A Student's Proposal for Using
an Online Chat Room to Facilitate Student Discussion

In the age of computers and the internet, we find our students teaching us about new ways to use technology to promote learning. As part of his work with our Center, Renyan (John) Zhang, an undergraduate at UCLA, worked up the following proposal about using a chat room to engage students who are reluctant to participate in classroom discussions.

Background to the Proposal

As any teacher will likely agree, students' participation in classroom discussion is vital to good learning. The literature supports this. Research has shown that classroom discussion promotes the understanding of material and facilitates the learning process of individuals and the class as a whole. And it can be a good indicator of student motivation.

At the same time, encouraging all students to participate in discussion is an ongoing challenge, especially with students who are reluctant to engage. Such students may not engage because they believe they will not do well; others don't value the process; others are simply not interested. The internet provides a relatively new tool for teachers to use in meeting the challenge, especially with students who do not readily join in class discussions.

Proposal

The proposed approach calls for schools to set up multiple online chat rooms for discussions related to various courses. The teacher sets specific times in a week for the whole class to meet up in a real-time online chat room. The chat room interchanges are synchronous, meaning that when a student says something, s/he can receive timely responses from peers.

At the same time, participants in the chat room are anonymous. Every student is given a virtual ID and are asked to keep their online identity secret.

A teacher's job in the chat room is to facilitate the proces (e.g., setting up the chat room, assigning student virtual IDs, establishing guidelines for and continuously encouraging students to participate actively).

Note: At first glance, all this may seem similar to a MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) discussion forum. The difference is that the chat room uses a synchronous platform. The discussion forum of MOOC is an asynchronous environment. Students on a MOOC forum communicate through posts at different times. Real time interactions are essential to the approach proposed here. Another difference is that the discussion forum in a MOOC essentially is tutorial. Participants come to the forum expecting answers from an "expert," not a discussion. Chat room interactions are dominated by peer exchanges; the teacher participates, but only as a facilitator.

Why should it work?

Research emphasizes the usefulness of anonymity and synchronous discussions.

The power of anonymity. Chat room anonymity puts more emphasis on what is being said rather than who is talking. In a traditional classroom discussion, a few students can readily dominate the discussion. Students with dominant status in the peer relationship are more likely to lead the discussion and ignore the comments and input of other students (Kao, 2009). As a result, reluctant and disengaged students remain silent. The anonymity in the chat room alters the social standing among peers and creates a different group dynamic. Also relevant here is that research indicates that "outgoing" students prefer face-to-face communication, "introverts" prefer to communicate via the internet (Blau, 2012).

Serena Yu (2009), an English teacher in a small city in Wisconsin carried out an action research study in which she compared a hybrid anonymous online discussion format with a traditional classroom discussion. The majority of her students rated the online discussion positively, noting that the anonymity made them feel safe and this allowed them to more freely express themselves.

The value of synchronous interchanges. Recent experiments have shown that synchronous discussions induce greater student participation (Duncan, 2012; Hrastinski, 2008; Park, 2007). Hrastinski found "synchronous discussions had higher sentence counts, more dense perceived social networks, and stronger perceived participation. The discussions were more focused on task and social support when compared to asynchronous discussion." One interpretation is that students are more motivated in a synchronous setting (e.g., willing to share their thinking about the materials in a more complex way). Also, stressed is that confidence levels increase with participation, thereby producing the positive outcomes (Meyer, 2006). Another view is that the noted outcomes are the product of changes in group dynamics (e.g., the synchronous discussion is seen as building rapport, social presence and cohesion, solidarity, and a sense of belonging). Still another analysis suggests that the demand characteristics elicit pressure to react to postings.

Concluding Statement

Research has shown that hybrid (online + offline) education works more efficiently than offline education alone. Anonymous synchronous online chat rooms can facilitate disengaged student's participation in discussions related to course content. And the approach not only could benefit such students, but all students. It can play a role in lowering anxiety, enhancing motivation, improving language fluency and academic performance, and increasing media literacy. Moreover, Crozier (2000) reports a "spillover" effect on face-to-face communication and social-emotional development.

A Sample of References Used in Developing this Proposal

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