

Chapter 7

Hanging on by a Thread

Dorothy F. Garrison-Wade

I view my role as a teacher is to facilitate students' learning by challenging them to explore and construct knowledge by solving authentic problems. Yet, how does one effectively do this in an online class? For me, this is an ongoing challenge. I attempt to bring my online courses alive by using a variety of technological tools such as PowerPoint, web conferencing (*Adobe Connect*), graphic design, audio tools (*Jing*), and links to other web-based videos. Yet, the most effective tool I use in my online classes to enliven the online format is threaded discussions.

A threaded discussion is conversation around a main topic in which secondary postings are the "threads" that spin off from the main discussion (Horton, 2000). Through threaded discussions, students participate in discourse that promotes questioning and critical thinking, which in turn facilitates their learning. In addition, threaded discussions give my students in the School of Education and Human Development opportunities to develop their leadership skills and to collaborate by sharing ideas and strategies to improve their individual learning as well as their work in schools. In this article, I discuss how I use threaded discussions as an instructional tool to bring the online classroom environment alive. I also share how I have taken threaded discussions a step further by using them to evaluate my teaching and students' growth and development through an exploratory research study.

Using Threaded Discussion to Engage Students in Critical Discourse

Offenholley (2006) states threaded discussions are the "lifeblood" of her online math courses. I have found similar success by using threaded discussions to engage students in thought provoking dialog and collaboration in my online EDUC 5400 Special Education Seminar for Principals course. Engaging students in threaded discussions alleviates the feelings some students have of hanging out there alone in cyberspace.

Since the course is designed to promote leadership, I empower my students to take charge of the threaded discussions to further develop their leadership skills and to share ideas and resources with their peers. For 13 of the 15 weeks of the course, students participate in active threaded discussions around assigned readings that are designed to support students' learning to develop: (a) an ability to lead school-wide conversations about problems and issues that arise in special education in ways that strengthen the culture of the school and its commitment to all students' learning; and (b) an ability to garner resources for the school's programs. I inform my students that I will closely monitor their discussions but that I will limit my participation to minimize influencing the discussions. However, I do add at least one small entry weekly to the discussion to let students know that I am also a participant.

Prior to the start of class, I email students a syllabus that includes the course assigned readings, ranging from 2 to 6 assignments per week (see Table 1). Students are instructed to email me their 1st, 2nd, and 3rd choice for reading assignments and select a week that he/she wishes to facilitate the discussion and write a reading response paper on the assigned reading. Students must read selected assignments, identify major themes of the readings, and summarize the readings. I tell students to do the following:

Think of this paper as a conversation with the author and with your classmates. Why are the issues you picked troubling / exciting / interesting / important to you? Figure out how to invite your readers to think along with you about themes/issues you identified in the readings. Post your paper (first day of the week) in the appropriate "Reading Response" discussion week, and also place your paper in the "Reading Response" drop box for a grade. Click below on URL to listen to video instruction.

<http://www.screencast.com/users/dgarris/folders/Jing/media/573b231a-c28e-4534-aa97-2b60c8e50b4f>

Table 1. Reading Assignment from Syllabus

2 Week of January 26	Principals' knowledge or lack of knowledge in special education	<p>Reading 1a: Garrison-Wade, D. (2005). Principals' training or lack of training in special education: A literature review. In C. L. Fulmer & F. L. Dembowski (Eds.), <i>National summit on school leadership: Crediting the past, challenging the present, and changing the future</i> (pp. 235-241). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.</p> <p>Reading 1b: Wakeman, S.Y., Browder, D.M., Flowers, C. & Ahlgrim-Dezell, L (2006) Principals' knowledge of fundamental and current issues in special education, <i>NAESP Bulletin</i>, 90(2), 153-174.</p>
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After the student uploads his/her reading response paper in the drop box, I review it and offer feedback; then he/she is instructed to upload it in the threaded discussion area. This assignment counts for 15% of student's grade. Table 2 below is a rubric I used to grade students reading response paper and leadership of the discussion. The rubric is very helpful in providing immediate feedback to students. In addition to the rubric, I add written feedback on their performance. At the end of the week of discussion, I add the points to the student grade for leading the discussion. I find this to be an effective strategy for encouraging students to stay engaged in the discussion during the entire discussion.

Table 2. Grading Criteria for Reading Response & Facilitation of Threaded Discussion

Point Value	Criteria
___/4	Identified and summarized key themes and issues
___/4	Raised key questions and clearly presented personal perspective
___/5	Engaged readers in threaded discussion and responded to questions
___/2	Used appropriate language, mechanics in written response paper
Total ___/15	

All students are encouraged to read all the assigned reading to participate in a critical dialog of the readings. In order to get full credit for participating in the threaded discussions on the weekly reading response papers, students must engage in a minimum of 8 weekly threaded discussions (20% of their grade). I have found, like others (Brescia, 2005), that when I didn't assign minimum requirements, some students would take the opportunity only to post a few times.

Many students tell me via email and/or through my end-of-course evaluation that the online threaded discussion is the most valuable part of the course. They share their experiences, resources, and even invite their peers to visit their schools in these discussions. Like my students, I also find it to be the most rewarding part of the class because I also learn so much from them. Several students commented,

- I found online classes difficult to get into genuine discussions because I like the face-to-face interactions. However, Dr. Garrison-Wade set it up so that we were sharing in the reading and facilitating the discussions. She has selected practical and high-level texts which added to the discussions.
- I loved how our professor got involved in the discussion also and pushed our thinking around some critical issues.
- The threaded discussions were the most effective for me. It helped to share our experiences and learn from one another. I also liked the fact that there were topics assigned to each discussion.
- The online discussion helped us connect with our classmates even though it was an online course.

Using research to inform my teaching

Over the past four years that I have been teaching this course, I have become so fascinated with the threaded discussion and what I have learned from the students. As a result, I decided to conduct an exploratory study, *Quest for Inclusive Leadership*, to examine the knowledge acquisition of students in my EDUC 5400 Seminar in Special Education online classes. The purpose of this exploratory study is two-fold: (1) To determine what students' perceptions are on inclusive education coming into the class, and (2) To determine the impact of the class in shaping students' leadership practices outside of class. I plan to use existing data generated from four semesters of the course.

From the study, I hope to determine students' views on and perceptions of inclusive education; students' understandings of the Response to Intervention (RtI) initiative; how students understanding vary from different schools and/or school districts; if the class is promoting inclusive leadership; and the impact the class had on inclusive practices outside of the classroom setting. I'm excited about all the possibilities of how this research can inform my teaching and support my research outreach.

In conclusion, while a threaded discussion isn't a new concept, it can be in my experience effectively used to support students' learning by creating a collaborative interactive environment. In addition, it offers a space that promotes critical dialog and discussions to alleviate some of the isolation that may come from attending an online class.

References

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Bio

Dorothy F. Garrison-Wade, PhD is an Assistant Professor of Administrative Leadership and Policy Studies in the School of Education and Human Development at the University of Colorado Denver. She teaches courses in principal preparation and licensure. Dorothy's professional work includes experience in public and private schools as a principal (secondary), assistant principal, counselor, teacher (secondary). She's committed to offering high quality instruction that addresses the needs of diverse learners. Recently, she received the Campus-wide and SEHD 2008 Excellence in Teaching Award (Teaching Tenure-Track) and the 2007 Colorado TED Excellence in Teacher Educator Award.