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​​Online threaded discussions, ubiquitous in LMSs, often involve students talking past each other, instead of with each other, with little uptake of others’ contributions. We report on uptake and authenticity in two types of online discussions in seven online university courses: (a) threaded discussions, and (c) linear chat-style discussions with collaborative responsive writing (CREW). These newer forms of online discussion present learning and teaching advantages.

**Future of OL Discussion: Introducing the CREW**

Since they provide much needed student-student interaction, online threaded discussions are ubiquitous in online courses. While threaded online discussion forums make it easy for instructors to track who posted and how often, prior studies have documented several limitations of threaded forums as compared to other forms of whole-class discussions [(e.g., Larson & Keiper, 2002; Meyer, 2003)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?edd6eh). Threaded online discussion forums can limit students’ *uptake* [(Collins, 1982)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?h2VZEx) of ideas in previous posts [(Gao, 2011)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?ovDs7T). Each post may have little organic relationship to prior and subsequent contributions (especially those in other threads), as students address instructors’ prompts and fulfill the assignment, rather than to collaboratively make a decision, solve a problem, elaborate an idea, or interpret a text [(](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?eMSzLE)[Hara et al., 2000](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?bzbXxz); [Hewitt, 2001; Sun & Gao, 2017](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?G2PcxF); [Thomas, 2002)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?etJdet).

Based on years of experience with threaded online discussions in post-secondary LMSs, we note a lack of authentic questions and of uptake, as students talk *past,* instead of *with* each other, or struggle to re-enter an active online threaded discussion after being away for several days.

We research how new variations of conversational and collaborative features in online discussions may produce more authentic discourse. Collaborative responsive writing, as enacted in K-12 face-to-face classrooms, can improve student comprehension and rigor of thinking. Attempting to foster more authentic online discussions, our research group added collaborative responsive writing to linear online discussions. Students use the linear chat to negotiate a consensus position, and then collaboratively write a shared response.

In CREW discussions, book clubs of three to six students, collaboratively compose a response to an instructor question about the reading. The CREW interface has two spatial zones: (a) the right zone, an SMS-type chat area, where group members discuss their strategy, and (b) the left area, a collaborative writing space (like a Google Doc) where all book club members type and edit their shared response, later submitted to their instructor.

*Research question*: How authentic is the student discourse in threaded online discussions versus CREW, in terms of uptake and dialogic spells?

**Method**

We explored two types of online discussions: (a) threaded discussion in an LMS, and one other type of educational online discussion, embedded in web-based interactive eBooks, and (b) Collaborative REsponsive Writing (CREW) with linear chat-style discussions.

Two-hundred graduate students participated in two types of online discussions. They first read a text and then a discussed an authentic (open-ended, higher-order thinking) question, in two discussion types: (a) in an LMS, first reading an attached pdf and then participating in a threaded discussion, versus (b) reading a text in a web-based eBook and then engaging in a linear chat-style discussion to negotiate the collaborative writing of a shared response.

**Analysis**

We coded postings using discourse analysis. Our coding scheme included concepts such as (a) uptake: evidence that the student addressed the content of another’s post, (b) dialogic spell: three or more related posts, where each student added to a chain, (c) purpose: interpretation of a text vs. deliberation about a process, and (d) pivot: changes to the purpose of discussion.

**Results**

In the threaded online discussions, students often delivered long posts in formal language, staking out content positions relative to the instructor’s question (in this example, about the classic short story, The Lady or the Tiger, “*Part 1: What happens next? What is behind the door, the lady or the tiger? Part 2: Later, the King discovers that his daughter has broken the law. How does the King respond? What happens*?”), without uptake of other students’ postings:

“*Part One: The lover picks the door which the Princess indicates, and the beautiful courtier is revealed. The Princess grappled with her thoughts and instincts, feeling jealous and thinking about sending her lover to his death rather than see him with another woman. She ended up indicating the door which held the beautiful woman because she realized that she couldn't live with the knowledge that she had sent her lover to his ruin. Deciding that she would rather see him alive, she shows him which door to pick*.”

By contrast, CREW postings were shorter and informal. Dialogic spells—chains of related posts--were longer and terminated with pivots. Discussions typically followed a conversational pattern, including: (a) greetings and procedure:

“*Hi everyone! I have read the story and am ready to discuss. I can log back in later to see if anyone else is ready. Should we try to figure out a time to all come back and work in here together?”*

(b) seminar-style debate of stances on the text and the instructor’s discussion question, that led to dialogic spells and, eventually, consensus:

“*In terms of just answering I feel like the tiger was behind the door, and later the King puts the daughter to trial...*”

“*That's exactly what I think as well.*”

“*No problem. :) So to jump right in, when I read I felt like she sent him to the door with the tiger.*”

“*Ok, we all thought the tiger!*”

“*does this mean we are barbaric too*?”

“*Ha ha, maybe!*”

(c) pivot to deliberation about how to create their shared response in the collaborative writing area:

“*Okay so maybe we could each write out an answer for the first part of the question and then we edit the response into one?*”

“*Ok, that works for me. We can just answer the questions.*”

(d) summary of their experience, and (e) sign-off with salutations.

*" I'd say we pretty have wrapped things up then. It was nice working with both of you!”*

*“Good job ladies. Thank you both.”*

*“Yes, thank you too. Good job everyone. :)"*

The collaborative written document, composed synchronously, closely reflected the content of the discussion and each member’s contributions.

**Impact on student learning**

We found that collaborative writing shifted the purpose of discussion from demonstrating fulfillment of an assignment to authentic sharing of interpretations and deliberating about processes. Post surveys indicated that students felt that they learned more from the CREW discussions.