

# Moving Beyond the “Façade of Participation”: Using Choice-based Design to Enhance Online Discussions

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**Abstract:** A universal struggle in online education is encouraging authentic engagement. Nowhere is this familiar challenge more apparent than the online discussion forum, which students often treat as obligatory rather than enriching. This reaction could be due to low self-determination within the course design. Using Self-Determination Theory as its basis, this study seeks to address the question of whether a choice-based course encourages autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and if these result in enhanced engagement in forums.

## Introduction

Online course enrollment continues to grow, with over a quarter of U.S. higher education students taking at least one online course (Online Learning Consortium, 2016). However, though it is now generally accepted that learning outcomes from online courses equal those of face-to-face (f2f) courses (Means, Bakia, & Murphy, 2014), one area that still struggles to compete with the f2f environment is the asynchronous online discussion forum.

While current LMS forums include tools beyond text to help facilitate more human interaction, students often treat discussion forum assignments as requirements to check off a list, rarely engaging in sustained, meaningful conversation (LaPointe & Reisetter, 2008). What results is a formulaic “discussion,” where each student creates an initial response to the instructor’s prompt and 1–2 (if any) replies to peers. In this way, forums can feel more like reporting in than having a real conversation, what Stodel, Thompson, and MacDonald (2006) term “a façade of participation” (p. 11).

To encourage more authentic interaction, the forum needs to appeal to students’ intrinsic motivation. Choice and opportunities for self-determination enhance people’s sense of agency, which in turn tends to enhance their intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). This suggests that if an instructor uses a choice-based model to encourage student autonomy, competence and relatedness should follow, ideally resulting in forum discussions that move beyond the façade of participation.

## Theoretical frameworks

Students interacting minimally in discussion forums are demonstrating “amotivation,” meaning they either do not post at all, or they post without intent, “just go[ing] through the motions” (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 72). These displays of amotivation are a signal that the forum is not meeting the students’ educational needs, whereas environments that appeal to innate psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness promote intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). This idea forms the basis of Deci and Ryan’s (2000) Self-Determination Theory (SDT). According to SDT, amotivation manifests from one (or more) of four conditions: nonintentional, nonvaluing, incompetence, or lack of control. Unfortunately, this captures all too many online discussions: required forums (lack of control) a student does not care about (nonvaluing) or cannot adequately address (incompetence), resulting in lackluster posts (nonintentional).

One way to address amotivation is to instill in students a sense of control. If students can choose whether and how they interact in a discussion forum, this sense of choice could help promote agency. Control alone, though, will not result in a student’s feeling empowered self-determination. All three aspects of SDT—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—contribute equally to an individual’s sense of self-determination, so all elements must be present. Therefore, the autonomy gained from having choice would need to positively impact competence and relatedness as well for self-determination to be actualized.

This design-based research study (Amiel & Reeves, 2008) explores whether using a choice-based course design will positively impact all three aspects of SDT, leading to the first research question: ***RQ1: How does a choice-based course influence students’ perceptions of self-determination?***

In addition to students’ feeling enhanced autonomy in a choice-based course, it is hypothesized this approach will also lead to higher levels of both cognitive and social engagement within discussion forums, addressing SDT’s competence and relatedness. To gauge these levels, this study employs the Community of Inquiry model (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000), a framework popular for assessing online learning communities. The Community of Inquiry (CoI) model is illustrated by a Venn diagram that includes three domains: teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence. This current study focuses on social presence and cognitive presence from the model. Social presence (SP), which is comprised of affective, interactive, and cohesive subdivisions, is the ability for individuals to present themselves in a way that allows them to be seen as

real people in a virtual environment. Cognitive presence (CP) refers to a progressive scale of demonstrated critical thinking with four phases: a triggering event, exploration, integration, and resolution. This study will apply the CoI model's elements of SP and CP to assess students' levels of social and cognitive engagement in a course, which will be used to address the second research question: ***RQ2: Is there a relationship between students' perceptions of self-determination and their levels of social and/or cognitive engagement in the discussion forums?*** The researcher hypothesizes that students in a choice-based course will demonstrate higher levels of perceived self-determination than those in a non-choice-based course (*RQ1*), and that these students additionally will demonstrate higher social and cognitive engagement scores (*RQ2*).

## Context and methods

This study is being conducted on two sections of a fully online introductory liberal education course at a large public university in the Midwestern United States. Each course, housed in Canvas, is capped at 20 undergraduate students and is available to all programs of study at the university. One section is designed with the choice-based model, and one is not. The sections are taught by the same instructor but are not concurrent. The first way in which student autonomy is supported in the experimental course's design is through choice of topics covered. At the beginning of the semester, students are asked to complete a survey to determine preferred course topics, the outcome of which is used to determine content covered. The course design also offers choice in assessment. Students are offered a variety of activities at different point values, allowing them to participate in ways they find meaningful. For students uncomfortable with options, there is a default method provided.

To address SDT perceptions of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (*RQ1*), students will be given an end-of-course survey based on a modified version of the Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction in General (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Gagné, 2003). To assess students' levels of competence and relatedness, the CoI model (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000) will be used. Students' discussion posts will be qualitatively coded using a quasi-deductive approach based on the CoI model, with the inclusion of internal breakdowns of low, medium, and high levels for each subdivision of each presence. These will be used to create two coding sets: one with a score of 1–12 for the progressive states of cognitive presence (to assess competence), and one for a score of 1–3 for each subset of social presence (to assess relatedness). See Table 1. A correlational analysis of survey scores and SP and CP scores then will be conducted, comparing the choice-based course and the control (*RQ2*).

**Table 1: Two sample codes – Social Presence (Interactive)**

Score	Characteristics	Course example
Low (1)	Short response that does not elicit further interaction or demonstrate comprehension; agrees/disagrees/compliments but does not elaborate	“Great post! I really like what you had to say about rights ethics.”
High (3)	Agrees/disagrees with more in-depth explanation; adds own opinion with support; seeks to engage discussion further with questions, elaboration, challenges, etc.	“N—, Your statement regarding the relevance of cultural relativism being extremely relevant, ‘especially in 2019’ intrigues me. I wonder if your wording was intentional, meaning that the current year that we are experiencing has made cultural relativism more important to our society than it was in past years. I also wonder what your meaning is behind, ‘society is at different stages depending on where you go in the world.’ What are these stages? Is one stage a progression of the next, or are they all dependent on the society that they refer to?”

## Implications

As online courses become omnipresent, understanding how design choices impact learning is increasingly imperative. While this study is ongoing, the hope is results will suggest using a choice-based model positively impacts self-determination, ultimately helping to alleviate the “façade of participation” in discussion forums.

## Key references

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