Online Discussion Forum: A Tool for Effective Student-Teacher Interaction

Alabo H. Biriyai[1], and Emmah V. Thomas*[2]

[1]University of Port Harcourt
[2]Rivers state University of Science &Technology

A R T I C L E   I N F O

Corresponding author: Rivers state University of Science &Technology.
E-mail address: vikae2solo@yahoo.com

A B S T R A C T

The problem of communication between students and teachers in an educational institution is a major concern. This is because some students find it difficult to participate in classroom lectures because of their inability to socialize; also lecturers do not often have enough time to elaborate on the topics they have to teach for a particular class, hence, the decline in students' understanding of a given topic. Computer mediated communication (CMC) brought about the effective use of online forum for communication. This journal highlights the structure and features of an online forum which makes it an effective communication tool between the lecturer and students of an institution.

BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Before the advent of computers and sophisticated information and communication technology equipment, interactions between students and their lecturers in an educational environment was possible only when they come face to face. This sometimes made it difficult for students to give out urgent information to their lecturers that may be useful and that could not be kept until a scheduled period for lectures. Also lecturers on their part may find it difficult to send information to their students either relating to an urgent reschedule of classes or just information that may be benefit the students. The introduction of computer mediated communications (CMC) has brought about new forms of asynchronous discussion, which makes up a significant and very important component in distant interaction.The advent of computer networks and the internet has provided a platform for online communication and interaction among users. Many different types of discussion groups have been created over the years; these are environments which enable people to write, read and share articles, messages, software and other sorts of information[3].

Discussion and learning networks provide opportunities to seek, obtain, and provide information. Relationship that is created among participants in these networks can be formed in a culturally diverse global environment facilitated by its inherent nature of operating across space and time. Many questions about the effectiveness of these discussion and learning networks are raised; some of which are:

(1) Can people effectively share information?

(2) Can they work together in this virtual environment?

(3) Can their interactions result in enhanced understanding and develop insight?

All these questions remain. However, to answer these questions and also to achieve the goals of a discussion and learning network, an online discussion forum is being developed.

ONLINE DISCUSSION FORUM

Online discussion forum (ODF) is a web-based application that brings people together with shared interest and mind-set. The use of online discussion forum (ODF) has emerged as a common tool and an effective way of engaging students outside the classroom[1]. ODF is an e-learning platform that provides students with privilege to post messages to the discussion threads, interact and receive feedback from other students and instructor, and hence create a deeper understanding of the subject matter being discussed. In education, they have been deployed to complement traditional learning techniques such as lectures and tutorials[2]. Online discussion forums (ODFs) harmonize with the educational philosophy that makes communication a necessary tool and fundamental mechanism for effective learning[4]. It was discovered that the interaction of the learners with both human and inanimate objects, and their participation in technology mediated education, were essential for the quality of their learning experience, which can enrich the process of knowledge exchange among participants and has positive effects on the students' performance[10]. Consequently, online discussion forums (ODFs) can be successful in enhancing collaborative learning by attracting students to participate and interact[8].

TRADITIONAL AND ELECTRONIC LEARNING SYSTEMS

Comparison of students in a tourism and leisure management class that were taught with either a traditional or electronic tutorial was made by McDonnel[6]. A tutorial is a period of class outside the 'regular lecture classes' where lecture material is discussed between students and a teacher assistant or a professor. Communication in the electronic tutorial was in an asynchronous manner. No between-group differences were found regarding grades. From his assessment, students seemed to prefer the electronic tutorial due to the flexibility it offered and the fact that a permanent record was available for future reference. A study on the usage of online forum in a graduate science education course showed that students' contribution to a subject under discussion were more detailed and deliberate when interacting online compared to face-to-face interactions[7].

Online forums provide an avenue where class material can be reviewed, discussed and reinforced. The underlying presumption is that knowledge can be constructed by an online asynchronous dialogue of class material. The conversational model of learning – Laurillard[9] – stipulates that it will enhance learning, including increased motivation, engagement, and deeper levels of understanding. Communications technologies – such as online forums – enable students to discuss class material in an asynchronous manner. This communication channel supports discussion outside the classroom and is flexible for students that work full-time. Kanuka and Anderson[5] used a constructivist interaction analysis model to evaluate learning in an online community.

STRUCTURE OF A FORUM

A forum usually consists of a tree-like directory. The top end is the "categories", which represent the relevant topic of discussions. Under the categories are sub-forums and these sub-forums can further have more sub-forums. The *topics* (commonly known as *threads*) come under the lowest level of sub-forums and these are the places under which members can start their discussions or posts. Logically forums are organized into a finite set of generic topics (usually with one main topic) driven and updated by a group known as members, and governed by a group known as moderators. It can also have a graph structure. Therefore, basically a forum is made of the USER GROUPS which are the different users that have access to the forum, the POSTS which are the messages submitted to the forums by the different users, and the THREADS which are topics for which a user can submit a post.

User Groups

Forums that are designed with western style allow visitors and members to be organized and logged in into user groups. Privileges and rights are given based on these groups. Based on criteria set by the administrator, a user of the forum can automatically be promoted to a higher user group, giving him more privileges in the forum. A viewer who does not have some privileges on the forum is said to be viewing in a closed group. He does not have the right to submit messages there, but a moderator will likely have access to more than just posting messages in the forum.

A user of the forum who has not registered on the site is commonly known as a *guest* or *visitor*. Guests are typically granted access to all functions that do not require database alterations or breach privacy. A guest can usually view the contents of the forum or use such features as read marking, but occasionally and administrator will disallow visitors to read their forum as an incentive to become a registered member. A *lurker* is someone that regularly visits the forum, and the habit is referred to as *lurking*. Registered members often will refer to themselves as lurking in a particular location, which is to say they have no intention of participating in that section but enjoy reading the contributions to it.

a) Moderators

The moderators (short singular form: "mod") are users (or employees) of the forum who are granted access to the posts and threads of all members for the purpose of moderating discussion and also keeping the forum clean (neutralizing span and spambotsetc). They also help to control the content of the discussion of members of the forum. Because they have access to all posts and threads in their area of responsibility, it is common for the site owner to promote his friend to a moderator for such a task. Moderators also respond to users' questions about the forum, as well as respond to specific complaints. They also can do anything to lend a helping hand to a user in need. Moderators themselves may have ranks depending on the level of privileges assigned to them. Some may be given mod privileges over only a particular topic or section (called "local"),

while others (called "global" or "super") may be allowed access anywhere. Common privileges that moderators can have include: deleting, merging, moving, and splitting of posts and threads, locking, renaming, stickying of threads, banning, suspending, unsuspending, unbanning, warning the members, or adding, editing, removing the polls of threads.

Essentially, the moderator manages the day-to-day affairs of a forum or board as it applies to the stream of user contributions and interactions. The relative effectiveness of this user management directly impacts the quality of a forum in general, its appeal, and its usefulness as a community of interrelated users. Category of moderators also exist e.g. "Global Moderators" and just "Moderators". Global moderators have the rights to moderate the complete forum while moderators can be assigned only to the sub-forum.

b) Administrator

The *administrators* (or "admin") manage the technical details required for running the site. As such, they may promote (and demote) members to moderators, manage the rules, create sections and sub-sections, as well as perform any database operations (database backup etc.). Administrators often also act as moderators. Administrators may also make forum-wide announcements, or change the appearance (known as the skin) of a forum.

Post

A *post* is a message submitted by a user which is enclosed into a block that contains the date and time that it was submitted. Members of the forum are usually allowed to edit or delete their own posts. Posts are contained in threads, where they appear as boxes one after another. The first post starts the thread; this may be called the TS (thread starter) or OP (original post). Posts that follow in the thread are meant to continue discussion about that post, or respond to other replies; it is not uncommon for discussions to be derailed.

The internal limit of a Post is usually measured in characters. Often one is required to have a message of minimum length of 10 characters. There is always an upper limit but it

is rarely reached – most boards have it at 10,000, 20,000, 30,000 or 50,000 characters.

Most forums keep track of how many posts a certain user has made. This is known as the user's postcount. Users with higher postcounts are often considered more reputable than users with lower postcounts. Some forums have disabled postcounts in the hopes that doing so will reduce the emphasis on quantity over quality of information.

Threads

A *thread* is also known as a *topic*. It is a collection of different posts, usually displayed from oldest to the most recent, though this is subject to review: options for the most recent to the oldest and for a threaded view (a tree-like view applying logical reply structure before chronological order) can be available. A thread is defined by a title, an additional description that may summarize the intended discussion, and an opening or original post (common abbreviation *OP*, which can also mean *original poster*) which opens whatever dialogue or makes whatever announcement the poster wished. A thread can contain any number of posts, including multiple posts from a single poster, even if they are one after the other.

A thread is contained in a forum, and may have an associated date which is taken as the date of the last post (options to order threads by other criteria are generally available). When a member posts in a thread it will go to the top since it is the latest updated thread. This is for threads that are configured to display from most recent to oldest. Similarly, other threads will go in front of it when they receive posts. Threads which are important but rarely receive posts are *sticky*ed (or, in some software, "pinned"). A *sticky thread* will always appear in front of normal threads, often in its own section. A "threaded discussion group" is simply any group of individuals who use a forum for threaded, or asynchronous, discussion purposes. The group may or may not be the only users of the forum.

The popularity of a thread in a forum is measured in the number of reply (total posts minus one, the opening post, in most default forum settings) counts. Some forums also keep track of the number of page views. Threads that meet up to a particular number of posts or views

may receive a designation such as "hot thread" and be displayed with a different icon compared to other threads. This icon may stand out more to emphasize the thread. A '*dead thread*' is used to refer to a thread in which the users have lost interest in[11].

SOME COMMON FEATURES OF FORUM

Some of the common features of forums are discussed below

- **Private message**: A *private message*, or PM for short, is a message sent in private from a member to one or more other members. The ability to send so-called carbon copies is sometimes available. When sending a *carbon copy* (cc), the users to whom the message is sent directly will not be aware of the recipients of the carbon copy or even if one was sent in the first place.
- **Attachments**: An attachment can be almost any file. When a file is being attached to a post they are uploading the file to the forums' server. Forums usually have very strict limit on the type and size of file that can be attached. Attachments can be part of a thread, social group, etc.
- **Emoticons**: An emoticon or *smiley* is a symbol or combination of symbols used to convey emotional content in written or message form. Forums implement a system through which some of the text representations of an emoticons (e.g. xD, :p) are rendered as a small image. Depending on which part of the world the forum's topic originates (since most forums are international) smilies can be replaced by other forms of similar graphics, an example would be kaoani (e.g. *(^O^)*, (^-^)b), or even text between special symbols (e.g. :blink:, :idea:).
- **Poll**: Most forums implement an opinion poll system for threads. Most implementations allow for single-choice or multi-choice (sometimes limited to a certain number) when selecting options as well as private or public display of voters. Polls can be set to expire after a certain date or in some cases after a number of days from its creation. Members vote in a poll and a statistic is displayed graphically[11].

THE SWITCH TO ONLINE DISCUSSION

While we tend to think of discussions as face-to-face activities, online discussions provide benefits sometimes not available in the classroom. For example:

- More students are able to participate in online forums than in large group classroom discussions.
- It provides the platform for students who do not participate during class discussions to become "vocal" during online discussion.
- Online interaction allows for further discussion of a topic. It also provides students with enough time to think and reflect on the course material and hence post more thought-out comments to the discussion board.
- Students and instructors often think of comments or questions after the lecture and can post them and discuss these inquiries online.
- The online environment lets you easily create small discussion groups within a large class.
- The online format is a convenient way to archive and preserve your course discussions.
- Online discussions can give you feedback prior to or after a class; this feedback may indicate what content students understand and what requires further clarification.

With some of the benefits mentioned above, it is imperative that an online forum provides a very conducive environment for teacher-student collaboration. In addition, the attachment feature present in forums will afford lecturers the opportunity to upload files and course materials for their students to download, view and study.

CONCLUSION

With the proliferation of new computer technologies and Information Technology related innovations, learning and interaction of individuals are gradually taking advantage of these technological developments.

Having discussed the structure and some of the features that are present in a forum which makes it a better choice for effective communication among members, it is therefore important that lecturers and students who have regular discussions be advised to take advantage of the flexibility that forums provides. With the introduction of forum for student-lecturer interaction, communication between these groups of people become easier as students will be able to participate in the online discussion and contribute their opinion in any subject matter of their choice without being shy or afraid of making contributions to topics of discussion.

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