

## **Enhancing Case-based Learning Using Online Discussion Groups: Diversity of Practice**

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The online discussion is quickly becoming an important part of the educational environment, either as a part of distance education or used to support face-to-face or mixed delivery model coursework. The online discussion format has great potential for bridging the gaps that exist between pre-service and practicing teachers, and general and special education teachers, by utilizing computer-mediated discussion groups across times, locations, and student groups. The most valued aspects of online discussion groups are the accessibility to instructors and invited experts, the flexibility and the convenience of asynchronous participation, and inclusion of diverse participants and perspectives from multiple locations.

To date there has been little research reported that provides direction for effective design and delivery of instruction using online discussions. Most universities leave the organization up to individual instructors using whatever online tools are available.

### **Rationale for Discussion Groups**

Case-based instruction is a recent, popular alternative to traditional, teacher-directed instruction in special education teacher preparation (Anderson & Baker, 1999; Goor & Santos, 2002; McNaughton, Hall, & Maccini, 2001). A survey of the members of the Council for Exceptional Children TED Division found that 78% of respondents had used case methods within the previous two years (Elksnin, 1998). A recent summary of

current practice in the use of case methods in special education teacher preparation programs stated that the greatest advantages to case methods of instruction are bridging the gap between theory and practice and developing students' problem-solving skills (Elksnin, 2001).

Cases are one way of providing practice fields in teacher education. Practice fields focus mainly on situating content in authentic learner activities. In practice fields students engage in the kinds of problems and practices that they will encounter outside of school. Preparing practice fields involves creating realistic activities or experiences for the learner. These activities must be authentic; they must present most of the cognitive demands the learner would encounter in the real world, that is, authentic problem solving and critical thinking in the domain. Barab and Duffy (2000) list the design principles for creating practice fields as follows:

1. Doing domain-related practice.
2. Ownership of the inquiry.
3. Coaching and modeling of thinking skills.
4. Opportunity for reflection.
5. Dilemmas are ill-structured.
6. Support the learner rather than simplify the dilemma.
7. Work is collaborative and social.
8. The learning context is motivating.

Whereas practice field learning environments can be offered through computerized cases or problem-solving scenarios, one design principle described by Barab and Duffy—*work is collaborative and social*—suggests that implementation of practice fields must involve a community of practicing professionals. With the belief that all knowledge is socially constructed, learners must have opportunities to share, discuss, and modify their own understandings based on others' perspectives and experiences. One of the hallmarks of expert thinking is the ability to apply knowledge differentially across different contexts. Therefore, not only the technological development of a system itself should be emphasized in the design, but also—and maybe more importantly—the usage of the practice field system within and throughout the professional training program (Riedel, Fitzgerald, Leven, & Toenshoff, 2003).

Through case conferences, diagnostic seminars, and ongoing discussion groups—face-to-face or online, synchronously or asynchronously—it is believed that knowledge can be manipulated, re-constructed, and transferred beyond the learning system environment. Technology has great potential to enhance this sharing of knowledge and problem solving among communities of learners.

Beyond use in initial training programs, practice field systems can be utilized in ongoing professional development offerings through face-to-face or web-based professional communities of practice. In this way learners, teachers, and practitioners can discuss cases and dilemmas that engage the professional society. Through technology, 'anytime-anywhere' learning is available in the profession for social construction of knowledge and transfer.

## **The Virtual Resource Center in Behavioral Disorders—Research Consortium**

VRCBD—RC is a three-year research project in the United States focusing on case-based instruction in higher education. The instruction incorporates the use of interactive, multimedia cases, the use of performance support tools to enhance transfer of knowledge and skills to real settings, and integration of online discussions and chats to support collaborative learning with the materials. The research project is a collaborative research project involving five universities; it is funded as a Steppingstones Innovations in Technology grant from the U.S. Department of Education. The project is ongoing during the 2004-2006 time period. (Fitzgerald, Hollingshead, Koury, Miller, & Mitchem, 2004-2006). One strand of the investigations focuses on the use of discussion groups that accompany instruction with the cases. Information on the series of cases can be found at the project web site: <http://www.coe.missouri.edu/~vrcbd>.

### **Implementation of Online Discussions and Chats at Three Universities**

Three different discussion group structures have been implemented to date. Following each description, research results will be shared on the diversity of discussion patterns, participation rates, and student feedback, along with instructor observations.

#### 1. Andrews University—Open Discussions Around Course Topics and Cases.

Behavioral and Emotional Problems of Children was offered as a 3-semester hour graduate credit course in two formats. One was on-campus in a classroom setting; the other was in an off-campus setting meeting in a school district. The on-campus classroom consisted of seven students. Some of the students were full time, others part-time. Participants varied in programs from school psychology, school counseling, community counseling, and special education. The reason for enrollment in the course was degree completion for career advancement.

The off-campus classroom consisted of ten students, two of whom dropped the course leaving the enrollment at eight. All of the students were enrolled part time. Participants were enrolled in a special education program and were employed full time as special education teachers in an urban low-SES school district. None of the participants were qualified by the state to teach special education in the settings in which they were employed and were enrolled in the course for the purposes of degree completion and career advancement. Both courses required the use of two cases from Program I: *Perspectives on Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*; students worked on the cases of Zach and Shawn independently and then participated in on-line discussion activities.

##### *a. On-campus class on-line discussion activities*

The course was structured so that 20% of the grade included the completion of two Program I cases and participation in two threaded discussions. Students were given one month to complete each case. Discussion #1 centered on issues for Zach using each of the perspectives presented in the case. Discussion #2 focused on Shawn using

the same format but included more in-depth application prompts provided by the instructor.

*b. Off-campus class on-line discussion activities*

The course was designed around three components: completion of two Program I cases, participation in two threaded discussions, and completion of a classroom/individualized change project. The two threaded discussions represented 25% of the course grade. Students were given one month to complete each case. Discussion #1 focused on three paper cases that were similar in content to Zach and Shawn in academic and behavioral needs. Prompts were provided by the instructor to guide discussion for finding solutions to various issues by applying the perspectives included in the Program I cases. Discussion #2 employed an additional three paper cases and the CD “Whose Future Is It Anyway?” These cases were real ones from the students’ classroom teaching experiences. Prompts provided by the instructor led students to find solutions to issues based on student concerns from various perspectives, as they related to Zach and Shawn and real experiences in their classroom settings.

Table 1. Participation Data

<b>Totals across Discussions #1 and #2</b>	<b>On-Campus</b>	<b>Off-Campus</b>
Number of Students in Threaded Discussions	7	8
Total Number of Student Postings	72	305
Average Posting per Student	10.29	38.13
Range of Postings per Student	6-16	20-68
Range of Hits per Student	68-140	215-761
Average Read Items per Student	60.57	315.75
Range of Read Items per Student	40-87	167-529

Table 2. Student Comments on Open Discussion Boards

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Student Comments Based on Transcribed Interviews</b>	
	<i>On-campus class</i>	<i>Off-campus class</i>
Value of Discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What I gained was not so much the differences of opinion but clarifying of my own take on it.</li> <li>• It was helpful to see how most of us take the same perspective in the class, and then to discuss it between each other.</li> <li>• Different views, several points being brought out that I hadn’t thought of before.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We talked about the actual case and how it would reflect back to something we had encountered in our own classroom. It took on a life of its own.</li> <li>• We got insights and learned from each other; we were able to implement some of the suggestions that were made.</li> <li>• Using real cases takes the</li> </ul>

		concepts from abstract to concrete and you can learn quicker.
Membership of Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We had a slow class the first time, but the second time we had much more discussion, that was neat to have. exchange between everyone.</li> <li>• People were comfortable with each other and there was interest in the topics so they naturally kept the discussion going.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not all the learners in the group had always been teachers; watching them grow mad me grow.</li> <li>• We bonded in the discussions.</li> <li>• We are a very diverse group but sincere and caring about kids is the common denominator.</li> </ul>
Role of Instructor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prompts about theories and perspectives and how we thought these would benefit the students.</li> <li>• Prompts were helpful because they gave a sort of direction.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• She was very good at making us dig deeper.</li> <li>• When we got off track, she put us back in the right direction.</li> <li>• She didn't tell us what to look for but indicated what we needed to be aware of and to look closely; she asked rather than told.</li> </ul>
Suggestions to Improve Discussions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Possibly to raise more specific questions.</li> <li>• I don't think any; I liked the prompts that were given.</li> <li>• Make applications more practical.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I wish I could have had copies of everything I did to use as reference material.</li> <li>• Our interactions should be videotaped because you would have to see the engagement of everyone to believe it.</li> </ul>

### Instructor Reflections:

#### *a. On-campus class*

- This class was taught by a professor other than the researcher. The case projects and threaded discussions were incorporated into the class by the researcher in collaboration with the class professor. However, integrated discussion of the cases and applications into the threaded discussions throughout the duration of the semester was hampered by this arrangement.
- The researcher was given 4 full and 2 partial class sessions out of 16 over the duration of the semester in which to implement case study learning. This limited student access even though researcher contact information was provided.

- The students in the class were engaged in multiple courses with one another over numerous semesters, so they were well acquainted. This allowed them to speak freely in discussion as well as to call each other, speak on-campus to one another, and talk frequently by email, or on the phone. They stated in interviews that this added to the successful completion of their tasks and learning in this class.

*b. Off-campus class*

- This class was taught by the researcher. The cases and threaded discussions were integrated fully into the content of the course.
- The class met every other week. On the off weeks, the researcher went into the student's classrooms to provide them feedback on their classroom/individualized behavior change project. This project had to be (1) directly related to either the entire classroom or one student and (2) had to use at least one specific perspective learned about in the case studies to resolve at least one behavioral problem operationally defined with baseline data.
- The class membership was made up of practicing teachers—some of whom had no teacher training whatsoever, this being their first course. Some had general education teacher training and were working on special education teaching endorsement. Others had special education teacher training, but in a different categorical label and were seeking another endorsement. The school district in which all were currently employed was high poverty, high crime, high dropout rates, and inner city.
- The reason the activities in this class differed from the on-campus course was because the needs of the class members were radically different. They needed hand-on authentic learning. Therefore, learning from the CD cases was transferred to similar paper cases in threaded discussion #1 and transferred to real classroom situations as well as similar paper cases in threaded discussion #2. In the second discussion, the students transferred learning from the CD cases to paper cases and to their own classroom students.
- This transfer of learning was further enhanced by discussing their classroom/individualized behavior change projects, which integrated case-based learning with real classroom practice.
- The CD cases allowed the students to examine their own perspectives on how they would attempt to resolve problems in their own classrooms. When unsuccessful in managing classroom issues, the CD gave them the tools to redevelop the behavior change project from an additional perspective. The learning process was facilitated through the cases on the CD, the paper case threaded discussions, and the behavior change projects.

2. University of Missouri—Prompted Discussions Around Cases, Topics, and Tools.

BD Online was offered as a 3-semester hour summer course completely online with students from four states around the U.S. This was a graduate methods course with 20 students enrolled. Demographic data were collected for 11 students. All of these participants had teaching experience ranging from 3 to 24 years with a mean of 12 years. The primary reasons for course enrollment were personal interest in course or professional development for career ladder advancement. Course requirements were built completely around the VRCBD multimedia cases plus two additional readings. Students were required to participate in three types of discussion groups during the course. Students could receive 5 points for each of the five discussion groups (out of a course total of 100 points).

*a. Discussion forums based on two assigned readings.*

Discussions were prompted by the instructor. Based on assigned articles, students were directed to explain their views based on experiences in their own school districts. One topic focused on the placement process for children with emotional and behavioral disorders, and the other on assessment of behavior. Requirements were to identify an issue and respond to at least one issue raised in the discussion.

*b. Collaborative case conferences to “staff” the child in the multimedia case.*

Students chose three case discussion groups depending on their interests. Each discussion group held a “staffing” on the case to improve their understanding of the case and to discuss an intervention plan for the child. Students identified missing information, ecological needs, and problems with current management programs. The discussions were student-led and the instructor’s role was primarily to respond to questions raised about the case data and special education assessment and planning process. Although these discussions remained focused on the case, students shared information from experiences with similar students in their own classrooms.

*c. Discussion forum on the use of computerized behavior intervention tools.*

The discussion was prompted by the instructor. Students were provided a CD with behavior intervention tools that children can use to help to change their own behavior through problem solving and self-monitoring. They were asked to evaluate the tools and provide their own views of this approach with students. This was the last discussion board in the course.

Table 3. Participation in Prompted Discussion Boards

Type of Discussion Board	Number of Participating Students in Discussion	Average # Messages/ Board	Number of Contributions per Student		Percentage of Instructor Contributions
			Low	High	
Assigned Readings	17	70	1	15	23.6
Case Conferences	2 - 7	18.7	0	8	20.3
Use of Behavior Tools	14	32	1	4	19.0

Table 4. Student Comments on Prompted Discussion Boards

Themes	Student Comments Based on Transcribed Interviews
Value of Discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>You realize you're looking at the same case study and the same materials and at the same history and everything...you suddenly realize you view it differently. And you realize that your background and your perspective isn't the only one.</li> <li>More comfortable than if you were sitting face to face because its easier to give your opinion and you don't feel intimidated.</li> <li>Seeing the similarities as well as the differences, because there were a lot of things across the country that were very similar as far as school settings and attitudes and then there were things that were very, very different in different parts of the country, and with different counties in the same state.</li> </ul>
Membership of Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Smaller groups were good because we had some sort of similar interests to go for the case [that we picked].</li> <li>The membership was varied, it was diverse, it was interesting. I wasn't just going to say any old thing. I didn't want to look like an idiot. I wanted to make the information I said pertinent.</li> <li>I remember within the group. I felt connected because we were working on the same things. It really freed me up...it helped me get into the case and continue to work and put forth more effort. I started to really, really focus more on what the course was about.</li> <li>I could definitely tell that there was maybe a bit too much of a wide range of experience. A few people hadn't been in the field yet...they didn't have the practical experience yet.</li> </ul>
Role of Instructor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prompts were given when he needed to.</li> <li>He was really great about responding to our different ideas and answering questions.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It was obvious that there were a couple really young folks in the group that hadn't had more experience that some of us more mature folks had, and he was able to meet everybody's needs.</li> </ul>
Suggestions to Improve Discussions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I got a little bit more comfortable with it as it went on because our professor suggested putting a picture up. But none of us wanted to put pictures up. But it really did help.</li> <li>• There were times when I just held back a little bit...to give some of the younger folks that needed to get their opinions kind of out there first without the rest of us coming in and giving the game away.</li> </ul>

### Instructor Reflections:

- The overall “feeling” of these discussions was that they were not authentic and that students limited participation to meeting course requirements. Some students used the opportunity to ask questions of the instructor and this may account for the instructor participation being at such a high rate and focused on declarative knowledge information. Participation waned toward the end of the course.
  - Discussions have to be considered within the parameters of the class being totally online and a summer course. There were continuing technical issues. Although assistance was available, summer students tend to work at an uneven pace, and may not utilize assistance quickly enough to stay on top of the required work. About half of the students treated the course as a summer workshop and did not give it high priority; these tended to be experienced teachers who were interested in the material but not the demands of a graduate class. Some greatly enjoyed the case discussion groups that enabled them to share experiences with each other.
  - Some resentment was evident by the experienced teachers toward the novice teachers regarding contributions. Experienced teachers were less interested in “impressing the instructor” with all the theory and were more inclined to relate case discussions to their own real-world experiences.
  - These observations suggest that some attention to group membership and clarification of the discussion expectations are necessary for managing large, online discussions. Even though the instructor had a high level for facilitating these groups, a different type of facilitation may be more helpful for students to extend their learning from the case to knowledge and skills for the future.
3. West Virginia University—Structured Chat Discussions Around Cases.

Classroom Behavior Management was offered as a 3-semester hour graduate course using the interactive video network on alternate weeks supplemented by the same number of web-based modules for the off weeks. A total of 78 students were enrolled in the course in five sites across the state; demographic data were collected

for the 20 students enrolled at the research site. Eight of these participants had teaching experience ranging from 1 to 17 years, with a mean of 4.5 years. The primary reasons for course enrollment were personal interest in course or professional development for career ladder advancement. All 20 students were enrolled in preservice preparation in special education to gain special education certification. Course requirements included the use of two cases from Program III: *Instruction and Management in Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*. All students completed the case of Amy independently and then had a choice of either the Martelle or Dengelo case. Students completed each case study exploration as the assignment for the web-based week.

After individually exploring the Amy case and completing the embedded activities, students were assigned to roles and groups. Each group comprised five students playing the roles of special educator, general educator, principal, parent, and school psychologist. Students were told to meet with their group in a chat room and conduct a simulated staffing in which they were to develop a programming and placement plan for Amy. Students could receive a total of 50 points for these activities; 30 points for the individual case assignment and 20 points for the simulated staffing.

#### *Simulated staffing in chat room*

Students were provided an activity sheet to guide their meeting. This discussion guide required students to write a present level of performance for Amy and identify paired target behaviors, personal adjustment or relationship concerns, and intervention approaches for each. In addition, students were to document instructional needs and approaches, and provide a placement recommendation with a rationale. Students had 14 days to complete the chats in assigned groups and submit their reports. Table 5 provides participation data for 6 of the 16 chat representing the range in participation.

Table 5. Participation in Role-Playing Chat Groups

Chat Groups	Number in Chat Group	Total Messages in Chat	Number of Contributions per Student		Average Contribution per Student
			Low	High	
Amy 11	5	104	19 - sp ed tchr	44 - principal	20.8
Amy 15	4	133	11 - principal	48 - gen ed tchr	33.3
Amy 13	5	162	10 - behav spec	63 - sp ed	32.4
Amy 6	4	170	32 - parent	59 - sped	42.5
Amy 5	4	234	30 - gen ed tchr	137 - sp ed	58.5
Amy 7	4	245	32 - parent	77 - sp ed	61.3

Table 6. Student Comments on Role-Playing Chat Groups

Themes	Student Comments Based on Transcribed Interviews
Value of Chat Discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I found it fun to have the group meeting and it was in many ways similar to those I have been at where things are a little disorganized and confusing and you leave wondering whether anything was really accomplished—BUT you probably cover the most important issues and get most of what needs to be done, done. I guess that is the advantage of having a group meeting without clear-cut guidelines—very ‘real world’ in atmosphere.</li> <li>• I would keep the chat because I feel as if it helped me complete my assignment. I heard what others had to say and their opinions made sense. It was very helpful when I needed to put the finishing touches on my report.</li> </ul>
Membership of Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I enjoyed the group activity because we came up with different ideas and related them to our schools with a child like Amy. We also gave each other much needed support!!!</li> <li>• The group meeting was beneficial, we tossed around many ideas, and those of us in different teaching situations had a lot of different opinions to offer. A study group is often a beneficial idea—the support is a plus, too!</li> <li>• I think ...the one that really helped out was when we would do the group discussions and group work together, cause I got to listen to what other people thought and sometimes they would bring in certain aspects that I hadn’t really thought of and it would kinda open your eyes, or at least make think a little bit. Even if you didn’t agree, it would make you think a little of what ...angle they were coming at.</li> </ul>
Suggestions to Improve Discussions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I think I would have liked to have a more clear understanding of exactly what was the point? Meaning, was I implementing an IEP, general transitions meeting, or father came to us concerned....I needed to know what was my role, what was I focusing on specifically.</li> </ul>

#### Instructor Reflections

- The chats among students were highly focused on completing the activity sheet provided to structure their meeting. One student typically took the lead in managing the discussion and using the prompts on the guide to keep students focused on developing a program and placement plan for Amy. Although students rarely brought in information from their personal experience to illustrate issues, this structure did limit extraneous interaction and served as a realistic simulation of a real situation staffing

- Students appeared to have difficulty with role taking. Even though they were able to identify the role they were to play in the meeting, most approached the task through their current knowledge base as a special educator. Some teams were successful with this with the parent role and this seemed to extend their discussions of ways to help Amy in the home that included asking the father to call and check on Amy when he was on the road as well as discussing with him how he could communicate more with his girlfriend and Amy together. These conversations between parent and school personnel appeared to reflect a true extension of learning for students.
- Some students used the group chat as an opportunity for creative problem-solving. For example, the issue of Amy's unkempt appearance was viewed as something contributing to Amy's alienation by her peers. This group decided that addressing hygiene and self-care skills as well as rewarding Amy for participating with a manicure for the girls in the class might assist in addressing peer interaction as well hygiene needs.
- Some students expressed the case was difficult. I think that this was related to some of the technical difficulties that students experienced with the floppy disks they were supposed to save their work to. In addition, many students underestimated the amount of time it would take to complete the assignment and were frustrated when they realized, shortly before the assignment was due, how much work was involved. It did appear that the discussion helped students to learn from the case both in terms of assistance with the technology, organization, and content.
- The chats provided evidence of students helping each other to clarify information or extend their understanding of aspects of special education not specifically related to the case. For example, one student indicated that she had no experience with IEP meetings and another student responded that "IEP meetings are usually held after all tests are completed and a plan has been prepared to discuss with the IEP team." Some students even incorporated informal group discussions independently of the instructor-required activity.

### **Discussion of Results**

The use of discussions and chats provided opportunities for collaborative and social learning as recommended by Barab and Duffy (2000) for learning to take place in practice field environments. Student interview responses were positive about their participation in both chats and discussions, primarily valuing multiple perspectives gained from group members. They viewed the interactions as helping them revise their own thinking, understand other points of view, learn from each other, work together on solving the case problems, gain confidence in putting forth their own ideas, and think about extending the case knowledge and skills to real classroom situations. These reflections support the belief of Barab and Duffy that knowledge is re-constructed and manipulated in communities of practice; these online chats and discussions provided

opportunities for the students to share, discuss, and modify their case understanding and to support each other in using that knowledge to solve case and classroom problems.

There was some difference of opinion related to the idea of structure. Students clamored for more structure and wanted to know exactly what was required. When greater structure was provided, discussions appeared to be shorter, more focused on the case at hand, and less rich in terms of students relating what they learned in the cases to their own experiences. When specific requirements for participation were defined, some students only met the minimum requirement and failed to fully engage in ongoing dialog. The less structure that students perceived, the more they struggled with the assignment but the richer the discussion and the more creative their responses. When instructors prompted students to expand their understandings to paper and real cases, students found the discussions even more meaningful and real.

Although the participation data varied across the discussion settings, they were consistent with these conclusions. Regardless of the size of group or degree of structure provided for the discussion or chat, some students failed to become engaged beyond the minimum requirements while other students took it on and read and responded regularly at high levels. The discussions held in the summer course were closely tied to course requirements and instructor prompts. Participation was higher early in the course, and waned towards the end. Although these students were positive about the discussions, the messages did not go far beyond the required topics. Somewhat of a different pattern was seen in the small size, structured chat groups. Students had a more even level of participation and this may be due to the nature of chats as being time specific and focused on an activity guide. The highest level of participation was seen in the off-campus discussion group at Andrews University where students were prompted to extend case learning to paper cases and their own real teaching situations, as well as to use the discussion group for feedback on their projects. These students were currently in classrooms and were able to transfer learning from the cases to actual classroom practice.

Students were successful in holding discussions and chats independently when the structure was set up with clear guidelines or opening prompts by instructors. However, most students felt more secure when there was a higher level of instructor participation. They liked getting feedback on their ideas, having instructors answer questions and keep them focused, and provide ongoing direction. More experienced students were able to recognize shifting roles of instructors as they moved from being the information provider to helping students apply new knowledge and skills to teaching settings and experiences. These reflections emerged in longer-running discussion groups that focused on transfer of learning.

There were some interesting insights into discussion management when looking at group membership. In general, smaller groups were favored if all members participated in the discussion; there were problems in small groups where some students did not become actively engaged in the discussion. Large groups were viewed as problematic when the number of messages needing to be read and/or answered became unwieldy. There was a unique point of view toward group membership from students who were highly

experienced teachers. They expressed some irritation with fellow students who did not have teaching experience trying to “grandstand” and impress the instructor with theory. Some of these experienced teachers described holding back in discussions to let the novices have a chance to express their points of view before “taking over” and “giving the game away.” These seasoned teachers were the ones that talked about the discussion taking on a life of its own and really getting into it, but this tended to occur between the experienced teachers, not the whole discussion group. They suggested limiting the range of experience in a group.

This finding reveals a tension between student desires and instructor intentions. When building a learning community, novices and experts are typically grouped together to provide opportunities for learning from each other and expanding perspectives. Similar to issues in cooperative learning, not all students like participating in mixed-level groups, particularly when requirements and grading practices are not delineated to the extent students want them delineated. Students are uncomfortable with ambiguity and want specific guidelines on how much and how often they must participate and how their contributions will be evaluated. Students are unsure about group participation and open-ended discussion. They wanted to know the point of the discussion and not venture far into broader topics unless guided by the instructor. Compromises may be necessary to make students comfortable with the structure and requirements of online discussions while providing the open-ended, constructivist learning opportunities desired by instructors.

## Summary

The practice field discussion group typically established in web-supported courses does not become a true community until members use it for sharing and mutual problem solving. Practice field discussion groups can become true communities when students go beyond course requirements and become engaged in authentic issues of professional practice. Instructors can facilitate the development of a professional practice community by careful design of structure and discussion requirements and group formation, discussion activities and prompts; and by defining their role as leader or facilitator. There are no “one-size fits all” recommendations for successful use of online discussion groups and chats. One must consider the level of the learners and the purpose of the discussion or activity, carefully monitor the progression of the group as a community, and intervene appropriately. A true community is not likely to emerge without thoughtful design and careful attention to the process by the instructor.

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