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Students' Experience of the Online Discussion Forum as a Tool for Asynchronous Learning

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Abstract

In this study, we explore and document students' experiences of the online discussion forum as a tool for promoting asynchronous learning to complement the face-to-face instructions at a private Emirati university. We used a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches to collect and analyze data. Our study indicates that many participants were familiar with the platform despite being in their first year. They also find it helpful to gather information to address real-life issues and prepare for examination asynchronously. However, using the forum as a learning tool was not without some problems. Students find it challenging to respond to the initial questions and to respond to peers' posts. Our study reveals that these problems can be mitigated by active instructors' involvement, probing questions related to exams, and provision of real-life examples.

Keywords: Online discussion forum, Undergraduate students, Teaching, Emirati context, Asynchronous learning.

Introduction

Online learning platforms are increasingly becoming popular to support teaching and learning in higher education institutions. Pre-COVID-19 pandemic, researchers indicate that the traditional face-to-face instructions are most likely to feature more online activities to support students' learning (Hamdan, 2014; Aderibigbe, 2020). No wonder, universities are offering blended and fully online courses to address the changing needs of students, including flexible arrangement and preference for online learning opportunities (Sharma et al., 2019; Lauver, Drum, Windsor & Miller, 2013) and their safety in emergency situations. Explaining this further, Hamdan (2014) argues that blended learning challenges the traditional format of education and leans towards a student-centered approach, which is the current trend in higher education. In an experimental study, Alsalhi, Al-Qatawneh Eltahir and Aqel (2021) found that students who learned through blended learning approach demonstrated better academic achievement compared to their colleagues without such an opportunity.

With the adoption of virtual learning platforms and establishment of online universities, it is clear that online education is not new to the Middle East region. That said, efforts need to be intensified to strengthen the approach for enhanced students' learning experiences. Ashour (2019) contends that there is a shortage of studies on the application of technology to educational contexts despite the youths' interest in using technology within Arab societies. She argued further that higher institutions need to plan and implement an innovative idea in line with the characteristics of the students who constitute the new generations. Citing Ramanau (2016), Hwang (2018) argues that the need for exploring students' online learning experiences in international and varied cultural contexts is necessary. As Hwang (2018) explains, variations in participants' characteristics, including their treasured cultural values, can impact their engagement in the online learning contexts. Thus, we explored students' understanding and experience of the online discussion forum employed to offer flexible learning opportunities in the context of this study, described in the methods section. Knowing their views and experience can inform policies, approaches, and theoretical frameworks to support them better in their stud-

ies using the online discussion forum. Essentially, the information can help strengthen the blended and hybrid learning models being employed as precautionary attempts to protect students from the COVID-19 pandemic while continuing their education. We contend that educators, students, policy-makers, and other stakeholders in education and wellness stand to benefit when more studies are conducted on students' experience of online learning platforms.

Additionally, we contend that this study adds to the existing international literature on online discussions in higher institutions as it documents students' experiences and thoughts in an Emirati cultural context. Further, it highlights the possible challenges an institution may face when introducing a new technological learning platform, especially in the Emirati and Middle East contexts. In the next section, we further clarified the research problem which influenced our perceptions and interests in the study.

Problem Statements

The promotion of quality education is a core pillar of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) Vision 2021 agenda. As such, there is sophisticated infrastructure, including advanced technologies and high-speed internet, in the country. Educational institutions are also encouraged to adopt modern pedagogies and use technology to strengthen teaching and equip the youths with contemporary skills to contribute to societal growth (UAE Vision 2021). Due to this philosophy, online learning activities as components of the blended learning approach are incorporated into educational programs in schools and higher institutions across the UAE, even in the pre-COVID-19 time. Alsalthi et al. (2021) note that higher institutions in the UAE are working to enhance teaching and learning methodologies with the appropriate use of technology. However, Ashour (2019) reports that students are still using technology in a conventional way for daily activities instead of using it innovatively to promote learning. In the same vein, Sharma et al. (2019), while drawing on some previous studies, contend that the blended learning approach can be counterproductive if students do not use the platform effectively and it is not well-managed by instructors. They further argue that the method can also be ineffective if facilitators and students do not know how to use the technological tools. We agree with the scholars and contend that no context is an exemp-

tion. After identifying these issues, we focused our attention in this study on students' experiences of the online discussion forum at an Emirati University. In streamlining the study's focus, we generated the following research questions to guide our data collection and analysis process:

- 1 - To what extent do students report that they are familiar with the online discussion forum?
- 2 - How beneficial do students see the online discussion forum in this context as a tool for asynchronous learning?
- 3 - What issues do students have when using the forum, and how can such problems be reduced?
- 4 - Having discussed the research problem and highlighted the research questions, it is essential to discuss the related theoretical framework and extant literature. Thus, we focus on these in the next section.

Theoretical Framework And Related Literature

As earlier pointed out, the place of online education platforms cannot be over-emphasized in today's educational landscape. However, educators need to adopt a theoretical framework to develop and implement online learning strategies through evidence-based practices (Garrison, Cleveland-Innes & Fung, 2010). To this end, Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2010) suggest the Community of Inquiry (COI), a framework consistent with the constructivist pedagogies, where students take ownership of the learning process and help each other learn. The COI promotes learning settings characterized by three dimensions: cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence. The cognitive presence supports critical thinking in students as they are provided with problems that they explore, analyze, and address by combining efforts. Students engage, communicate, socialize, and interact as real people through the social presence to achieve common objectives, taking their emotions, beliefs, and cultural values into consideration. The teaching presence involves teachers' efforts to plan and deliver curriculum contents, monitor students' learning, and provide feedback to strengthen their learning (Warner, 2016). The framework supports the process through which learners socialize and engage in collaborative learning endeavors to enhance their mutual interests

(Shea et al., 2010). Further, online collaborative efforts improve students' experiential experience in the online learning contexts, including the online discussion forum (Hwang, 2018).

Paolini (2015) argues that an ideal contemporary learning model integrates different functions empowering learners to participate in available learning activities smoothly. Further, teachers' roles will continue to be relevant for active engagement and interactions in online learning settings (Hwang, 2018). Not surprisingly, Poon (2013) adds that instructors should consider providing students with learning experiences capable of helping them to develop professional skills and knowledge crucial for employability. Besides, the learning environments should be adaptable, interactive and characterized by a process through which students get regular and formative feedback (Poon, 2013). These features can motivate students to engage actively (Wong, Tatnall & Burgess 2014). Similarly, scholars argue that instructors, who explicitly communicate, clarify expectations, reply to emails, and provide regular constructive feedback impacts positively on students' learning (Stein, Wanstreet, Stragle, Trinko & Lutz, 2012).

While the absence of regular constructive feedback and clarification of expectations can hinder students' learning in a blended learning context, other challenges that may affect a combination of different learning strategies must be acknowledged. Harris, Connolly and Feeney (2009) argue that evaluation, pedagogy, skills training, human factors (interaction and understanding about a system), technology, and implementation could impact the blended learning approaches. As such, they stress that educators should consider the areas when planning and implementing the strategies. It is also important to note that a blend of different methods as a strategy for teaching and learning is primarily context-dependent concerning design and implementation (Harris et al., 2009). Further, institutions and course instructors need to explore the specifics of learning strategies and practices that evolve when technology is introduced to teaching and learning contexts (Aderibigbe, 2021; Halverson et al., 2012). Among others, this will include the online discussion forum to determine what works for them and their students. In the same vein, Galyon, Heaton, Best and Williams (2016) argue that it is necessary to examine the

factors that can promote or hinder the usability and effectiveness of technology as its role in students' learning increases. In doing this, in this study, we started by identifying the research problem. We then examined the related theoretical framework and literature for understanding the process to enhance students' learning through the online discussion forum. After reviewing the extant literature considering our research questions, we elected to answer the questions using a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Figure 1 shows that research framework summarizing the sequence followed to complete the study.

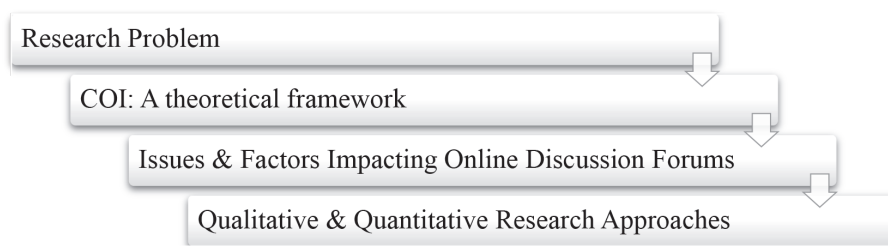


Figure 1:

Research Framework

In the next section, we described the methodology used to complete this research in detail.

Methodology

Context

We conducted this study at a private university in Dubai. Embedded in the university's LMS are tools for facilitating both synchronous and asynchronous discussions with students online, including forum, journal, and glossary. At the University, students attend classes along with their counterparts of the opposite gender. However, in line with Emirati culture, there are restrictions on the level of closeness between and among people (males & females) who are not related by blood or marriage. Given that most of the students are males and Emiratis, the online discussion forum provided an ethical space for strengthening students' learning experiences without violating Emirati cultur-

al norms. Many of the students are working, married, on a full-time evening program, and residing in other cities such as Sharjah, Al Ain, Abu Dhabi, and Ras Al Khaimah. As such, we hoped that the approach would offer equitable and flexible learning opportunities for them. It is also important to mention that the English language is the medium of instruction in the university except for the College of Law, where students take classes in Arabic language.

In facilitating students' learning using the online discussion forum, we posted reflective questions after face-to-face classes to help students engage and learn from each other asynchronously. We allowed students to share thoughts before getting involved in their discussion, adding our thoughts, and providing them with necessary constructive feedback. Through this approach, we were able to maintain teaching, cognitive, and social presences (Garrison et al., 2010 b; Warner, 2016).

Research Design and Methods

Given the complex nature of students' online learning experience, we elected to rely on both quantitative and qualitative data to answer our research questions. We employed this approach because of our desire to seek a better and comprehensive understanding of our students' online discussion forum experience (Creswell, 2014). So, the quantitative phase offered the chance to gauge the common thoughts of the students. In contrast, the quantitative phase provided the opportunity to seek clarifications guided by the students' nuanced understanding of the issues explored.

Data Collection and Instruments' Administration Procedure

In collecting data for the study, we reached out to all the students enrolled in four sections of a General Education course (Introduction to Social Sciences). In the study's first phase, we used a Likert-scale type questionnaire to collect data from the students enrolled in the course. We divided the questionnaire into two sections, with the first section covering the demographics of the respondents, while the second part focused on their experiences of the online discussion forum. We chose a survey as we needed to reach out to most of the students who enrolled for the course across the four sections (Cohen,

Marion & Morrison, 2011). In this sense, we purposively targeted all the students in the four classes because they share some common characteristics, and we felt the need to get their shared thoughts about the online discussion forum (Patton, 2014). We distributed the questionnaires to 128 students registered for the course and got 75 completed copies back 59%. Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the 75 students who filled and returned the questionnaires. As the chart indicates, most of the students are males, in Year 1 and from the College of Business Administration, while a high percentage are in their early 20s.

Table 1.

Demographic characteristics of the participants (n=75).

Variable	Description	Percentage
College	College of Mass and Media Communication	19
	College of Computer and Information Technology	13
	College of Fine and Applied Arts	7
	College of Business Administration	61
Year of Study	Year 1	69
	Year 2	17
	Year 3	9
	Year 4	5
Age	18 – 22	47
	23 – 27	31
	28 – 32	13
	33 and above	9
Gender	Male	62
	Female	38

After administering the survey, we conducted a focus group in the English language with a small number of students to seek explanations on some of the responses we obtained from our quantitative data (Creswell, 2014).

To recruit students for the focus group discussion, we asked students

who filled the questionnaires to indicate at the bottom if they would like to participate in a follow-up study. From the returned surveys, 12 students agreed to participate in the focus group discussion; however, only 4 of them eventually participated in the discussion. Three of the participants were males, while the remaining one was female. We admit that the small number of participants in the second and qualitative phase is a limitation to the study because generalization may be impossible through the data and the sampling technique. However, we conducted the focus group discussion, which lasted for about 60 minutes, with the 4 participants given that we intended to generate qualitative, nuanced data and not to generalize (Aderibigbe, Antiado & Sta Ana, 2015).

We recorded the focus group discussion digitally and transcribed it verbally. In facilitating the conversation, we used a semi-structured guide as it provides us the flexibility to ask relevant questions and seek clarifications where necessary (Patton, 2014). In this sense, the focus group discussion helped us to collect qualitative data focused on our students' experience about the online discussion forum in this context. We later drew on the quantitative and qualitative data to discuss our findings and other scholars' views and existing literature for triangulation (Aderibigbe et al., 2015). Thus, we were able to get a sense of our students' shared and individually constructed opinions regarding the online discussion forum.

Data Analyses Procedure

Regarding analysis, we analyzed our quantitative data using a descriptive statistic technique. Precisely, we calculated the frequency distribution of students' responses to the questionnaire items and then presented the findings in a table. On the other hand, we analyzed our qualitative data thematically following the inductive and iterative thematic process to determine participants' common views (Creswell, 2014) and the underpinning reasons for the common thoughts (Connell et al., 2018). In doing this, we read the transcripts of our data severally, after which we built patterns and themes based on shared opinions expressed by the participants. We shared thoughts on the emerging trends and ideas and revised the themes vis-à-vis the goals of our study.

Validity, Reliability and Trustworthiness

We checked for the content and face validity of the questionnaire items by sharing the first draft with four experienced colleagues along with our research objectives. We did this to ensure that all items covered all aspects of the study, appeared meaningful, were easy to understand for university students, and can help answer the research questions adequately (Connell et al., 2018). Their feedback helped us make necessary modifications to ensure that the items address the goals of our study. We also tested the reliability of the questionnaire by administering the survey to ten students in two sections on two different occasions at an interval of about three weeks. Consistency in the results confirms its reliability and clarity (Patton, 2014). We used the comments made by students and four colleagues in the initial draft to revise and craft the final draft. For the qualitative data, we did member checking by providing transcripts of the focus group discussion to the participants, to see if the data represent their thoughts or not (Patton, 2014). Participants indicated their satisfaction and desire not to change any part of the transcript. Also, triangulation of data from questionnaires, focus group discussion, and online discussion data lend credibility and trustworthiness to this study (Creswell, 2014).

Ethical Considerations

Our data collection process followed the British Educational Research Association's (2011) ethical guidelines. For instance, we got permission to conduct the study and considered the confidentiality of our participants as we did not mention any names in our report. Moreover, students were not forced to take part in the study, as their participation was voluntary. We also acknowledge that there might be issues with the instructor-student relationship in this context. As a result, we assured students of their rights to pull out of the study anytime without consequences. We got them to complete the questionnaires anonymously, and we conducted the focus group discussion after releasing students' results. So, students were not under any pressure to participate in the study.

In this section, we discussed the context of the study, methods employed to collect and analyze data, validity, reliability and trustworthiness issues, and

ethical considerations. In the next section, we present the findings from the data analyzed.

Findings

As earlier explained, the data collected were analyzed using a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Here, we present our findings starting with the quantitative data, followed by the themes emerging from the qualitative data. In discussing our results, we highlight the items with the highest percentage from the quantitative data and the key themes that emerged from the qualitative data to show the strengths in participants' standpoints. As argued in Aderibigbe and Ajasa (2013), this approach can potentially provide relevant information to university management, instructors, and course designers to effectively utilize innovative technology-assisted learning platforms.

Table 2.

Students' views and perceptions about the online discussion forum (n=75).

Students' responses to the following questions:		Frequency	Percentage
To what extent were you already familiar with the on-line learning platform?	Very familiar	24	32
	Familiar	36	48
	Moderately familiar	12	16
	Not familiar at all	3	4
How easy was it to use the on-line discussion platform?	Very easy	31	41
	Easy	36	48
	Slightly easy	0	0
	Not easy at all	8	11
To what extent was the on-line discussion platform useful?	Extremely useful	12	16
	Useful	45	60
	Slightly useful	16	21
	Not useful at all	2	3

Cont. Table 2.*Students' views and perceptions about the online discussion forum (n=75).*

Students' responses to the following questions:		Frequency	Percentage
How much did you learn from the course through the on-line discussion platform?	A lot	19	25
	A fair amount	38	51
	A little	16	21
	Nothing	2	3
How valuable did you find your tutors' contributions in the on-line discussions?	Very valuable	22	29
	Valuable	46	61
	Slightly valuable	6	8
	Not valuable at all	1	1
What aspect of the on-line discussion platform was difficult for you?	Responding to initial questions	26	35
	Responding to colleagues' views	21	28
	Reading others' comments	12	16
	Following trends of discussions	16	21

Students' Familiarity with the Online Discussion Forum

We asked respondents to indicate the extent to which they were familiar with the online discussion forum in this context. Despite that more than half of the participants were in Year 1, the quantitative data reveals that most were familiar with the online discussion forum. Not surprisingly, many of them also indicated that they found the online discussion forum easy to use, as shown in Table 2. This finding may be because some of the students might have experience with such a learning platform before joining the university, as the use of technology in education is a strategic priority of the UAE government. In line with the Vision 2021 plans of the UAE, students might indeed expect that their courses provide them with the opportunity to learn through an online platform that can enhance their interaction with their colleagues and instruc-

tors. However, the fact that less than 20% of them reported that they were not familiar with the online discussion forum or find it not easy to use is also a cause for concern. It might, therefore, be inaccurate to assume that all students today are aware of educational technology tools such as the platform and its functionalities despite using technology day-to-day. It could also be that some of the students are using technology for daily endeavors, but not in innovative ways to strengthen their learning (Ashour, 2019). As such, institutions and instructors need to provide orientations focusing on the values of the online discussion forum and give students time to understand the new learning terrain and its potential benefits.

The participants involved in the focus group discussion indicated that they were first-time users of the online discussion forum as a learning tool from the qualitative data. That is, the only theme that emerged from the qualitative data regarding students' familiarity with the online discussion forum is 'first time user.' The following comments show this:

I started using the online discussion when I selected the Introduction to Social Sciences course (Participant A).

I have been using the online discussion since I took the subject, Introduction to Social Sciences (Participant B).

For me, this is the first time I used it in my life (Participant C).

This revelation is not surprising as our quantitative data shows that some respondents were moderately familiar while some were not familiar with the online discussion forum. However, one participant who had studied abroad explained that he has come across the online discussion forum before the Introduction to Social Sciences class:

I have been to some universities here and abroad. I am kind of used to it. So it's nothing new to me (Participant D).

From these findings, it is apparent that not all the students were familiar with the online discussion forum, which seems to explain why some did not

find it easy to use. Thus, this reinforces the quantitative data and the need for orientations to be considered to help students better understand the platform for its goals to be achieved. Consistent with this finding, Harris et al. (2009) argued that educators should consider skills-building training for students when employing a combination of different learning approaches. Besides, instructors and instructional technologists should assure students of ongoing support within a university system. As reported in Sharma et al. (2019), they also have to manage the forum to impact students' learning positively. Thus, one-time training without constant support may not be adequate, especially for students new to the university and technology-enhanced learning systems.

Benefits of the Online Discussion Forum in this Context

To determine the benefits of the online discussion forum for students in this context, we asked them to indicate the extent to which the platform was useful. We also asked them to signpost how much they could learn from the course through the online discussion forum. As Table 2 revealed, most of the respondents found the online discussion a valuable outlet, while most indicated that they learned a lot through the platform. Further, most of the respondents found the instructors' contributions in online discussions beneficial to their learning process in the course. These findings reinforce the previous studies that the use of online learning platforms in addition to the traditional face-to-face approach strengthens students' learning (Alsalhi et al., 2021; Poon 2013; Halverson et al., 2012).

Notwithstanding, 24% of the students did indicate that they learned a little through the platform, while less than 10% found it a little valuable. These students may not be receptive to change or may not consider the platform as an avenue to learn despite its potentials, including the promotion of flexible and asynchronous engagements. Ashour (2019) explained that students treasure the flexibility to study and work through technology, but some are not tapping into its capacity to foster their learning. It is also not a surprise that some researchers suggest that students' learning preference need to be understood by instructors to achieve the goals of education (Lauver et al., 2013; Poon, 2013). Thus, instructors need to acknowledge the individual differences in

students when planning to facilitate students' learning using a blended learning approach involving the online discussion forum. Instructors also need to reassure students of their regular support while introducing them to a new technological platform for teaching and learning. Doing this conforms to the COI framework where probing questions, social engagement among students, and constant feedback to foster understanding are taken seriously (Garrison et al., 2010a; Garrison et al., 2010b; Warner, 2016).

To clarify the specific benefits of the online discussion forum, we asked the focus group participants to comment on the advantages. Three key themes emerged from the qualitative data, as follows:

Examinations and Real-life Situations. Participants indicated that they were able to get relevant information to prepare for exams as well as real-life situations:

For me, it was helpful because most of the questions are direct questions, and they help us in preparing for exams. To be honest, it helps us to understand how questions may come in exams and how we can answer the questions (Participant B).

Participants also acknowledged that information to prepare adequately for exams is provided, but real-life examples were also valuable:

We do not depend on the online discussion because of exams alone, but we are also preparing ourselves for the real life as well (Participant A).

I have been learning so many things about the subject, about life and how it's working, about people, how they think, different race, businesses and who have power (Participant B).

Different but Relevant Information. Another finding is that participants were able to get various information relevant to their studies and lives through their engagement with one another in the online discussion forum:

It has extensive information, and it explains everything that has to do with life (Participant A).

You keep getting different information from various sources if you study on-line if you read books, but the discussions were useful because they kept us on track (Participant D).

Feedback from Professors. Feedback from professors through the on-line discussion forum was also thought to be a benefit to the students. The following remarks explain this:

The doctors were giving us feedback and advice about what to do and what not to do (Participant D).

Different examples given by doctors about the concepts taught were useful (Participant A).

The examples provided by the instructor were helpful. For instance, giving an example of real life and how things work (Participant B).

These qualitative data corroborate the quantitative data where students reported that they could learn from each other and their professors through the online discussion forum. Therefore, these findings suggest that online discussions well facilitated and coordinated with tutors' prompt feedback can assist students in learning, sharing ideas, and preparing for examinations. Not only this, but it can also help them connect or apply what is discussed in the forum to real-life situations (Poon, 2013) as they can reflect on what they have seen or experienced to strengthen their arguments while helping each other learn online.

To understand the likely issues that students may have while using the online discussion forum, we asked them to indicate the problems they face in the online discussion forum in this context. As shown in Table 2, a high number 35% of the respondents said they found it challenging to respond to initial questions posted on the platform. This number was closely followed by 28% of the respondents who considered responding to colleagues' views as a challenge for them while 21% selected following trends of discussions. Reading others' comments was seen as a minor challenge for students in the online discussion.

This finding indicates that efforts need to be made to plan and facilitate online discussions so that students are motivated to respond to initial questions. In doing this, questions need to be crafted to help students understand the key messages and link them to the course learning outcomes. Doing this might give students the impression that their instructors care about their success and become more motivated to engage actively in the learning process (Paolini, 2015). However, Paolini argued that students demonstrate commitments when held accountable for their participation in their class activities. So, students need to be continuously reminded to participate in online discussions as their moral responsibility to help each other learn. Besides, they should be reminded to consider the online discussion forum as an avenue to share thoughts without any intimidations and showcase their knowledge for cross-fertilization of ideas with colleagues.

Our qualitative data indicates that two major issues may hinder students from using the online discussion forum effectively, and they are as follows:

Tutors' Response and Explanation. As enunciated below, tutors' approach and style can impact students' learning through the online discussion forum:

Maybe the doctors are not responding as quickly as possible? I wish we could have a quicker response from the doctors (Participant C).

Maybe the way the doctors explain may not be encouraging (Participant A).

Students' Attitude. On the other hand, the participants thought students' attitudes could also affect their learning while engaging with colleagues on the platform:

Maybe students are not responding or not using critical thinking skills to understand and answer questions online (Participant A).

Participants also explained that some questions might be tricky, but students could make such matters more challenging if they are unable to strive hard to have the questions answered:

Yes but nothing is complicated. If I have difficulty with a question, I will search on Google. Maybe students are not trying. So, students need to do more to try. If they try, they can do it (Participant B)

The findings point to the need for both instructors and students to demonstrate commitment, passion and dedicate more time to the learning conversations in the online discussion forum. On the one hand, instructors need to provide adequate guidance and clear explanations of concepts to help students learn. More importantly, they have to motivate students by responding to their questions and promptly clarifying assumptions (Stein et al., 2012). Students can find it challenging to learn in the events that this is missing through the online discussion forum. This sentiment is consistent with the COI's teaching presence, emphasizing the need for tutors' efforts to engage more promptly with students when using the online discussion forum to facilitate students' learning. (Garrison et al., 2010a; Garrison et al., 2010b; Warner, 2016).

On the other hand, students need to be more committed to their learning by critically analyzing issues before responding and conduct independent research to foster their understanding. For this to happen, students have to be intrinsically motivated to participate in the learning process through the platform, apart from the external incentive of getting good grades. This notion is in line with the constructivist and COI theoretical frameworks, allowing students to take leadership and ownership of the learning processes through their actions (Garrison et al., 2010a; Garrison et al., 2010b; Warner, 2016). Notwithstanding, our qualitative data reveal that the issues affecting students' learning in the online forum can be minimized. Regarding measures required to reduce the problems for students to be able to engage actively in the online discussion, three themes emerged from our data, and they are as follows:

Type and Purpose of Questions. A key finding as a way forward to reducing the challenges to the online discussion forum is the kind of question set by tutors. As a participant explained, asking some questions can motivate students to be actively involved in the online discussion:

For me, I think asking specific questions that I call motivating questions which would help students to work more (Participant A).

Echoing the importance of the type of questions as a motivating factor for students to engage actively in an online discussion, another participant explained that asking questions that could help students to prepare for examinations is necessary:

If the doctors (instructors) can also post questions that may be relevant and related to exams, students would be encouraged to get more involved (Participant C).

Real-life Examples. The participants indicated that the provision of examples related to real-life situations could also motivate students to be actively engaged in the online discussion:

I think more examples of real life would help students to understand the subject better (Participant B).

I agree. Real life examples would be useful (Participant A).

Marks for Participation. Another motivating factor for students to take the online discussions more seriously is to award them some marks for their participation. This view is enunciated in the following remarks:

I know that the doctor (instructor) said five marks are given for involvement in the online discussion. To be honest, I was involved because of the marks. That could be a real motivating factor (Participant D).

I can guarantee you that no one will open the portal if the five marks are not given (Participant C).

I totally agree with participant D, but some people don't have many contributions. They still have to be given some marks to encourage them (Participant A).

However, a participant noted that giving students marks for their participation needs to be encouraged, but students as well need to be actively engaged in the online discussion:

The online discussion is helping some people to get marks. At the same time, it is helping them to learn about the subject. If you're looking for marks, you need to be involved in that (Participant B).

From the findings, it is indispensable for instructors to consider some factors if students are to be motivated to engage actively in online discussion. For instance, instructors need to craft questions so that students are helped to learn about fundamental concepts taught and how they can connect them to real-life scenarios (Paolini, 2015). Consistent with the COI's cognitive and teaching elements, questions should provoke responses to help students prepare for examinations. At the same time, they should get some marks for their participation in online discussions (Garrison et al., 2010a; Garrison et al., 2010b; Warner, 2016).

Much as the data presentation and discussion were explicitly done, highlighting the implications of the findings is necessary. As such, the following section focuses on the conclusion and implications for stakeholders and professional practices.

Conclusion and Implications

This study documents students' experience of a newly introduced online discussion forum as a learning platform embedded in LMS at an Emirati private university. Our findings indicate that the platform was beneficial to students as they were able to engage and learn from each other without crossing any cultural boundary. Thus, in a reasonably traditional and international context such as ours, faculty members can regularly incorporate learning conversation through the online discussion forum to complement conventional face-to-face teaching as a means for consolidating institutional strategic goals. Using the platform can provide the opportunity for cross-fertilization of ideas between and among students of different gender with the Emirati tradition and cultural values upheld. For this to be effective, however, students should be given orientation and constant support as some may not be familiar with the platform. Instructors should also post probing questions focused on strengthening students' critical thinking skills and abilities to connect concepts and real-life situations. Besides, instructors planning to incorporate online debate

in a course should consider constructing online questions in a way that helps students to study in preparation for exams.

Much as the benefits of the online discussion forum cannot be over-emphasized, it is necessary to stress that the use of the platform is not without some challenges. For instance, students may find it challenging to respond to initial questions and respond to peers' posts while the tutor's approach may also hinder students' commitment to online discussions. Thus, instructors need to consider different strategies to make the online discussion forum attractive to students. The procedures may include using videos, recorded lectures like TEDtalks, recorded messages, and sharing the coordination of online activities with students. Instructors also need to be actively involved in online discussions through timely, constructive feedback and contributions to issues discussed.

Last, this study draws mainly on students' views of the online discussion forum in the Emirati educational and cultural setting. Future studies may incorporate different data sets, including actual students' assignments and academic reports related to online discussions. Future studies may draw on data from students across many disciplinary areas or an entire University system for comparative and critical analyses of the discourses related to online discussions. Impacts of culture and gender can also be considered variables for strengthening understanding about the use of online discussion forums in the region.

تجربة الطلاب في المنتدى النقاشي عبر الإنترنت كأداة للتعليم غير المتزامن

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الملخص

في هذه الدراسة ، نستكشف ونوثق تجارب الطلاب في المنتدى النقاشي عبر الإنترنت كأداة لتعزيز التعلم غير المتزامن لاستكمال التعليم المباشر في إحدى الجامعات الإماراتية الخاصة. استخدمنا مزيجاً من الأساليب الكمية والنوعية لجمع البيانات وتحليلها. تشير دراستنا إلى أن العديد من المشاركين كانوا على دراية بالمنصة مع أنهم كانوا في عامهم الدراسي الأول. كما أنهم يجدون أنه من المفيد جمع المعلومات لمعالجة مشكلات الحياة الواقعية والاستعداد للاختبار بشكل غير متزامن. ومع ذلك ، فإن استخدام المنتدى كأداة تعليمية لم يخلو من بعض المشاكل. يجد الطلاب صعوبة في الرد على الأسئلة الأولية والرد على مشاركات الزملاء. تكشف دراستنا أن هذه المشاكل يمكن تقليلها من خلال مشاركة المدربين النشطة ، وتدقيق الأسئلة المتعلقة بالامتحانات، وتقديم أمثلة من الحياة الواقعية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: منتدى نقاشي إلكتروني، طلاب جامعيون، تعليم، سياق إماراتي، تعليم غير متزامن.

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