Exploring Asynchronous Critical Conversations: A Qualitative Case Study Prospectus

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Abstract

This research project proposal outlines an intended research design for a single case study exploring the relationship between instructional design and asynchronous discussion activities in an asynchronous studio-based online course for undergraduate art students enrolled in a 100 percent distance degree program at an R1 institution in the mid-Atlantic region. This study proposes exploring the topic through case study because the context and the phenomenon are both central to understanding the problem at hand. This study proposes examining the problem in setting through the lenses of constructivist pedagogy and the Community of Inquiry model.

*Keywords*: asynchronous discussion, case study, online education

**INTERPRETIVE BIOGRAPHY**

Online and digitally mediated learning experiences have been an important part of my lifelong learning journey. As early as middle school, I benefitted from the opportunities distance learning offered. While there are many moments that lead to me becoming an early consumer of anywhere, anytime learning offered through distance education experiences, one memory in particular stands out as a pivotal moment in my public school experience. In eighth grade, my class was assigned to read *A Separate Peace* by John Knowles, a common reading selection for middle school. However, rather than reading the book outside of class and using class time to discuss the plot, theme, characters, and other aspects of the book, we spent our class time taking turns reading the text aloud. Early on in primary school I was identified as an advanced reader, and that label was never as painfully clear to both myself and my classmates as it was during this reading exercise. Listening to my classmates struggle to articulate the text juxtaposed with my quick, clear, and competent turns reading aloud only highlighted the difference in skill and furthered solidified my existing “outsider” status with my classmates.

As a result, I often read ahead of the class because I genuinely enjoyed the story, but my zest for the literature occasionally left me lost when it was my turn to read. I can recall clearly the day when my turn to read aloud came, and after needing to be told where to begin yet again, my teacher stopped class to phone my mother at work and inform her of my misdeeds. Though my mother defended me quite loudly over the phone and communicated exactly how much she didn’t appreciate being contacted at work over something so trivial, I was mortified. To this day, that moment lives on in my memory like a mental scar.

After that experience and myriad parent teacher conferences, it was decided that I would be better served at school by incorporating some online courses through a partnership with our local community college as part of my curriculum. Taking those online courses felt like a life raft. I didn’t have to contend with judgmental stares from my peers, I could work mostly at my own pace, and it ended up saving me huge amounts of money in student loans.

That online education during high school helped me obtain credits toward my bachelor’s degree before I stepped foot on a college campus, significantly reducing the amount of time and money it would cost me to obtain my degree. Expecting to have the same successful experience I did in high school, I scheduled online classes when I could during my undergraduate career, but I was shocked to find that this time around, I actually missed the collegial nature of face-to-face interaction with peers when mediated by a subject matter expert. The asynchronous discussions in particular rang hollow, and felt like exercises in writing for an empty room that would occasionally be visited by a classmate. I avoided online classes after that.

My aversion to online classes didn’t fade, although I ended up struggling once again in a situation where online education was my only option for obtaining my Master’s. I was supporting myself working as a substitute teacher and freelance journalist after graduating from college with my bachelor’s in secondary education at a time when schools were laying off teachers left and right. I knew I needed another credential in order to give myself an edge in the job market, but the lack of a regular schedule for these two sources of income made it almost impossible to schedule traditional face-to-face classes.

I stuck it out, thankfully, and earned my Master’s degree taking primarily online courses despite still feeling the same way about them as I did during my undergraduate experience. My life now is not as rife with inconsistent incomes and crazy work schedules, and I credit this improved lifestyle to my education. As difficult as it was to work multiple jobs while trying to put myself through a Master’s program, I needed the experience to appreciate just how transformative an education could be.

When my prospects for classroom teaching faded, I knew I wanted to remain in the education field and help others achieve their potentially life-changing educational goals. I have always enjoyed a good challenge, and dedicating my work to solving problems in distance education is highly rewarding for me. Given my background, it is not surprising that I found my way to becoming a learning designer. As a direct beneficiary of online learning’s flexibility, reach, and cost savings, I knew that I could be happy in a career that allowed me to help others obtain an education on their own terms.

**COMING TO THE QUESTION & IDENTIFYING AN ISSUE**

I began my learning design career working in a business school setting, and time and again I would face this issue of asynchronous discussions. In my role as a higher education professional, I also learned that instructors often dislike the instructional strategy just as much as students do, and for many of the same reasons. Most faculty resorted to instilling parameters on their students’ discussions, such as requiring a certain number of responses at a specific length per post, and told students what they should talk about in those responses, rather than allowing conversation to occur organically.

As mentioned previously, I have participated in these activities using standard LMS discussion boards. In my experience, posts often feel contrived and are only tangentially related to the posts of other students. It is as if there are many small, forced side conversations happening in one large space, but no one is listening to the other because each participant is bringing their own agenda to their part of the discussion. Instead of a critical conversation where learning takes place, I more often find myself simply practicing using the discipline’s jargon and republishing my own interpretation of the week’s instructional content in a different way. While explanation in one’s own words is a proven learning strategy, it is not a discussion, but rather a writing exercise.

Designing better asynchronous discussion activities became a bit of a game to me with every new course I was given to develop. I kept abreast of the latest research and tested as much as I could with willing instructors who trusted me to help them figure out a way to better engage their students.

Even when I switched jobs to work in the arts, I met this problem again in a new form. In the arts, the issue of meaningful asynchronous discussion is a much more critical problem to solve. I learned that the majority of art courses, when taught in residence, utilize what is referred to as studio-based instruction. This consists of students and instructor coming together to work, provide feedback, and discuss aloud the progress of their art projects. This conversation about and observation of practice is crucial to students’ learning and it is a hallmark of any visual arts program in higher education. If we want to have a successful distance learning program in the visual arts, we need to figure out how to resolve the issue of lackluster asynchronous discussion experiences for our learners.

**RESEARCH PURPOSE**

According to Baptiste (2008), narrowing one’s research focus allows for the purpose to become clearer and thus provide a pathway to the methodology used to complete the study. This research project should yield information that could be used by a broader audience, such as instructors or higher education professionals concerned with developing asynchronous discussion activities. By conducting this study, I hope to produce a detailed case study focused on describing the environment where critical conversations are occurring in an asynchronous studio-based undergraduate course. I also hope to describe how characteristics of the environment align with or fall short of the Community of Inquiry model and social constructivist pedagogy. The evidence I intend to use to benchmark the environment against the CoI model and social constructivism will be derived from authentic student- and instructor-generated content within the course, as well as reflective statements uncovered during surveys and interviews.

**PROBLEM STATEMENT**

The issue of critical conversations in online learning environments is an important problem to figure out, because as it stands, a large population of students are missing out in their online learning experience due to the lack of knowledge around designing spaces for critical conversation. This issue is particularly concerning in disciplines where critical conversation is a driving strategy for instruction, such as in the arts, where studio instruction is a time-honored method that all art students are expected to experience. As both an online learner and a learning designer, I would like to learn more about the impact of learning design and environment design on facilitating critical conversations among online learners in order to bring this essential learning experience to the online population.

This research will focus on exploring the experiences of undergraduate art students in a distance learning course with a studio-based instruction component. Specifically, this purpose of this case study is to explore the discussion environment and how meaningful critical conversations for undergraduate art students unfold in an asynchronous studio-based instruction course. Because “design” is a term utilized in many different contexts with just as many unique meanings, it is necessary to define what definitions of “design” will be used in this study. For the purposes of this research, the following types of design will be discussed:

* Environment Design: referring to decisions made about the look and arrangement of a space, either digital or physical
* Learning Design: referring to decisions made regarding pedagogy and instructional practices
* Research Design: referring to the decisions made related to carrying out this research

**REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

This literature review will provide a brief overview of existing research regarding asynchronous discussion activities. In addition, the review will cover the theoretical frameworks through which I plan to examine the problem, social constructivism and the Community of Inquiry framework.

**Background**

Research demonstrates that a common problem in online education lies within asynchronous discussions, which are a feature of many distance education experiences (Rourke & Kanuka, 2007). Both students and instructors report that discussion activities are often not meaningful and do not contribute to learning despite theories suggesting that discussion is a way to engage students in higher-order thinking, and as a result, deeper learning (Rourke & Kanuka, 2007). Researchers have found success in manipulating the instructional design of these activities in ways such as assigning roles to participants in order to improve the quality of asynchronous discussions in blended/hybrid courses (Gašević et al., 2015, Chen et al., 2009). In a review of published research from 2008-2012, Loncar et al. (2013) found that the majority of studies focused on blended learning contexts, which demonstrates a need for further investigation into asynchronous discussion in 100 percent online settings.

**Critical Discussion Activities & Collaborative Knowledge Building**

It is important to distinguish the specific type of discussion activity to be studied. In the context of this research, I will explore critical discussion activities. These activities generally require participants to engage in public peer review of an artifact created by another participant or group of participants. This is a signature instructional strategy in environments such as art studios and other situations where students can learn from each others’ dialogues (Chinn et al., 2017). In addition, Cennamo & Brandt (2012) highlighted that outcomes from this type of instructional strategy in face-to-face settings include collaborative knowledge construction between instructors and students, as well as exposure to professional practices common to the field. In spite of these intentions, Rourke and Kanuka discovered that participants in the critical discussion activity they studied often interpreted critique as a personal attack (2007), which suggests a need for further study regarding these types of activities.

**Social Constructivist Theory & the Community of Inquiry Framework**

Based on my experience in this field, I believe the problems with critical discussion activity outcomes can be best explored through the application of social constructivist theory and the community of inquiry framework. Woo and Reeves (2007) argue that incorporating indicators of social constructivist theory into design can potentially increase the meaningfulness of online interactions. According to Vygotsky (1978), social constructivist theory dictates that students’ construction of meaning during their learning requires social interaction among other things. While the stated outcomes of critical discussion activities appear to line up with the theory of constructivism, as Gulbrandsen et al. discovered, aligning the instructional design of asynchronous discussion boards to a social constructivist pedagogy improved the quality of critical reflection in participant responses, however, “responses representing this depth of analysis were not consistent throughout the asynchronous discussions” (2015), once again suggesting that perhaps more research in this area is warranted to discover why participants are unable to consistently perform to expectations in these activities.

A derivative of constructivism, the Community of Inquiry framework dictates that learning occurs when social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence are all observed in the learning design (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000). Swan et al. (2009) argue that constructivist approaches in combination with community are essential for learning and should be incorporated, and Barber (2011) found that applying the CoI framework in critical discussions in a blended course context was successful. However, research directly supporting the benefits of this framework in 100 percent online/distance contexts is currently lacking.

**PHILOSOPHICAL ASSUMPTIONS & INTERPRETIVE FRAMEWORK**

For the purposes of this research, I am examining the problem through the framework of constructivist research as explained by Creswell (2012). Constructivist research assumes multiple realities, as each individual interprets and constructs their own meaning from sharing experiences with one another in a learning environment. Since this view frames many of my assumptions about education, it also means that I assume that each individual’s reported experience counts as knowledge.

As a learning designer, I value creating learning experiences for online students that support their achievement of learning objectives equal to the ways in which their face-to-face peers would also achieve those objectives. I do not believe in modifying the learning objectives of a course based on the delivery format. I believe that it is possible to create an equal, if not superior, online learning experience for distance students.

Acknowledging that, I also know that I am a methodological person. While I don’t believe there is a one-size-fits-all approach to developing learning experiences, I do believe that there are logical steps that can be developed for every experience design process, and I believe in assessing designs to ensure intended outcomes are met. I bring this philosophical assumption to my research practices as well. I like to examine things in context and try to understand how one characteristic can influence other qualities of a given problem.

**CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

The literature review has identified a clear gap in research, along with a few promising directions to explore in order to fill them. I propose to complete a case study of asynchronous, critical discussion activities in a digital media design program. The program is a 100% online bachelor’s degree granting program at an R1 institution in the mid-Atlantic region. It is the institution’s first 100% online bachelor’s program, which makes it an ideal setting for this study. In digital media design, a creative arts-based program within the broader visual arts discipline, the art studio critique is a critical component of the instructional experience. Students, from first years to those preparing for their capstone experience, all participate in asynchronous studio critique.

In this section of the proposal, I will attempt to provide a framework for my case study. To explore the experiences of undergraduate students participating in asynchronous critical discussion activities, virtual focus groups with groups of students who have taken courses in the digital media design program will be conducted. In addition to focus groups with groups of students, I would like complete semi-structured interviews with instructors who facilitate asynchronous critical discussion experiences in the digital media design program. It is my hope that hearing students describe their experiences in their own words would generate evidence that fits or contradicts Garrison et al.’s Community of Inquiry framework, and that instructors would provide evidence of attempting to create the conditions described by the CoI framework.

Listening to instructors and students discuss their experiences at participants in asynchronous critical discussion activities is one strategy to learn more about this topic. I would also like to conduct a content analysis of the discourse in these online environments. Through this content analysis, I would like to identify themes from the activities that fit the CoI framework. If I am able, I would like to recruit the same students who participated in the selected discussion activities to also complete interviews where they could provide me a verbal description of the conversation.

**RATIONALE**

This research would be of interest to any higher education professional or educator who is interested in developing a successful asynchronous studio environment for their distance students. Studio instruction is not limited to the visual arts, and its popularity is increasing as interdisciplinary education efforts also increase, specifically for fields such as engineering design.

This study also takes a broad approach by treating the asynchronous studio environment as a structured asynchronous discussion activity. This research aims to generate knowledge about the design of these activities, and any distance learning professional could potentially derive value from this research for their own practice developing meaningful critical conversation opportunities at their institution. Asynchronous discussions are part of almost every formalized online learning experience from institutions of higher education, which means the scope of application for the outcomes of this research could be vast.

**RESEARCH DESIGN**

The aim of this research project is to learn more about the relationship between digital learning space design and student interaction. In particular, this research attempts to gather information about how design influences critical conversation among learners. According to Yin (2009) as cited by Creswell (2012), “case study research involves the study of a case within a real-life, contemporary context or setting.” Case study methods fit this research problem because it will be studied in a real-life context.

Yin goes into more depth on the types of research problems best suited for case study work, asserting that it is an appropriate method when research is investigating “both a particular phenomenon and the context within which the phenomenon is occurring” (1993, p. 31).

This research project will be an intrinsic case study, which is the term for a case study composed to provide in-depth information on a specific case because it is unusual (Creswell 2012). The added factor of studio-based instruction in an online art course makes this case unusual enough to warrant a more detailed account of what is happening in the space. The specific case this research will explore is an asynchronous visual art course for undergraduate art students at a R-1 university. This course relies on students receiving and providing critical feedback in an asynchronous studio environment. The studio environment and the critical conversations that occur within it are the specific context of this research. The case duration will be one semester, and this research will study the course as it progresses throughout the semester. The case will consider critical conversations happening among learners and between learners and instructors in the course.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The questions this study is primarily concerned with gathering information about are generally related to understanding through case study the experiences of participants in studio-based critical conversation activities in an undergraduate online course at a mid-Atlantic R-1 university.

The questions that drive this study are:

* How does task design influence participation?
* How does environment design influence critical conversation quality?

**METHODS**

**Research Site**

This proposed study will explore the problem in a realistic context. The research site will be a 100 percent asynchronous undergraduate art course that incorporates critical discussion activities. The course is delivered in a university supported learning management system, but some critical conversation activities will take place in an online learning platform that has been specifically developed for discussion-based activities. Comparing results across the two environments will provide more robust data for analysis. The course is a traditional 15-week long semester course taught every semester, and the study will examine two sections of the course across one semester.

**Participant Sample**

For the purposes of this case study, the sampling method will be convenience sampling. Due to the specific nature of the problem being investigated by this research, convenience sampling is the appropriate method because this project aims to explore the discussion experiences of students in a particular class. This class is taught in multiple sections across a semester, but all students participate in the same sequence of activities. In order to generate enough data for analysis, the project will look at all students taking the course as one case. While Luborsky & Rubenstein (1995) warn that some qualitative researchers feel diversity among a sample is important, in the case of this research, the homogeneity among participants is desired because the project aims to draw strong conclusions about the nature of the problem occurring in this specific context.

**Data Collection**

While the case study does not dictate any particular set of methods (Yin 1993), collecting multiple sources of data that all center on the same problem is a central tenet of case study research. To that end, I propose a variety of data collection methods.

Data collection methods that will be employed in this study are interviews with students and instructors. All students will be asked about their experiences participating in the critical discussion activities in the class at various points throughout the semester via a digital survey, which will be given after the first three weeks, six weeks, and 12 weeks of the semester. These surveys will be created and reviewed by the instructors. Students will rate the quality of the studio discussions, how helpful the discussions are in improving their work, and other similar questions so that student perceptions of quality can be tracked throughout the semester and compared between the two environments and the two sections of the course.

Students will be selected for one-on-one interviews on a volunteer basis to occur toward the end of the semester. During these interviews, they will be asked to explain in more depth their experiences in specific critical discussion activities, and how those conversations helped their work. They will also be asked to point out examples of quality critical conversation that they observed during the course, and describe why they consider those examples to be of quality.

In addition, instructors will be interviewed in a similar way, but they will be asked to assess the quality of discourse in the class overall, as well as point out specific examples of quality critical conversation. Instructors will also be asked if they noticed any improvement in the work of those students who engaged in critical conversation regularly, if such students exist within the sample.

In addition to the surveys and interviews, artifacts from the natural proceedings of the course will be gathered, coded, and analyzed for themes. Artifacts that would be analyzed in this way include discussion posts, artwork, and reflection assignments completed after each unit. These artifacts will be coded for elements that align with the Community of Inquiry model described previously. Responses to questions related to the design of discussion spaces will also be coded and analyzed for themes related to the three components of the CoI framework.

**VALIDITY & RELIABILITY**

As with most qualitative research, the results of this project, while incredibly valuable for the course being studied, will likely not be highly generalizable beyond this project in the traditional sense. The scope is narrow, and the sample size is likely too small to apply any findings to other contexts without further research. But attempts to improve the validity and reliability of the project can be made.

According to Creswell (2012), triangulation is a strategy researchers can utilize to improve the validity of their qualitative work. In Creswell’s view, triangulation involves researchers utilizing multiple sources of data to confirm codes and themes. Creswell notes that existing theories can be used to corroborate evidence, and I intend to utilize the Community of Inquiry framework and markers of social constructivist pedagogy to triangulate findings in data. In addition, Golafshani points out that a constructivist paradigm in research accepts multiple realities as valid knowledge (2003). When it comes to validity and reliability in constructivism, Golafshani asserts that triangulation of data can be achieved when the researcher and participants both engage in data collection (2003). Instructors will also be involved in the development of survey instruments and student interview guides to ensure consistency across all data collection methods. Instructors will also generate data themselves for analysis in the form of reflections.

In an effort to increase the confirmability of this project, member-checking with the instructors of the course will be utilized to ensure consistency in how terms like “critical conversation” and “quality” are defined for the purposes of this study. I will also ask an instructor to recode an artifact from the course to check the integrity of our codification. As Creswell (2012) suggests, I would also attempt to organize a focus group of participants, comprised of the instructors and students from the course, to provide feedback and perspectives on the themes derived from the data analysis.

**ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Any research project is bound to have ethical considerations, and this one is no exception. In any case where students are being asked to provide their feedback about a course, there is always potential for students to be concerned that participation in the study would impact their grade in the course. This could motivate them to participate or not participate for various reasons, and also to change how they participate based on possible perceived gains. In addition, as Creswell discusses on pg. 60 (2012), interview methods inherently create a power imbalance that is important to recognize. Creswell shares strategies for respecting the imbalance such as avoiding leading questions and suppressing my personal opinions about the research (2012, p. 58).

As a researcher in the unique position of also being a practitioner with ready access to potential research contexts, it is also important to address the ethical considerations that come with this dual title. For example, instructors may not feel comfortable being interviewed by me, but may feel a professional obligation to help me complete my research because my professional role involves supporting and assisting them. It is a different kind of power imbalance, and it is important to be aware of the social dynamics that could potentially come into play during a project such as this.

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