Research Proposal

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Best Practices in Asynchronous Online Discussion for Novice Online Learners

Introduction

Overview

In Shachar and Neumann's (2010) summative meta-analysis of the twenty years of research on the academic performance differences between traditional and distance learning, Shachar and Neumann concluded that distance education not only was comparable to traditional instruction, but also, could outperform traditional instruction. Distance education has been a part of higher education in the United States. Asynchronous online discussion is a common activity in online courses for learners' reflections and giving leaners the opportunities to understand the perspectives of others (Bonk & Zhang, 2008). Asynchronous online discussion makes interactions possible when learners and instructors are at different locations and at different times. It's convenient for learners to participate in discussions wherever and whenever they desire (Berge, 1999). It also can foster in-depth learning and critical thinking, because learners have more time to process information and their thoughts. However, research shows not everyone were actively involved in asynchronous online discussion activities (Burgoon, Fang, & Twitchell, 2010). This study will focus on how some learners engage in the asynchronous online discussion and benefit both themselves and others. The purpose of this case study will be to describe the ways used by international graduate students who did not have online learning experiences to be successful in asynchronous online discussion activities.

The Research Questions

The central question will be how the international graduate students who are novice learners can be successful in asynchronous online discussions quickly. Sub questions are:

- What are the learners' perspectives of the benefits of asynchronous online discussion?

- What are the learners' motivations to be successful in asynchronous online discussion?

- What strategies do the learners use to form the initial submission in an online discussion assignment?

- What strategies do the learners use to choose and respond peers' postings?

- What make a discussion post be successful?

Delimitations

This case study will focus on the international students who are from Asia and now studying in the United States, and did not have online learning experiences before they enrolled. The accessible population is the international students at a state university in the eastern of the United States. The asynchronous online discussions are limited to the discussion board, blog, and wiki in the Blackboard system, which is the learning management system (LMS) used by the university. All the online discussions will be the activities or assignments of online credited courses. The online course could be full online course and hybrid course. Subject domains are not limited.

Significance of the Study

Asynchronous online discussion is a very important activity broadly used in online courses and hybrid courses. However, it will have positive effects on learning when the learners are actively involved in the activity. The more the learners involved, the more they learned. Some international students are not benefited by it, because they have difficulties in participating in asynchronous online discussion actively. According to the preliminary interviews, some

students were not confident with their language, had difficult in citation, and were unfamiliar with the LMS. The results of this study could benefit those international students who have troubles in the asynchronous online discussion, help them be more active and confident during the online discussions. This study could helpful for online instructors. It could provide information for online instructors on how to design asynchronous online discussions and how to motivate learners be actively involved in the discussions. This study also will contribute to the literature of distance education. Future studies could be based on this study to explore the same problem in massive open online courses (MOOCs).

Definition of Terms

Full online course is a course that does not required having face-to-face meetings with during the course period. It has at least one instructor who are facilitating, monitoring, and grading learners' performance. Most of the communications among the instructor(s) and learners are online, e.g., the course website in LMS, email, or other communication tools.

Hybrid course is a course that has both classroom sessions and online sessions. It should has at least 50% of the course activities or assignments are online. Learners can communicate both in classroom and online.

Asynchronous online discussion allows users discuss on topics at different times. Online discussion board (forum), blog, and wiki could be considered as asynchronous online discussion tools.

Literature Review

Many strategies to improve the online discussion were proposed in the literature. Nandi, Hamilton, and Harland (2012) presented a framework for designing, developing, supporting, and

evaluating online discussion. Indicators for engaging learners in online discussion (Cheng, Liu, & Shieh, 2012), learners personality, readiness to participation (Blau & Barak, 2012), and learners' behaviors and roles in online discussion (Yeh, 2010) were addressed. Yeh (2010) identified 13 online discussion behaviors, including providing opinions for group functioning, providing opinions for group assignments, encouraging opinions about/responses to group assignments, sharing information, clarifying concepts, constructing a positive atmosphere, answering questions, providing reminders of assignment-related work, explaining personal problems, explaining the problems of others, solving problems, setting schedules, and assigning work. Among these behaviors, providing opinions for group assignments, constructing a positive atmosphere, and providing reminders of assignment-related work were the most frequent behaviors. These behaviors could be used for online post analysis.

In asynchronous online discussion activity, strong self-discipline and self-efficiency are important for online learners. Research shows that online discussions at graduate level emphasized on learner-learner interaction and learning communities (Agee & Uzuner Smith, 2011; Baran & Correia, 2009; Lim, Dannels, & Watkins, 2008), while undergraduate students need more guides from instructors (Cheng et al., 2012; Jiyeon, 2012; Lee, 2013; Mason, 2011; Nandi et al., 2012; Yeh, 2010). Graduate students tend to be more self-regulated and benefited by online discussion activity. Learner-learner interactions are keys to manipulate a discussion board to be successful.

Research confirmed the advantages of online discussion, which would increase opportunities for a collaborative dialogue and could extend learning (Agee & Uzuner Smith, 2011; Lim et al., 2008). Researchers also discussed the issues of online discussion, especially among undergraduate students, such as technical problems (Mason, 2011), lacking of

motivation(Cheng et al., 2012; Mason, 2011), and unstructured presenting (Blau & Barak, 2012). According the preliminary findings, some international graduates students had these concerns as well.

Preliminary Findings

Interviews were conducted on three international graduate students who came from Asian countries and majored in educational related subjects. Four students were randomly selected in the class. A letter of intent was sent to the four students and three of them agreed to participate in the interview. All of them were master graduate students and they were in their second semester. Before they entered the state university, they did not have any experience in online learning.

A semi-structured open-ended interview protocol was prepared for the interviews (Appendix A). Interview questions were about their experiences in asynchronous online discussion activities, e.g., what were/are you asked to do in online discussion? What do you think about the quality of your posts? How do you choose the posts you want to response? (Why?) Analysis of field notes was based on open coding. Five themes were identified and presented. Themes were 1) learning experience, 2) benefits and barriers, 3) tasks in online discussion, 4) quality of discussion, and 5) instructors' participation.

Overall, interviewees thought asynchronous online discussions were beneficial to their learning. It provides more time for them to learn, think, and prepare their opinions than in face-to-face discussions. Although one interview had difficulties in language and citations, she had a positive attitude toward learning more through asynchronous online discussions. The quality of online discussions is fine. Most of learners put more efforts in online discussion than they did in face-to-face discussion. Depends on personality, it is reasonable that some of the interviewees

like face-to-face discussion more than online discussion. One interviewee was not very confident with her postings and did not think peers' comments were helpful. Interviews mentioned that they need more time to get used to learning through online discussion. They also thought that having a short training online course on writing strategies and citations would be very helpful. According to the preliminary findings, it will be necessary and helpful to help international students, who do not have online learning experience, to get used to online activities more smoothly, easily, and quickly.

Methodology

Overview

This study will be a case study. The cases will be several individuals in the same site, which is a state university in the eastern of the United States. Interview will be the primary data source. The posts written by the participants will be collected as the secondary data source. Both interview data and documents will be analyzed by using the coding and interpreting method provided by Creswell (2013).

Sampling and Participants

The researcher will use convenient sampling method to identify two to three online courses, which have considerable amount of asynchronous online discussion activities. The researcher will ask for the permission to access all of the discussion content in these courses. The purposive sampling will be used to identify individual participants. The participants should be international students and meet the following criteria:

- come from Asia,

- did not have experience in online learning before enrolled by this university,

- have taken more than two online courses that had online discussion activities, and

- have been successful in asynchronous online discussion activities.

The researcher will use two steps to identify the participants. First, the researcher will get a recommended list from instructors. The expected number of the list will be 8 to 9 students. Then, a questionnaire will be used to evaluate their attitudes and satisfaction levels of asynchronous online learning. The questionnaire was adapted from (Lee, 2013). It contains 17 items utilized a five-point Likert scale, with 5 indicating strongly agree and 1 indicating strongly disagree (Appendix A). The expected number of the participants will be 4 to 6 students.

Instruments

A semi-structured protocol will be used in the interview. The interviewer will explore responses and follow-up with emergent questions while following the protocol. The researcher will conduct in-depth interviews. All interviews will be recorded by an audio recorder. The protocol will consist of the following questions:

1. How many online courses have you taken? How many of the courses you have taken had online discussion activities? What was the interval of the discussions typically in one course?

2. How do you learn by participating in asynchronous online discussions?

3. How do you think about the quality of your peers postings?

4. How competent do you feel in participating in asynchronous online discussions?

5. What made you so actively participated in asynchronous online discussions?

6. Typically, how would you approach to a discussion task? What would you consider to be included in your post?

7. If you were not clear about the requirements of a task, what would you do?

8. If you had five days to post the initial posting and respond at least two of your classmates, how would you use these five days?

9. If you were familiar with the topic of this week's topic, how would you prepare your initial posting? If you were not familiar with it, how would you do?

10. How do you cite while you are writing? Is there any tool or reference you would suggest?

11. How do you search the literature for a discussion post? What types of sources you will use for a discussion post?

12. How would you choose the posting that you want to respond, if the instructor did not assigned someone to you?

13. What would you do to respond your peers' work?

14. What make a discussion post be successful?

No instruments will be needed for collect participants' articles in the discussion board. The articles can retrieved from the Blackboard directly.

Data Analysis Procedures

The researcher will describe the cases and its contexts. For both interview data and documents, the researcher will use open coding approach. Codes will emerge during the analysis and categorized into themes. The interview data analysis will focus on the methods, strategies, and tools, which used by the participants and participants' attitude as well. The documents

analysis will focus on the content, types of posts, citation sources, citation frequency, writing styles, length, posting time, number of posts, and patterns in peers' interactions of the participants.

Trustworthiness

In this case study, multiple types of data, which are interview data and posts stored in the LMS, will be collected. These two types of data will supplement each other and will make a more holistic picture of how the participants did to be successful in asynchronous online discussion. The instruments and data analysis process will be reviewed by another researcher to control the biases and clear misunderstandings. The data and findings will be checked with the participants to correcting errors in interpretation. The researcher will describe the context (e.g., the course background, the design/requirements of the discussion activities and assignments, the online learning environment, and the participants' background) of the case study in depth to increase the transferability of this study.

Limitations

Learners' academic performance and satisfaction could related to their language skills, different subject domains, different course requirements, or different course activity designs. Due to the small sample size, these relationships could not be identified. To address the limitation, the researcher will describe the context in details to provide a holistic picture of the cases.

Summary

The central question of the case study will be how the international graduate students who are novice learners can be successful in asynchronous online discussions as soon as possible. The researcher will use purposive sampling method to identify four international graduate students who had good academic performance and were successful in asynchronous online discussion. Interviews and content analysis will be the primary methods. Member check, peer coding, peer review, and in-depth context description will be used for the trustworthiness of the study. The results of the study will benefit novice online learners to get used to asynchronous online discussion and help online instructor design effective online discussion activities.

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Appendix A: Questionnaire for Selecting Participants

Items	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Online discussions help me learn	1	2	3	4	5
3. Online discussions help me better understand the lectures	1	2	3	4	5
4. Online discussions help clarify some concepts	1	2	3	4	5
5. Online discussions help integrate concepts of knowledge	1	2	3	4	5
6. Participating in online discussions promote my learning motivation	1	2	3	4	5
7. I enjoy participating in online discussions	1	2	3	4	5
8. Online discussions are boring	1	2	3	4	5
9. Online discussions are time consuming	1	2	3	4	5
10. Online discussions are stressful	1	2	3	4	5
11. Online discussions improve my ability of academic reading	1	2	3	4	5
12. Online discussions improve my ability of academic writing	1	2	3	4	5
13. Online discussions improve my critical thinking skills	1	2	3	4	5
14. Online discussions improve my analytical skills	1	2	3	4	5
15. I am satisfied with my own performance in online discussions for this course	1	2	3	4	5
16. I am satisfied with my classmates' feedbacks in online discussions for this course	1	2	3	4	5
17. I am satisfied instructors' or teaching assistants' feedbacks in online discussions for this course	1	2	3	4	5