International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning

Book Review - Student Participation in Online Discussions: Challenges, Solutions, and Future Research

Barbara Miller Hall

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Découvrir la revue

Citer ce compte rendu

Book Review

Student Participation in Online Discussions: Challenges, Solutions, and Future Research

In *Student Participation in Online Discussions: Challenges, Solutions, and Future Research*, Hew and Cheung offer a comprehensive review of factors influencing the quantity and quality of content in asynchronous threaded discussions.

The book's 10 chapters are well-organized into three sections to lead the reader through a discussion of the role of course-based, online discussions to the potential for future research on the topic. Chapter One offers context for the role of asynchronous discussions, and Chapter Two explores previous empirical research that presents the current state of online discussions. Chapters Three and Four explore strategies and strategy dilemmas, which are those instances in which the research has been particularly inconclusive. Chapters Five through Seven focus on case studies that highlight suggestions for motivating participants, sustaining discussions, and fostering higher levels of knowledge construction. Chapter Eight relates conditions in which students prefer peer versus instructor facilitation, while Chapter Nine examines the use of audio in asynchronous discussions. Chapter Ten suggests future areas of research.

The layout of the book is also useful in guiding the reader through the information presented. The use of frequent headers situates the information within the greater section, chapter, and book as a whole, while also chunking the material into sensible portions for comprehension, reflection, and application. Tables effectively summarize material presented, such as the highly useful Appendix A which summarizes the empirical studies reviewed within the book, including an alphabetical list by author last name(s), year of study publication, method used in study, purpose of study, sample, and data sources analyzed.

Despite its stated purpose "to identify the various reasons or factors leading to limited student contribution in asynchronous online discussion, and to discuss the possible solutions or strategies that may address these limitations" (p. ix), there is an obvious

omission of research and discussion related to the initial design of the discussions. Instead, the book focuses on facilitation strategies, particularly peer facilitation strategies. While this focus is certainly an appropriate and valid approach, the title of the book could have captured this focus with greater clarity.

Another opportunity to expand the discussion is related to artifacts and their situation within an appropriate theoretical framework. While Hew and Cheung mention artifacts as "useful in helping students externalize their current state of knowledge, and also stimulate feedback and critique" (p. 43), the authors omit recognition that discussion posts represent such artifacts or that the importance of artifacts is related to the theory of social constructionism, a further development of social constructivism.

There were also a few methodological issues that could affect interpretation of the conclusions drawn by Hew and Cheung. For example, a "sustained" discussion is defined in one study as a discussion thread with six levels, and in another study as a discussion thread with only three levels. Another example is the broad definition of higher levels of knowledge construction as four of the five phases of the interactional analysis model (IAM). While the IAM is a validated tool for assessing knowledge construction in asynchronous discussion, the use of all but the first phase is imprecise and would certainly influence the interpretation of results.

Finally, the most important factor to consider in interpreting Hew and Cheung's conclusions is that the majority of the case studies presented were in a blended versus wholly online environment. This point is important because of the possible influence of social presence developed in the face-to-face sessions of the course. The instructors were usually free to design and revise the course requirements, thereby limiting application by instructors who use a standardized curriculum developed by a design team. While there was representation across undergraduate and graduate degree programs, the length of the discussions varied widely across the studies and the data sources relied heavily on subjective student perceptions. There were usually no posting requirements or deadlines; rather, "students were free to post in whichever forums they wished" (p. 68).

Despite these criticisms, Hew and Cheung offer a useful catalog of factors influencing such student participation in asynchronous threaded discussions. The topic is timely and increasing in complexity with the growth of open education. Steven Ross, in his Foreword to the book, accurately captures the contribution of *Student Participation in Online Discussions*: "valuable guidance in a thorough and highly readable manner to inform instructional design, course applications, and research" (p. viii).

Athabasca University