand difference in engagement. It is plausible that the engagement in one space has distinct variance from the engagement in the other space, suggesting at a minimum that the goals of discussion may be better attained through one method or the other.

The students are self-selected as they enroll in the class on their own accord. As this class is an upper-level course, students are expected to have developed some philosophical methods prior to enrollment. Furthermore, the course is being offered as an intensive summer course, further self-selecting students that are perhaps more studious or motivated to complete coursework. Thus, the results of the study are highly circumscribed by the student-participants. However, given that the same students are participating in both venues, it is possible that any difference in engagement is not due to these factors – it is due instead to the technological mechanism.

Evaluating the results of the varying discussions will be highly dependent on the proclivities of the instructor (the author). How should we measure engagement? Is quantity (both of texts and of time) sufficient? Should the quality of the discussion be considered and how can it be gauged with the recognition that what might be quality the students is not quality according the instructor's expectations? These are valid questions and ones that must be reflected on before evaluating the results. Further literature reviews may unearth resources that can be utilized to better recognize the precise articulations of these questions.

Results

If there is a distinct difference between the engagement of students in the two discussion venues, then we can start understanding these venues encourage or discourage certain online objectives. For example, if the synchronous discussion (Google Documents) provides more in-depth yet wandering conversation, we may be able to conclude that if an instructor wishes to foster informal, constructionist oriented discussion, then synchronous forums can be useful tools. If the engagement between the two venues is similar in relevant aspects, then we may conclude that obstacles to online discussion occur at deeper levels that are not necessarily overcome by technological variance.