

# ROLE OF DISCUSSION FORUMS IN ONLINE LEARNING

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**Abstract:** Online learning has given an opportunity to pursue courses offered by universities across the world. Every course of e-learning provides video lectures, exams, assignments and discussion forums to give a feel of classroom teaching to a student who has enrolled at online learning platform. While some courses are instructor-driven with a set deadline, there are other self-paced courses which not only gives instant access to the entire course material but also lets a student set a study time-table to suit his pace and various commitments. Here, the online discussion forums are a means of communicating the course-related topics provided for discussions. The discussion boards or panels (forums), in other words, are a way to connect the student or the candidate to the faculty or instructor. It also encourages the students in a virtual platform to “know each other” as well. The present study aims to understand the significance of Discussion Forum in Online Learning. The objective of the study is to highlight the role of online discussion in e-learning with regard to student participants, their expectations and information sharing. The researcher works on the study using secondary data and explore facts using qualitative research methodology tool of participant observation to become a part of online learning. For the purpose of the present study, the researcher limits to self-paced courses available in the field of creative writing and media. In the field of learning and distance education, online learning is growing with its number of initiatives being offered by world-over universities and government, however, the discussion forums lead an insight into the student identity and expectations.

Keywords: Online learning, Online discussion forum, Self-paced course

## INTRODUCTION

Learning is growing and is a continuous process. With the advent of technological revolution, education facilitating learning is accessible on digital form, as well as from Universities around the world online. The term ‘online’ is defined, by Cambridge online Dictionary, as services, or information that can be bought or used on the internet. Online learning, in other words, is a mode of distance education where the medium used for learning can be a computer or mobile devices (including a mobile phone), which has internet connectivity. Thus, online learning is delivery of instruction to a remote audience using the Web as an intermediary (Khan, 1997).

Online learning, a form of e-learning, has given an opportunity to pursue courses offered by world-wide universities. There are even offers of financial aids or options to take up courses for free without certification. The courses provide video lectures, online exam/quiz, assignments and discussion forum to give a feel of real-classroom teaching to a student who has enrolled at online learning platform.

While some courses are instructor-driven with a set deadline, there are other self-paced courses which not only give instant access to the entire course material but also let a student set a study time-table to suit his/her pace and various commitments.

Since there is no face-to-face communication involved, the online discussion forum is a way to connect the student or the candidate to the faculty or mentor or instructor. It also encourages the students in a virtual platform to “know each other” as well. From participating in subject-related discussions, seeking clarifications and raising complaints to getting introduced, the discussion forum allows any communication, which strictly abides by the guidelines laid by the online courses. It is expected from the students to maintain the code of conduct when they participate in discussions of the course, they have enrolled in.

### Some Definitions:

E-learning is a broader term comprising ‘online learning, virtual learning, distributed learning, networked or web-based learning. As the letter “e” in e-learning stands for the word “electronic”, e-learning would incorporate all educational activities that are carried out by individuals or groups working online or offline, and synchronously or asynchronously via networked or standalone computers and other electronic devices. Individualized self-paced e-learning online refers to situations where an individual learner is accessing learning resources such as a database or course content online via an Intranet or the Internet.’ (Research Paper: Dynamic E-Learning)

Blended learning combines face-to-face “methods with computer-mediated activities to form an integrated instructional approach.” (Pennsylvania State University, 2009, para. 1. website:www.niu.edu).

Blended courses (also known as hybrid or mixed-mode courses) are classes where a portion of the traditional face-to-face instruction is replaced by web-based online learning. (website:blended.online.ucf.edu, 2011)

Self-paced courses do not follow a set schedule. All of the course materials are available as soon as the course starts. Assignments and exams do not have due dates, so one can progress through the course at one’s own speed. Self-paced courses are available to complete for three to 12 months after the course start date. Course end dates are listed under Important Dates in the course. (website:support.edx.org)

Discussion Forum gives one an opportunity to participate in virtual conversations at any time and any location. 'Threaded discussion [Threads]' refers to online discussion postings about a topic. In an online course, one's professor may have weekly discussion assignments. Each week, there are questions for students to answer. Students are asked to post their answer on the Discussion Forum assigned to the week. Students can read the messages and respond to them. This group of messages with the initial message and responses is called a 'thread'. (Website: mxcc.edu)

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Research questions in this study are confined to:

1. Does the online discussion forum help to find the reason for selection of the course?
2. Does the discussion forum provide a base to the identity of the student participants?

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

The researcher (author herself) has made use of Observation method of Participant Observation and documented /collected primary data from the discussion forums of Four self-paced courses available on 'Coursera.org', an online learning platform.

The researcher has undertaken to observe the discussion forum of courses she pursued/pursuing between 2017 to 2019. Since these were self-paced courses, she has still got access to the courses and discussions (except for peer reviews which she had saved during the process of online learning). These courses were selected based on the factors of creative writing and media-related fields that had keywords like "advertising", "poetry", "story", and "branding".

The courses are:

1. Advertising and Society (Duke University). Status: Completed
2. Personal Branding (University of Virginia). Status: Completed
3. Writing for Young Readers: Opening the Treasure Chest (Commonwealth Education Trust). Status: Completed and Certified
4. Sharpened Vision: A Poetry Workshop (California Institute of the Arts). Status: Enrolled

## LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Due to paucity of time, for the present research paper, this researcher has observed the content of discussion forums of the above-mentioned courses only.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Online discussion boards [forum] are often used in traditional courses, hybrid courses, and fully online courses. Online chats and discussions can be particularly useful in fully online courses, as these communication connections are often students' only means of connecting with each other and sharing ideas in an open forum (Stephanie J. Blackmon, 2012).

The purpose of online chats and discussion boards is to provide a way for students to interact and discuss components of the course. Discussion groups allow students to participate actively and interact with students and faculty. As such, they supplement content delivery (Baglione and Nastanski (2007).

Discussion forums can be a powerful medium for online training because they promote interaction between the instructor and learners, and also among learners. They become a valuable platform to share thoughts and ideas. Discussions lead to deeper insights on the subject and help learners uncover new aspects of it (Hema Gopalakrishnan, 2018).

Hema Gopalakrishnan further explains the 'Advantages of Discussion Forums': free exchange of ideas for online learner community. Most of these forums permit learners to start their own message threads or respond to others' posts. This helps in a free exchange of ideas and experiences. Similarly, discussion forums promote a creative spark and make ideas flow. This exchange of ideas is bound to improve the quality of dialogue in the forum and generate new ideas and thoughts. It is also a facilitation of self-learning because they learn how to pose relevant questions and also respond appropriately to their peers. If a learner is stuck or finds it difficult to understand certain parts of a course, he need not wait for the instructor to respond, but can access the responses of his peers for help. The learning process becomes quicker this way. It also promotes multiple discussions at the same time. This helps them enrich their learning and encourages constructive discussions. Such active participation in these forums create user-generated content that can be the fodder for new courses or content for the Learning and Development team.

A number of researchers have investigated online forums as communities of practice, focussing on the ways in which they move their online learner participants from novice to expert status ((Shea & Bidjerano, 2009) as quoted by Jacqueline Aundree Baxter and Jo Haycock, 2014))

According to Justin Johnsen (2014), "in several Coursera classes, including two from Duke University, course instructors and staff have attempted to motivate students to interact in the forums through a participation component to the final grade. In every instance I have observed, this choice resulted in a vocal backlash from some students against the idea. The response at times has been so heated that the

course staff have completely removed the participation requirement, while in other courses the weight of the participation grade has been reduced.”

## OBSERVATION WITH REGARD TO DISCUSSION FORUM

The researcher has considered mainly two threads (topics) of discussion forum - seeking introduction and feedback - such as Giving one's Introduction and Discussions with regard to Weekly assignments. The observations are based on a total of 552 posts on the Discussion Forums, purely purposive in nature.

1. Advertising and Society: Span of Two years - 14 posts  
Discussion forum is not active
2. Personal Branding: Less than Two years - 168 posts  
Discussion forum very active
3. Writing for Young Readers: Opening the Treasure Chest: Two years -53 posts  
Discussion forum is fairly active
4. Sharpened Vision: A Poetry Workshop (Ongoing course): Two years - 317 posts  
Discussion forum is extremely active

The creative writing-related courses offer a peer review section. Each week an assignment is given, which is reviewed by peer and the feedback is posted on a one-to-one communication basis. It has been an online interactive platform to fair criticisms, observations and suggestions (as per the community guidelines of the platform).

## QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

The discussion forum fails to give a clear information on the number of students who have enrolled for the course.

Personal details: There is overt and covert information with regard to the posts on the forum.

- a. Age of the students has been arrived at based on the information provided, and in most cases, an assumption dependent on the 'tone of the message' posted on discussion forum. On the basis of observation, the age group of the students can be taken from young adults (18-35 years) to older adults (age older than 55 years).
- b. Education, profession, achievements, and other related background details are assumed and presumed based on the information provided.
- c. Country of the students is mostly answered, with a one percent of the learner going further to give the exact town or city.

The first-time posts of majority of students exude positivity, enthusiasm and reasons for choosing the course.

The vulnerability, insecurity and hopes to gain knowledge and personal well-being are factors that can also be established from the discussion forums.

Ability to express, more than language skills, is the strongest part of every discussion, which in turn reveals the strengths and weaknesses of the student participant.

There is constant support and encouragement given by mentors and fellow students. In very subtle ways, the student is informed about the suggestions to improvement, including syntax and factual errors.

The discussion forum shows anxiety and unhappiness among students where a peer review has not happened at all. Here, peer review is done by fellow students.

Shortcoming: The researcher, while pursuing 'Writing for Young Readers: Opening the Treasure Chest' was faced with a situation with regard to Peer Review. During the Week 3 of the creative writing course, the students were expected to submit the Week 1's assignment in personal voice (point of view: first person, second, person and third person). The researcher submitted the short story in first person (writing in first person account as one sees/observes) since in Week 1, she wrote the story in third person point of view. The peer reviewers were quick to point out that the researcher has not attempted third person angle. Also, one of the two gave a detailed explanation on 'what is third person point of view?'. This led to more discussions, and then researcher had to clarify with personal voice used in the Week 1 assignment. The confusion could have been avoided if it was the same peer who had reviewed Week 1 and Week 4 assignments.

## CONCLUSION AND SCOPE FOR FURTHER STUDY

To sum up, the discussion forums are a convenient mode of connection, provided there is student participation. The identity of the student is totally dependent on the information posted by the learner himself/herself. The reason for enrolling for the course is but, clear and focussed on personal growth. The online platform offers a world of anonymity and freedom of expression that has turned opportune for many learners who are easier to identify from the initials given in the profile. With online courses most of the students impart only a required few information, such as reason for choosing the course and clarification sought if any, they are faced with. Most importantly,

online discussion forums do give an insight into the identity and expectations of students who have participated. The present paper has had a minimalistic view point due to constraints of time. But it leads to scope for further research - in-depth studies and analysis, including participation of Indian student.

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