

Scaffolding asynchronous online discussion: Students' perspective*

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Scaffolding asynchronous online discussion in teaching psychology in M Ed program

- Background:
 - Social constructivist pedagogy based in sociocultural theory
- Example of “Psychology for Educators” M Ed online class
- Enrolled 45 students, online Discussion groups of 8-10 students, 4 forums
- Used Online discussion guides for Discussion forums
 1. Case study for discussion based in Learning outcomes (inter-subjectivity for ‘doing together’ – solving problems)
 2. Communicative strategies: Language choices (based on principles of social construction of knowledge)
 3. Clear requirements: Using strategies; 2 responses; Compulsory as attendance; Colloquial, dialogic, spoken-like, short messages)
 4. Lecturer’s presence: Ongoing, unimposing scaffolding



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Case study: Authentic; learning outcome based; simple, but detailed; includes a controversy embodied in characters:

Forum 2 Jessica is an experienced year 4 teacher. In conversation with a new teacher, Matt, who just joined the school, she is saying:

“Kids these days don't listen as well as they used to. They spend less time attending to things and we have to do a lot more to engage them”

She then asks Matt's opinion on a couple of strategies that she wants to use. She explains that students might be more motivated if they accept responsibility for their learning. Her class is currently doing a unit on kites, and she is going to give students freedom to form their own groups and to choose a topic for their research (e.g. how to make kites or how they are used in festivals). She also wants to use verbal presentations, claiming they are motivating because students feel 'proud of doing well in front of their peers'. For example, her students can be asked to verbally present for their current unit on kites.

However, Matt suggests that she could motivate her students more effectively if she uses a system of rewards. For example, she could divide the class in groups and award points for good behaviour or correct answer, but deduct points when students don't behave or are off task. He suggests using the Interactive Whiteboard to display the points for everyone to see.

Whose ideas would you support - Matt's or Jessica's?



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Communicative strategies & Language choices

Write two short posts of approximately 50-70 words: one in response to the case and one to another person in the group; **OR** you can choose to make two posts in response to two people.

Use the following communicative strategies in your responses to other students:

- **Re-stating:** to clarify or refine ideas - repeat in your own words (“as you said, ...”)
- **Extending** on ideas of others: to add more information or a new perspective (“you said ..., **and**...”)
- **Presenting alternatives:** to propose a different perspective (“you said...**but** on the other hand...”)

Don't forget to use the strategies from Forum 1:

- Addressing people by name
- Acknowledging their ideas by complimenting and supporting them
- Agreeing with their point of view



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Task 3, Essay

Social constructivist theorists believe that

[e]very function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, *between* people (*inter-psychological*) and then *inside* the child (*intra-psychological*) (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57).

Discuss the idea that social interactions play a fundamental role in effective learning and teaching. Reflect on your participation in this subject and particularly in the *Online Discussion Forums*. You should consider the ways that your interactions with others in these forums influenced your learning in the subject. In your reflection, provide specific examples to support your argument. Then using your reflection and relevant reading consider what this means in your practice as an educator.

To complete this assignment you will need to participate in Online Discussions, using the Discussion Guides provided on Moodle. Note: while the quality of your participation in online discussions is not assessed, the quality of your *reflection* is part of the assessment criteria.



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Forum Participation findings

- All students but two (51 out of 53) participated in all the forums posting at least 2 messages each (with 10-30 'views' by each student, per forum)
- Positive environment and content-based communication:

Hi Alana and Patti [pseudonyms],

I agree with your responses to the scenario we have been given. I share your thoughts on Jessica presenting some positive strategies to help in the development of intrinsic motivation. As you have both eluded to, this is the type of motivation we want to build and support in our students. By developing intrinsic motivation we are equipping students with the ability to persist with learning challenges until they are complete, self-efficacy. Also by developing intrinsic motivation students are more inclined to take ownership of their learning. Students that have confidence are keen to learn and would succeed using some of the strategies Jessica has suggested. Allowing the students to select the groups and topics will build on their cooperation, interests and social skills (Jayden)



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EmergEd themes from the Essays

All the students reflected on their own participation and shared their experiences and their thoughts. Some emergEd themes are below:

- Authentic scenarios triggered students' prior experiences of teaching
 - *It was important for the teacher to set valid discussion topics so that the participants can share both prior knowledge and newly acquired concepts through their readings and experiences, providing an environment where students are learning from each other (Kath)*
- Deep engagement with other students' ideas important for learning (specific chains of discussion were provided)
 - *A strong engagement level was present within the discussion as each student posted a response to the previous, building on their answers and providing a different approach at the objective (Erica)*
 - *Participation in the online forums provided a multidimensional and valuable learning experience (Kath)*
 - *The forum discourse was a meaningful activity because it gave students the opportunity to critically discuss the course content and, in doing so, construct and internalise our own understanding of the concepts (Elise)*
 - *I also enjoyed and appreciated the way such interactions challenged me to re-examine or strengthen my own analysis (Winona). After reading some of my peers' posts, however, it became clear to me that my perspective was, perhaps, too one-dimensional (Elise)*



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EmergEd themes contd.

- Safe and supportive environment is important for posting
- Their opinions were accepted and valued which was motivating
- The discussion not being assessed created a freely flowing discussion
- One student wanted discussion to be assessed who explained that her two posts were not responded to:
 - ...disappointingly, the former post remains unanswered, while the latter has received a single reply only very recently ...perhaps my peers may have been more motivated to participate if their contributions were going to be assessed (Elise)
- Another critical comment – the discussion felt a bit “artificial” and “too polite”



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Preliminary conclusions

- All the students felt they learnt from their peers and provided evidence of it (specific examples of exactly what it was)
- Overall the students were positive about their learning through the forums
- All the students were able to make links to their own teaching practice and understood theoretical underpinning (at different levels)
- The importance of responding to everyone (maybe add to the guide for the lecturers so they ensure they respond to those who did not receive any reply)
- An “artificial” and “too polite” manner of the discussion (sometimes): how can we deal with it? Provide more examples of word choices? Encourage variety?
- It was good not to assess the forums, but the reflective Essay was useful
 - Added to the “credibility” of the Forums (motivation)
 - Encouraged reflection
 - Modeled social constructivist paradigm

Points to consider:

- Online scaffolding – how much support do we need to provide? How to withdraw the scaffolds?
- A variety of students’ needs in scaffolding online discussion



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