



Students' Perceptions of the Use of Discussion Forums in Learning English Literature

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I INTRODUCTION

Online discussion forums, the most commonly used tool in online environments, play a significant role in online teaching and learning. A primary reason for its wide use is its asynchronous nature that affords opportunity for learners to interact with peers and their tutor or facilitator and to share knowledge (Nandi *et al.*, 2009). Discussion forums (DFs) are said to promote collaboration and learner autonomy, to give opportunity for learners to reflect and research prior to responding to comments made by peers, and to allow for construction of experiences and knowledge as they engage with the subject matter (Al-Shalchi, 2009).

Research in the use of DFs in English language teaching and learning shows that they provide a suitable platform to enable tutors to make available learning resources, conduct activities, conduct research and give feedback that aid in developing a variety of language skills (Connell, 1998). Also, participation in DFs are said to increase the language learners' collaborative and communicative skills (Krish, 2011).

Despite the success of DFs in the educational environment, several negative factors impact on its use. Mokoena (2013) points out, "discussion forums are powerful tools, but only if students engage in it" (p. 97). Additionally, studies in the use of DFs reveal that student perceptions are closely linked with the success of

interaction that takes place, and therefore suggest that use of DFs in the teaching / learning contexts should be regularly studied and evaluated, to ensure the success of a teaching programme (Nandi *et al.*, 2009).

While research locally and internationally has been conducted in the use of technologies in teaching English literature; use of desktop video conferencing (DVC) (Pullenayegem, 2012), CD/DVDs and YouTube videos (Barad, 2009) there appears to be a dearth of research that focuses on the use of online DFs for teaching English literature. Since student participation is imperative for learning to take place and for the success of the course through this medium, it is essential that learner perceptions be considered in teaching English literature as well. This research focuses on the Drama and *Poetry* Course of the Diploma in English and English Language Teaching offered by the Department of Language Studies of the Open University of Sri Lanka, and examines learner perceptions of the use of online discussion forums to teach and learn English Literature, particularly Poetry.

1.1 Research Questions

The main research question of this study is: What are learner perceptions on using discussion forums in the online



component of the Poetry and Drama Course?

The specific questions are:

1. What are the learners' perceptions of the nature of their postings to the discussion forums?
2. What are the learners' views on the extent of participation in the forums?
3. What are the learners' perceived benefits in participating in the discussion forums?
4. What are the problems encountered when participating in the discussion forums?

1.2 The Context of the Study

The Drama and *Poetry* course of the Diploma in English was offered in a multimode format with face-to-face (f-2-f) day school sessions, use of print materials, with a six-week online component which consisted of the works of the poet John Keats, and was conducted using the Learning Management System (LMS) Moodle. Course content was delivered primarily using DFs commencing with a forum for self-introductions, followed by a forum discussing literary aspects of the Ode, a poetic form. Three forums followed that engaged learners in a discussion thread prompted by questions posed by the tutor focusing on selected aspects of each poem. Assessment was based on participation and contribution to all five discussion forums, three quizzes, as well as an essay submission.

Sixty (60) students registered for the course, with each forum discussion composed of three groups of 20 members who were required to engage in discussion only within their assigned group. To encourage sharing and learning, restrictions were not placed on viewing the comments and contributions of other groups. Each group was assigned a different aspect of three chosen poems. Group members were required to post their own comments on the poems as well

as comment on their peers' comments, thus contributing to the construction of knowledge. The tutor served as facilitator.

2 METHODOLOGY

An exploratory design method was adopted. Data were collected primarily through a questionnaire consisting of seven questions, five closed questions, and two open-ended questions, to ascertain the views of the students on the following aspects of their participation in the discussion forums: (1) the nature of their postings, (2) the extent of participation, (3) the perceived benefits derived through interaction, (4) the perceived benefits derived from course content, and (5) the problems encountered in engaging in the discussion forums.

The responses to the questionnaire and selected online course data were triangulated. The questionnaire was administered to 55 of the 60 who registered. Fifty-five participated in the discussion forums of which (n=46) responded, achieving a response rate of 84%.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 shows, a majority (69.56%) of students felt that the DFs gave them opportunity to share personal opinions and comments raised by group members. These positive responses support the findings that engagement in DFs gives opportunity to share and construct knowledge. However, only 13.04% participants requested clarification of comments made by others. Possible reasons for not asking for clarifications can be attributed to factors such as lack of confidence in topic, lack of time, and shyness.

Table 2 presents students' perceptions of their participation in the individual forums. Forum - 1 had the largest percentage of participants (80.43%), confirmed by online log-in frequencies;



2017. This could be attributed to Forum 1 being least demanding that required students to introduce themselves and welcome their peers. Forum – 4 had the least (63.04%), attested to by online log-in frequencies; (963). Reasons for this could be that the content of the poem under discussion was more challenging and required more in-depth analysis than the other poems, as well as the time factor that appeared to impinge on this.

Online data records of Forums – 2, 3, 4 and 5 indicate that the learners viewed these forum discussions as important; the primary means by which the content of the syllabus was delivered and discussed. Furthermore, allocation of marks which accrued to the Continuous Assessment Mark could be another reason for active participation. The percentage of participants that had read the posts but not participated in the discussion was 10.87%. This is not uncommon among online learners, who are identified as lurkers.

Table 1: Students’ perceptions toward the nature of their postings

	Yes		No		No Response	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
(b) I shared my personal opinion on comments and issues raised by my group members	32	69.56	1	2.17	13	28.26
(a) I asked questions about something that was not Clear	06	13.04	1	2.17	39	84.79

Table 2: Participation in the discussion forums

Online Participation		Yes		No		No Response		Online log-ins
Statement	Forum	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.
(a) I read the posts and participated in the discussion forums	1. Let’s introduce ourselves	37	80.43	-	-	09	19.56	2017
	2. Introduction to the Ode	34	73.91	01	2.17	11	23.91	1786
	3. Ode to a Nightingale	36	78.26	01	2.17	09	19.56	1461
	4. Ode on a Grecian Urn	29	63.04	01	2.17	16	34.78	963
	5. Ode to Autumn	30	65.21	01	2.17	15	32.61	1010
(b) I read the posts but did not participate in the forums		05	10.87	-	-	41	89.13	-

Question 3; on student perceptions of the benefits from interaction with peers at DFs show that the majority (86.96%) viewed DFs as enabling them to interact with their peers in sharing knowledge and ideas, which could be attributed to the opportunity afforded to participants to gain an in-depth understanding, from

diverse perspectives offered from additional research. The second highest majority (78.26%), viewed the DFs as enabling introverts to freely express their views, followed by a lesser majority (54.35%) who viewed the use of DFs as promoting social interaction, indicating that social engagement is viewed as less



important than increasing knowledge of content. Discussion forums as a means of providing opportunity for participants to freely seek clarification on unclear aspects was 65.22%, suggesting that some students lack confidence, or are ill-prepared to participate meaningfully in the discussions. Response to DFs being useful in motivating greater engagement in course content was 65.22%. The least positive responses (36.96%) were on whether DFs increased teaching and learning more than f-2-f. The evident reason for data results, on motivation benefits, and teaching and learning benefits, is student preference for f-2-f sessions above online DFs, as is observed in the following comment: *“I personally feel that the online forum is not as effective as a face-to-face session where arguments can be settled instantly, whereas in a forum you have to wait for a response and logging in is the most difficult procedure due to slow connectivity and buffering”* – (SS-9).

Question 4 sought students’ views on benefits derived from course content. The majority (78.27%) viewed the DFs as contributing positively to engagement with the content of the course. Next, 67.40% agreed they gained greater confidence in expressing views on literary topics, and 67.39%, agreed that it helped in developing their ability to critically evaluate their peers’ comments, and 65.21% concurred that it enhanced their written responses to literary texts.

The final question was on problems students faced in engaging in the discussion forums. The time factor and tight schedule were listed as greatest drawbacks, followed by slow internet connectivity; substantiated by this comment: *“It was very difficult to connect to the forum. It took a long time to connect and time got wasted since the platform was extremely slow”* (SS-14). A percentage of (36.96%) indicated that they lacked access to a computer and the Internet as is observed in the comment

made by this student: *“Madam, since I live in a very remote area in Wilgamuwa. I could not actively participate [in] this. I don’t have the access to the internet in my area”* (SS-17).

These comments give greater insight into some of the reasons for non-participation as well as negative views of the use of the online discussion forum as a tool in teaching and learning English literature.

4 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings indicate that the use of the discussion forums in teaching and learning English literature, particularly poetry, is viewed positively by the learners. Allocation of marks for participation and engagement contributed significantly to increase student participation. Yet, some favour f-2-f learning above online learning due to the prevailing teaching and learning culture.

Also, the time factor which impinged on learner engagement in discussion forums is a perennial challenge faced by online learners. Therefore, online course design should take into consideration the culture of the learners, and appropriate prior preparatory training is needed on pedagogical and technological aspects of working in an online environment, to enable them to recognize its benefits in enhancing f-2-f learning, as well as to equip them to face challenges encountered in discussion forums.

Unsatisfactory internet connectivity due to poor server performance is another contributory factor that can be improved by upgrading the present Learning Management System. Future studies may look into the role of tutors in promoting social learning and learner motivation in conducting online discussion forums in the other genres of literature.



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