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Foster strengths and circumvent weaknesses: Advantages and disadvantages of online versus face-to-face subgroup discourseMingzhu Qiu , Douglas McDougall  [Show more](#)  Share  Cite<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2013.02.005> [Get rights and content](#) 

Abstract

This article points out some advantages and disadvantages of online over face-to-face subgroup discourse. Using a mixed methods study methodology, five online graduate-level courses were investigated and the experiences from twenty-two participants were described to identify key advantages and disadvantages of subgroup structures used to evaluate graduate students' and instructors' experiences. Outcomes revealed that online small group discussions have more advantages over face-to-face ones. Online small group discussions can be an effective strategy to interweave whole-class discussions with small group discussions in order to reduce overall information loads in large classes while providing more opportunities for interaction. However, online small group discussions have some disadvantages over face-to-face discussions. The findings may have implications for both practitioners and researchers studying online small group discourse. They could serve as a base for researchers to further explore the issue to achieve fruitful online discourse.

Highlights

► Online subgroup discussions are more focused, thoughtful, thorough, and in-depth. ► Less instructor involvement in online over face-to-face subgroup discussions. ► Flexible schedule promotes more writing and higher quality of contribution. ► International and shy students favor online subgroup discussion. ► Time delay in responding messages may make students lose their line of thought.

Introduction

In face-to-face classes, many instructors utilize a small group strategy to provide a more focused and in-

depth discourse. In online courses, one method to reduce information overload is to divide a large class into discussion subgroups (Qiu, 2010). This strategy is intended mainly to decrease the amount of information that needs to be processed in large classes with the goal of fostering greater participation in subgroup discussions, to promote focused and deeper inquiry, to increase opportunities for online collaboration, to maintain proper participation, and to help discussion thread development (Qiu, 2010; Qiu, Hewitt, & Brett, 2012). Although a great deal of research has been conducted to investigate small group learning (e.g., Bales & Strodtbeck, 1951; Davie, 1988; Davis, 1969; Hoffman, 1965; Maier, 1971; Stahl, 2006), not many studies have explored the advantages and disadvantages of online versus face-to-face subgroup discussions.

This mixed methods study explored the advantages and disadvantages of online subgroup discourse over face-to-face one with the purpose of fostering strengths and circumventing weaknesses in each mode of delivery. Not all aspects and factors that contribute to advantages and disadvantages of online and face-to-face small group discourse can be taken into account in this study. This research explored advantages and disadvantages by analyzing data from interviews of 10 online graduate course instructors and 12 online graduate students at one Canadian institute and five online graduate-level course datasets from the institute Web Knowledge Forum (WebKF) databases. Web Knowledge Forum, the second generation of CSILE (Computer-Supported Intentional Learning Environment), provides a group work environment with the features of threaded discussions to support knowledge building and online learning community building. It is online teaching and learning facilitation software. The information provided by this study may benefit interested researchers, online course instructors, and online learners. The findings will add to our knowledge of advantages and disadvantages of online and face-to-face small group discourse.

Section snippets

Literature review (has been rewritten)

Some peer-reviewed journals focus on studies on small group research. For example, the journal *Small Group Research* has been publishing articles on research, theoretical advancements, and empirically supported applications about all types of small groups since 1970. In the 1990s, small group research focused mainly on face-to-face small groups. For example, McLeod, Lobel, and Cox (1996) reported that diverse work groups have potential performance advantages over homogeneous groups, at least...

Methodology

Mixed methods research has been increasingly adopted in educational research as an alternative to traditional mono-method approaches (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). Biases inherent in any single method could neutralize or cancel the biases of other methods (Creswell, 2005). The resulting mixture has complementary strengths and non-overlapping weaknesses and results from one method can help develop or inform the other method (Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989) as well as provide insight into...

Findings

The findings revealed that online subgroup discussions inherited most of the advantages of online whole-

class discussions, while some unique features of online subgroup discussions emerged. Interviewees viewed these features as having a greater value over face-to-face subgroup discussions, as one instructor put it, “online subgroup discussions have more advantages”.

The number of notes written (Table 1) and the number of notes read (Table 2) by the instructors and students helped identify the...

Discussion (this section has been revised)

This study reveals that online subgroup discussions possess some unique advantages over face-to-face subgroup discussions. Interviewees viewed these features as having a greater value over face-to-face subgroup discourse. This study describes how online subgroup discussions are more focused, more thoughtful, thorough, and in-depth than face-to-face subgroup discourse. Online small groups provided more opportunities to form more diverse discussion groups as McLeod et al. (1996) stated that have...

Recommendations

The findings suggest that not all instructors and students may notice advantages and disadvantages of online subgroup discussions over face-to-face ones, though some of them have utilized small group discourse as a strategy. Nevertheless, some instructors and students may not have realized how to foster the strengths and circumvent the weaknesses of each mode of delivery. Consequently, many online courses designed as collaborative learning environments are not effective due to failure to...

Conclusions

Online education will continue to expend and shape the ways in which some people learn in the 21st century (Wuensch, Aziz, Ozan, Kishore, & Tabrizi, 2008). Although online learning has been developing rapidly, there are still some issues under discussion and problems to be solved in order to achieve a truly stimulating and realistic learning experience (Monahan, McArdle, & Bertolotto, 2008; Qiu, 2010). This article identifies some advantages and disadvantages of online subgroup discussion over...

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[The effect of computer-assisted cooperative learning methods and group size on the EFL learners' achievement in communication skills](#)

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[A study of the relationship between student communication interaction and sense of community](#)

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A. Zornoza *et al.*

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Small Group Research (2002)



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College students' experience of emergency remote teaching due to COVID-19

2020, Children and Youth Services Review

Citation Excerpt :

...Barnett-Queen, Blair, and Merrick (2005) found many college students to be able to learn in online discussions and that such discussions are not inferior to those in traditional face-to-face discussions. Qiu and McDougall (2013) reported that

in small online discussions, students do not spend a lot of time socializing as they would in a traditional face to face class, allowing them to stay focused, and text-based online subgroup discussions lead students to focus more on the discussions because they are all recorded. There are also findings discussing about the environment and experience of online classes....

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Fostering both extensive and intensive threaded discourse—Discussion thread development and class size

2019, Computers and Education

Citation Excerpt :

...More importantly, they examined how class size correlated with students' and instructors' note reading and writing practices and interviewees' perspectives about note reading and writing practices in different sizes of classes. There appeared to be both advantages and disadvantages to large classes (Qiu, 2010; Qiu et al., 2012; Qiu & McDougall, 2013). Larger computer conferencing courses offer educational advantages....

[Show abstract](#) 

The influences of an experienced instructor's discussion design and facilitation on an online learning community development: A social network analysis study

2017, Internet and Higher Education

Citation Excerpt :

...First, the instructor's design of an interweaving integration of class-level and group-level discussions helped students form an online learning community. Given the influences of group size on participant interactions (Caspi, Gorsky, & Chajut, 2003), small group discussions (e.g., base groups, article-based groups, learning teams) can be interwoven with whole-class discussions to help build social connections, improve interaction opportunities, and balance overall information loads (Qiu & McDougall, 2013). Moreover, the integration of different group arrangements had critical influences on the online learning community development....

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Influence of group configuration on online discourse reading

2015, Computers and Education

Citation Excerpt :

...This is in line with what Davis (1969) and Garvin (1981) claimed in their discussion of face-to-face groups. Previous studies suggest that high-level cognitive skills are rarely shown in common types of asynchronous online discussion forums unless structured conditions and technical functions are employed specifically to foster and sustain such high-level cognitive skills (Hewitt, 2005; Hewitt & Brett, 2007; Qiu, 2008a; Qiu, 2008b, Qiu et al. 2012; Qiu & McDougall, 2013). "Technology and a resurging interest in social construction have increased interest in group instruction and collaborative learning in large groups, and the establishment of learning communities has changed the way instructional designers think about group instruction" (Gagne, Wager, Golas, & Keller, 2005, p. 290)....

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Developing a framework for designing an Events Management Training Simulation (EMTS)

2015, Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism Education

[Show abstract](#) 


Influence of group configuration on online discourse writing

2014, Computers and Education

Citation Excerpt :

...In a follow-up analysis, Qiu, Hewitt, and Brett (2012) discovered that dividing classes into smaller groups was perceived as helpful by students. Other research (Qiu & McDougall, 2013) explored how to foster strengths and circumvent weaknesses in various arrangements of online and face-to-face subgroup discourse. The present study extends this earlier research through a more detailed focus on the following questions:...

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Annals of Epidemiology, Volume 23, Issue 9, 2013, pp. 576-579

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Research article

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Complementary Therapies in Clinical Practice, Volume 46, 2022, Article 101509

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Research article

Remote versus face-to-face delivery of early intervention programs for children with autism spectrum disorders: Perceptions of rural families and service providers

Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders, Volume 23, 2016, pp. 1-14

[Show abstract](#) 

Research article

Blended instructional practice: A review of the empirical literature on instructors' adoption and use of online tools in face-to-face teaching

The Internet and Higher Education, Volume 31, 2016, pp. 1-10

[Show abstract](#) 

Research article

The influences of an experienced instructor's discussion design and facilitation on an online learning community development: A social network analysis study

The Internet and Higher Education, Volume 35, 2017, pp. 34-47

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Research article

Academic self-concept and social presence in face-to-face and online learning: Perceptions and effects on students' learning achievement and satisfaction across environments

Computers & Education, Volume 69, 2013, pp. 131-138

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