

## Forums and Assessment in Online Learning

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In designing an online course, one has to be mindful of several factors. The online student is not in contact with the lecturer in a physical way. With this concept, the thinkers in the field no longer embrace the term *lecturer* to describe the role being played by the person offering the course because the technology is now the medium through which the content is presented. So the *facilitator*, once called lecturer, has to ensure that the student learns what is needed through their guidance and use of technology. The design of the online course has to be closely aligned with the learning principles and practices in the field of education. Such a design should cause meaningful learning to happen and enhance student engagement and knowledge building. It is true that online course design comes with great challenges, but all can be overcome through proper planning and employment of online learning tools.

Online learning does not seek to replicate face-to-face lectures, which in themselves can be grossly inadequate to meet the unique needs of each learner. Some aspects of the classroom delivery will never happen in online delivery. For example, student will not be subjected to didactic teaching and lengthy lectures. Online learning is flexible, interactive, engaging, gives opportunity for problem-solving and knowledge building. Dewey's inquiry-based education, Piaget's constructivism, Vygotsky's social constructivism, Bruner's discovery learning and Pask's conversation theory are some of the principles that guide the design of online learning. It is possible for deep learning to happen in online studies.

This paper seeks to answer the questions: How many forums should be on an online course<sup>1</sup>? How many pieces of assessment should each online module carry? Should online learners be given more pieces of assessment than face-to-face students?

### Online Discussion Forums

A forum is a software programme that permits you to post messages online and allows others to reply to your posting with one of their own (Ko & Rossen, 2004). A forum can contribute significantly to successful communication and community building in an online environment. You can use forums for many innovative purposes in educational settings, but teaching forums and student forums are arguably the two more significant distinctions (Moodle.org, 2018). The purpose of forums in an online course is to generate social presence, a community of enquiry and cognitive presence. Forums can range from simple to complex, that is, they may be used for introductions and expectations of instructor and students, for posting position papers or for dissecting a concept or theory. Generally, a forum is used to facilitate discussion. Students get a sense of belonging when they are able to meet and greet classmates and instructors at the start

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<sup>1</sup> Used interchangeably with "module" to refer to a number of lectures or other matter dealing with a subject (Merriam Webster, 2016)

of the module. Forums serve to enhance the social presence online. Online learning can be a lonely place and so the design of an online module must facilitate social interactions. Some students learn best in groups, others are comfortable learning on their own. It must be noted here, that online course designers pay keen attention to the profile of the learner which includes learning styles. Thomas and Herbert (2014) expounded that the key is to design a learning environment with multiple layers for engagement and participation where learners can choose their level of interaction with others. Gaytan & McEwen (2007) indicated that from a study conducted among faculty and students, effective assessment techniques include projects, portfolios, self-assessments, peer evaluations, weekly assignments with immediate feedback, timed tests and quizzes, and asynchronous type of communication using the discussion board.

### **Online Assessment**

The online student should never be viewed with any level of suspicion for getting 'off the hook' with the kinds and the validity of assessment given to him. The important factor is well-designed assessment by the facilitator and instructional designer. The online student should never be penalized with excess assessment pieces simply because he is engaged in online study. The keys to valid online assessment is the kinds of assessment selected for the particular learning outcome and the kinds of security put in place to detect academic dishonesty. Gaytan & McEwen (2007) asserted that online assessment should be viewed as a system for educating students and evaluating student academic achievement.

*Kinds of assessments.* It is expected that formative and summative assessments be used when designing the online module. Formative assessments given throughout the module will help the instructor determine the pattern, flow or language signature of the individual student submission. This means then, that some pieces of assessment will be for metacognition purposes, for practice, for interaction with the content, for retention, for transfer and for reinforcement. Summative assessments may be targeted as those that will be graded, although some formative ones can be assigned grades. Also the pedagogical principle of scaffolding where instructors model or demonstrate how to solve a problem, and then step back, offering support as needed (Study.com, 2017) is a good way to approach online assessment. So, self-check exercises, quizzes, workshops, discussion forum posts, wikis, journals and presentations will serve well. Authentic assessments are the perfect fit for the online learner, that is, he is to be given real-life problems that will be solved using his unique circumstances or situations of living. This can include the opportunity for the student to create culturally, politically and socially influenced solutions to scenario-based, problem-based or project-based questions.

*Confronting academic dishonesty online.* One of the reasons why some educators are apprehensive about online assessment is the argument of academic dishonesty. Note however, that regardless of the modality, most educators can attest to the fact that academic dishonesty is prevalent and persistent among learners. Cheating, for some institutions, represents a "crisis on campus" (Burke, Polimeni, & Slavin, 2007, p. 55) and the "most commonly reported challenge in online

assessment” (Hollister & Berenson, 2009, p. 272), is “reaching virtually pandemic proportions” (Bing et al., 2011, p. 28). While this is true, and online learning is rapidly growing and its scale and scope complicates circumstances, students who are on the physical campus are also improving their cheating strategies exponentially. The traditional classroom leaders must continue to employ the most appropriate strategies to curtail cheating among students. I suggest that for the online environment, the answer is to use the technology to detect and deter actions of academic dishonesty. So, several layers of checks and verifications need to be implemented for proctoring. Some examples are biometrics - finger prints and facial recognition (Sullivan, 2016); 360° room scan, captcha, electronic signature, browser lock and video proctoring. The security features must however, be accompanied by excellent assessment designs which should include a method to determine the pattern, flow or language signature of the individual student response.

## **Discussions**

Whether physically or on online, students in a class are to be engaged in discussion and information sharing. Adult learners bring experience to their learning situation and should be given the opportunity to collaborate and share. Forums online provide such opportunities. Copiously described, a forum is like a big melting pot of thoughts and ideas prepared under the guidance of the subject matter expert. Discussion forums provide the opportunities for high level thinking, research, application and expression. Forums are more than a replica of what happens in the face-to-face setting. They are superior to the classroom discussions and students are rewarded for their submissions, when facilitator assigns a grade or when facilitators and peers comment. Facilitators have the opportunity to join and respond to the discussions, providing valuable feedback. Most importantly, the forum posts remain visible and accessible to students for the duration of the course.

So, how many forums should be placed on a module? This depends on the kinds of responses expected in the forums. How much time will it take for the student to prepare a response for submission? How detailed is the response expected to be? How many responses to the replies are expected to be done by the student? What domain of objective is the discussion satisfying? Weekly forums might be too demanding on the student’s time. A careful balance must be achieved through the course since there are several other activities that may be used online to generate collaboration and interactivity. I agree with Thomas & Herbert (2014) and so posit that it will be important for learning to be designed using a variety of methods so that each student can be fully engaged. Thus, the avenue must be created for those who need that social presence in order to debug and assimilate content.

How many pieces of assessment should each online module carry? There is no set number of assessment pieces that can be prescribed for a module. Should online learners be given more pieces of assessment than face-to-face students? The number of assessment pieces should be prescribed out of careful planning and designing with the focus of allowing the student to

engage in assessment for learning while enabling the facilitator to determine the authenticity of the student response. Technology driven security and proctoring tools should be used to accompany the graded assessments. The facilitator along with the instructional designer, should carefully design authentic assessments and determine the number of pieces that would allow the student to comfortably achieve the learning objectives.

There is no number attached to forums and pieces of assessments, neither is there a formula to calculate and achieve a set number. These activities used in the online mode of delivery depend on expected learning outcomes, objective domain, student workload, the need for social presence, the need for interacting with the content, the need for practice, reinforcement, retention and transfer and the nature of the assessment. A module may have one project-based assessment that lasts throughout the duration of the course but has several deliverables including group work.

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