

Preface

As a result of the widespread use of the Internet in schools and homes, asynchronous online discussion has become an increasingly common means of facilitating dialogue between instructors and students, and also between students and their peers beyond the boundaries of physical classrooms. Unfortunately, there are usually very few students who actively contribute in online discussions, and often student contribution in online discussions is limited. Why is limited student contribution observed in asynchronous online discussion? How can we alleviate this problem? The primary purpose of this book is to identify the various reasons or factors leading to limited student contribution in asynchronous online discussion, and to discuss the possible solutions or strategies that may address these limitations. These strategies are based upon empirical evidence.

This book is organized into three main sections. In the first section, we describe the characteristics of an asynchronous online discussion environment, as well as review over 110 empirical studies in order to identify the factors leading to limited student contribution. Limited student contribution is defined as students making few or no postings, students exhibiting surface-level thinking, or students displaying low-level knowledge construction in online discussions. We identified ten main factors: (a) not seeing the need for online discussion, (b) behavior or practice of instructor or participants, (c) personality traits, (d) difficulty in keeping up with the discussion, (e) not knowing what to contribute, (f) lack of critical thinking skills, (g) being content in merely answering queries, (h) technical aspects, (i) lack of time, and (j) not wanting to run the risk of being misunderstood.

In the second section, we describe empirically based strategies to address each of the aforementioned factors, as well as discuss five main strategy dilemmas that educators might encounter. These strategy dilemmas include: (a) use of grades or marks, (b) use of number of posting guideline and posting deadlines, (c) use of message labels or sentence openers (online scaffolds), (d) extending the duration of the online discussion, and (e) instructor-facilitation. Strategy dilemmas refer to those strategies where previous empirical research shows mixed results when they are implemented. Acknowledging the dilemmas is essential for educators and

researchers to make informed decisions about the discussion strategies they are considering implementing.

The third section is a series of studies based on our research over the past 12 years. In this section we review ten empirical studies that examine peer facilitation, and how peer facilitation could promote the following three major outcomes: (a) increase students' online contribution rate, (b) sustain students' online discussion, and (c) foster higher levels of knowledge construction. Using students as peer facilitators may be an alternative solution to educators who wish to avoid the instructor-facilitation dilemma. In this section of the book we summarize these case studies and highlight the major findings. We believe that these findings would be useful to other educators and researchers who are similarly interested in using peer facilitation in their asynchronous online discussion environments.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that peer facilitation should not be viewed as a "cure-all" or panacea for the issues and challenges that online discussion presents. With this in mind, we discuss certain situations that may best be addressed using peer or instructor facilitation in [Chap. 8](#). Three major situations in which students wanted the instructor to act as the facilitator were identified: (a) when the discussion needed to be kept on track, (b) when conflicts arose in the discussion and needed resolution, and (c) when the topic of discussion was new or profound and required expert knowledge.

On the other hand, we also discovered four situations or reasons why students preferred peer facilitation over instructor facilitation: (a) participants feel more at ease in voicing their views in a peer-facilitated setting, (b) participants take greater ownership of the discussion, (c) participants are able to have practical hands-on experience of facilitating a discussion, and (d) peer facilitation allowed participants to reflect deeper on other students' ideas that came up in the discussions.

In [Chap. 9](#), we examine the use of asynchronous voice or audio discussion. So far, most of the discussions in previous research center on text-based discussion. The use of text-based discussion could pose a significant challenge for participants who are weak in reading or writing. Participants also run a higher risk of being misunderstood in text discussion due to the lack of verbal cues. We have been exploring the use of asynchronous audio discussion in the past 2 years and in [Chap. 9](#), we report our findings from two recently conducted studies that examine: (a) students' perceived benefits of using audio discussions, (b) their actual preferred mode of discussion (audio- or text-based) if given a choice, and (c) the levels of knowledge construction exhibited by students who participated in the text-based discussion versus students who used the audio-based discussion.

Finally in the conclusion, we suggest several future research directions concerning the use of asynchronous online discussion in education contexts. These directions include: (a) examining the use of peer facilitation in different contexts, (b) investigating the possible solutions to overcome the strategy dilemmas, and (c) studying the use of online discussion on mobile devices such as pocket PC and smart phones.

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Challenges, Solutions, and Future Research

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