

## **Student-Moderated Discussion Boards in a Graduate Online Course**

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### **Abstract**

This application brief describes a “Module Discussant” activity assigned in an online graduate-level leadership theory course. The assignment was designed to stimulate higher-level thinking, apply leadership theory to practice, and foster extensive communication among students in the online learning environment using a common learning management tool—the online discussion forum. This brief presents leadership educators with perspectives from two professors who coordinated the assignment, as well as the perspective of a graduate student participating in the activity. The professors and students involved report that the assignment resulted in compelling levels of engagement and critical thinking. Recommendations for future use and for enhancing the quality of the assignment are also offered.

### **Introduction**

Online education has become increasingly ubiquitous in higher education. A recent report on the trends in higher education indicated that 7.1 million students are enrolled in online courses in the United States, and that the proportion of all students taking at least one online class is at a record high of 33.5 percent (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Moreover, the field of leadership education appears to mirror these statistics, as many leadership education programs have created courses and curricula aimed at meeting this increasing demand. The International Leadership Association’s higher education program directory contains over 480 institutions from around the globe that offer graduate programs in leadership (International Leadership Association, 2015)

and one-third of these institutions offer at least a blended, if not entirely online, degree program. As leadership educators we must challenge ourselves to embrace research-based best practices to effectively facilitate course content and promote student engagement in online courses.

Research indicates effective online education requires three essential components: 1) a clear and consistent course structure; 2) an instructor who interacts frequently and constructively with students; and 3) a dynamic and valuable discussion (Swan, 2002). While it is important for instructors to interact frequently and constructively, they should “avoid becoming the center of all discussions,” by emphasizing student-to-student interactions (Rovai, 2007, p. 79).

With this in mind, two of the co-authors of this application brief created a “Module Discussant” assignment and facilitated it in an online, graduate-level leadership theory course. This brief first provides a review of the literature regarding online learning, with particular emphasis relating to online discussion and interaction. Second, it describes a specific assignment facilitating engagement in an online, graduate, leadership theory course. Finally, it includes faculty and student reflections, and proposes recommendations for future use and research.

### **Review of Related Literature**

Chickering and Gamson (1987) suggested seven principles of good practice in higher education, two of which, “develops reciprocity and cooperation among students” (p. 3) and “good practice uses active learning techniques” (p. 4), spawned decades of research focused on student interaction in college courses (Gold, 2011; Blignaut & Trollip, 2003; Newlin & Wang, 2002; Tu & McIsaac, 2002; Kuh, Pace, & Vesper, 1997). These practices posit that an effective learning environment consists of collaborative and social interaction among students, which enhances the students’ abilities to think critically and deepen their understanding. Learning is “not a spectator sport,” but must involve students in writing, communicating and relating what they are learning.

As technology advanced affording greater opportunities for online learning, Chickering and Ehrmann (1996) recommended strategies to effectively use technology to advance the original seven principles of good practice, and reiterated the importance of student-to-student interaction, as well as active learning in the online course. One of the most popular forms of student-to-student interaction in online classes is the use of discussion boards, whereby students are commonly required to respond initially to course-related questions and then post substantive responses to each other. Moreover, discussion board forums are often the only means of communication between students in the virtual learning environment (Blackmon, 2012). Dengler (2008) considered discussion boards a form of active learning that challenged students to connect theory to practice as well as have the opportunity to learn from each other, especially in case-based courses (Mitchem, Fitzgerald, Hollingshead, Koury, Miller, & Tsai, 2008). Other scholars noted that collaborative strategies such as reading fellow students’ posts in response to thought-provoking questions were valuable active learning assignments by students and “facilitated meaningful cooperation” (Graham, Cagiltay, Lim, Craner, & Duffy, 2001, p. 2).

Traditionally, online discussions have been facilitated by the course instructor. For instance, Smith (2015) detailed an excellent example of an instructor-led discussion activity via asynchronous discussion board in an undergraduate leadership theory course. Instructor-led

discussion board activities stimulate learning by challenging students to make connections between leadership concepts and their personal lives (Moore, Boyd, & Dooley, 2010) by requiring students to become active learners engaged in critical reflection (Harvey & Jenkins, 2014). However, this method is not without several drawbacks. For instance, instructor-led discussion boards can limit student participation (Hewitt, 2005), which can often be attributed to lack of motivation, time, commitment, or inability to critically analyze or communicate effectively (Rourke & Anderson, 2002; Brooks & Jeong, 2006).

Effective student engagement requires “multiple ways of creating meaningful communication between students and their instructor” (Dixon, 2010, p. 8). The Community of Inquiry theoretical framework informs us that asynchronous learning environments can develop meaningful communication between instructor and students and can foster deep level learning when social, teaching, and cognitive presence co-exist (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). *Social presence* refers to the feeling that others are "actually there" in the environment, whereas *teaching presence* reflects the roles and responsibilities of the instructor. *Cognitive presence* refers to the participants’ ability to construct meaning through sustained communication, measured by four forms of discourse: triggering events, exploration, integration, and resolution.

Discussion board forums promote students’ cognitive presence while additionally providing opportunities for social presence in the online course. Many instructors have begun to place students in the facilitator role whereby they share in providing the teaching presence. While on the surface this may appear that the instructor is abdicating his/her role in providing challenge and support to students, we assert this approach affords further opportunities for students to critically examine leadership concepts and engage with one another and the instructor. Aviv, Erlich, and Ravid (2005) reported a relationship between students’ level of responsibility in structured conversations with greater levels of involvement and critical thinking.

Student-led online discussion board activities typically are designed whereby the instructor chooses the overall topic for discussion while the student is responsible for the facilitation strategy (Baran & Correia, 2009). Research indicated that student-led online discussions promoted student involvement, meaningful conversation, student responsibility, and higher-level critical thinking (Pelz, 2007; Baran & Correia, 2009; Lim, Cheung, & Hew, 2011; Snyder & Dringus, 2014).

### **“Module Discussant” Assignment**

A student-led discussion board assignment was developed according to best practices (Picciano, 2002; Pelz, 2007; Lim, Cheung, & Hew, 2011), and was piloted by two professors in the fall of 2014 in a graduate-level leadership theory course. Among other activities and assignments, the course consisted of 28 peer-reviewed journal articles and text excerpts, organized topically. Examples of course topics included trait, behavioral, and contingency theories of leadership; leader-member exchange; perception-based perspectives; global leadership; followership; charismatic, transformational and servant leadership; toxic leadership; and post-industrial perspectives, among others.

## Description

The assignment required students not only to facilitate online asynchronous discussions but also to design the types of activities and questions that would be discussed. The central aim for this assignment was to stimulate students to think more deeply about the connections between leadership theory, research, and practice, and to allow for substantive peer-to-peer interactions, laying the foundation for a rich *community of inquiry*. This assignment required students to actively discover deeper connections between the theory and research from the course readings, and current or future professional practice.

Beaudin (1999) asserted that the four most effective methods for keeping online discussions on topic were 1) designing clear, focused questions, 2) providing guidelines to help students create relevant responses, 3) rewording the original question when responses were straying, and 4) providing regular discussion summaries. As such, students were guided by instructional materials provided by the professors on *Generating Questions & Interactive Activities* as well as on *Facilitating the Discussion*. They were also provided with examples and grading rubrics. Evaluation of the discussion boards included 5 domains: *Preparation*; *Organization*; *Activities/Questions*; *Participation*, and *Writing Quality*. The first two dimensions (*Preparation* and *Organization*) reflected the discussants' preparedness in understanding the leadership theories/concepts and their ability to organize the discussion activity/questions that logically flow and progressively challenge students to an in-depth understanding of the concepts. The last three dimensions (*Activity/Questions*; *Participation*; and *Writing Quality*) reflected the execution of the discussion as to how well the activity elicited student responses, and their ability to engage with other students toward an in-depth understanding of the module readings.

Students assumed one of two general roles during each module: *discussant* or *participant*. Discussants, as teams of two, were responsible for initiating and facilitating interactive discussion among the course participants. Students were paired together during the second week of the course, and were assigned the module for which they were responsible to lead. Discussants were provided detailed guidelines for their role. Additionally, they were instructed to design activities requiring participants to go beyond mere summarization of material by creating engaging discussion that achieved higher levels of critical thinking (Krathwohl, 2010). Discussant pairs were urged to brainstorm ideas and create a plan for the activity. They were required to interact with the instructor at least one week prior to the assigned module to ensure activity quality, and address any questions the discussants may have regarding their role and expectations. The instructor's role was to 1) provide extensive feedback on the proposed questions/activities; 2) ensure the pair understood the course readings for the module; 3) edit and refine the discussion activities; and 4) guide the pair in thinking through the types of interaction and responses they were likely to generate and how they would facilitate higher order critical thinking and maximum engagement. In effect, discussants were to serve as experts guiding the participants through engaging interaction over the content.

All other students not leading the discussion for the given module were designated as *participants*. Participants were expected to demonstrate evidence of knowledge and understanding of the course content and its applicability to professional practice through their responses to the discussants' activity. In order for participants to potentially receive full credit for the discussion activity, they were required to submit one initial response per the discussants'

instructions and three substantive responses to their peers during the module session, resulting in a minimum requirement of four posts per student per discussion board forum.

### **Analysis of Outcomes**

This activity resulted in tremendous student engagement and sophisticated levels of critical thinking. In general, students posted earlier, more often, and were more invested in the relationships with their classmates and instructor. Between the two sections, there were a total of 29 people who posted to the forums, including two instructors, in 18 separate student-led discussion forums. The variety and quality of the discussant teams' strategies were impressive. The learning activities included student-written original case studies, TED talks, documentary video clips, movie critiques, supplementary scholarly articles, an original survey on power vs. position, self- and leader-assessments, and a myriad of critical reflection questions designed to synthesize theory, research, and practice. There were a total of 2,184 individual posts within the 18 student-led discussion forums, resulting in an average of 8.2 posts per participant per week, more than double the minimum requirement.

The discussants did not ask simplistic questions but instead sought to make critical connections between theory, research, and practice, as designed. To highlight one example, a discussant team developed a detailed original scenario about Sally, a program director of a college campus radio station who was having trouble getting some of her student workers to comply with FCC regulations. The discussants asked eight multi-part questions (of which participants were asked to answer at least five) related to readings on Fiedler's contingency model and the least-preferred coworker scale, situational leadership, and the Vroom-Yetton/Vroom-Jago model of contingent decision-making. They also asked about specific things a professional could and should do in a similar situation. Several high-quality conversations ensued, with the discussants asking probing questions throughout. This student-led discussion was so engaging that this particular forum generated an average of 11.1 posts per participant.

### **Practitioner Reflection**

We both had reservations about the efficacy and value of student-led discussions for a variety of reasons. As experienced online instructors, we have spent years honing skills as discussion facilitators, and take pride in the types of questions and interaction we are able to generate on the discussion boards in our courses. While we always provide avenues for student-to-student interaction and other active learning techniques in our online classes, we were apprehensive about ceding control of the discussion forums to students. We were not fully convinced it would yield as high quality results as we were already getting in our courses. In short, we were wrong. Between us, we have taught scores of online courses over the past several years, most at the graduate level, and we have never experienced the quantity or quality of interaction and critical thinking that the "Module Discussant" activity generated in this course.

As instructors of leadership education it is our job to develop learning environments that foster social, cognitive, and teaching presence as a community of inquiry. On discussion forums, this means we must signal to students that their posts are being read, while encouraging student-to-student interactions and ensuring we are not the center of the discussion. There was such a robust discussion throughout each module there was little doubt about social presence in these

forums. Ensuring cognitive presence was a little more challenging, but it happened on the front-end. The key to facilitating this assignment was to work closely with the discussant teams before their activity was finalized and posted. We did this by video-conferencing with the teams to provide guidance and answer questions well before the week in which they were assigned to facilitate. They then sent us rough drafts of their ideas. We provided extensive feedback, and then uploaded their final draft to the discussion board. The conversation and feedback cycle provided an opportunity for us to determine their cognitive presence, and in turn, help them foster a community of inquiry within their designated forum.

It turns out that we did not cede control of the forums as we thought we might. In fact, it was the opposite. Conferring with the teams ahead of time, reflecting on the readings with them, helping them refine their activities and questions, and in some cases stretching ourselves to see the connections they were seeing, only served to enhance the course experience exponentially, both for us and for them. The level of discourse and one-on-one communication generated through helping them prepare for this assignment allowed us to develop deeper relationships with every student in the course.

The end-of-course evaluations show that the students also had a similar positive experience with this assignment. Students were asked to evaluate the level of student-to-student contact and the level of critical analysis and reflection. Figure 1 displays the results students offered, with a sampling of representative comments.

Question	Statistics
<i>My instructor encourages communication and/or cooperation among students.</i> 1: Strongly Disagree - 2: Disagree - 3: Neutral - 4: Agree - 5: Strongly Agree	Mean 4.583

My instructor encouraged communication to the fullest.  
 Killer Discussion Boards. Truly make you engage.  
 Lots of interaction via DB.  
 Grades were directly reflective of participation, and the instructor emphasized the importance of communication.  
 Does a great job facilitating virtual learning.

Question	Statistics
<i>My instructor encourages me to engage in critical reflection and analysis.</i> 1: Strongly Disagree - 2: Disagree - 3: Neutral - 4: Agree - 5: Strongly Agree	Mean 4.727

Reflection and critical analysis was not only required at times but was always encouraged.  
 All Discussion Boards and assignments require depth of knowledge and thought  
 I have learned a great deal through personal reflections in this course.

*Figure 1.* End-of-Course Evaluation Results

All in all, this was a very positive experience and will become a regular part of our graduate level courses.

## **Student Reflection**

As defined in the description of the activity, the central aim of the “Module Discussant” assignment was to help students think deeply about the connections between leadership research, theory, and practice. As a student participant in this activity, I can attest this to be true of the experience. Being able to apply leadership concepts to the real-world context is extremely important in leadership education. Throughout the course in which the “Module Discussant” assignment was used, I was able to connect my past and current workplace culture to leadership theory. Led by a different group of students each week, who came from a variety of backgrounds, each discussion forum was unique, which provided an array of perspectives.

During the week that my partner and I were assigned to lead the discussion, we were assigned to discuss relational leadership theory, leader-member exchange (LMX), and social network theory. In order to keep with the theme of applying theory to the real world, my partner and I developed a brief case study, accompanied by a short video. In addition to writing the case, we developed discussion questions, which was the most difficult part of the assignment; however, this offered the opportunity for my partner and me to think critically, as we were challenged to think like an instructor. It is important to note that while our professor guided the development of our questions, she did not tell us what to ask our classmates; our professor simply helped us confirm our understanding of the material and affirm our level of thinking.

Throughout the week my partner and I served as discussants, we monitored our classmates’ posts. This was quite challenging in that we were encouraged to potentially challenge our peers’ comments, and help them achieve a higher level of thinking. Many students also challenged us as the discussants, which gave us the opportunity to reflect on our attitudes toward the subject. In all, this experience left me with the feeling that online discussion boards have the potential to be the most beneficial learning activity in an online course. The “Module Discussant” activity created the most engaging and active learning environment I have ever experienced in an online course. Without the experience, I am confident I would not have been able to fully understand the practical applicability for many leadership theories.

## **Recommendations and Conclusion**

Based on the faculty and student experiences and reflection regarding the “Module Discussant” activity, we offer several recommendations for future use. First, instructors ought to carefully select module discussant pairings, and assign early module discussant roles. Instructors facilitated the first few modules of the course with the aim to model expected discussant and participant behavior for the students. This served a secondary purpose that allowed the instructor to evaluate students who demonstrated strong leadership theory comprehension and capacity for sophisticated critical thinking. Students exhibiting these qualities were assigned to the discussant role early in the semester to help establish and maintain high expectations for the quality of the discussant activities and subsequent interaction with other students.

Second, instructors ought to interact with discussants at least one week in advance of when the team is scheduled to lead the discussion. This interaction serves several functions. For instance, instructors are able to ensure that students have a strong comprehension of the material

as well as to ensure that the discussants have selected an activity that challenges other students to not only demonstrate their knowledge but requires them to exhibit high levels of critical thinking about the module content. It was our experience that students often found it difficult to ‘ask the right questions’ that probed others to achieve higher order thinking. Frequent interaction with discussants prior to their assigned module greatly aided this effort.

Finally, we strongly recommend that students maintain appropriate self-discipline and time management skills, especially in the weeks leading up to their assigned discussant role. Module discussants must be familiar with the assigned readings and begin formulating possible discussion board activities several weeks in advance. Preparation on their part greatly enhances the interaction with the instructor in planning for the activity, and tremendously aides the quality of module discussion with other students.

This application brief depicts a useful strategy to facilitate high-impact online interaction between students. The authors will facilitate future online leadership theory courses by incorporating the “Module Discussant” assignment, and encourage others to apply the activity in their respective courses and conduct more robust research on its efficacy. Moreover, we invite other scholars and practitioners to participate in further discourse to develop and refine research-based best practices in online leadership theory courses. We are happy to share all materials with others interested in facilitating this activity in leadership theory courses. These materials include a packet of assignment guidelines, rubrics for evaluation, criteria for feedback, and examples.

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