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*Corresponding author: Cheryl Hancock,
College of Humanities and Sciences, The
University of Phoenix, 390 Old Edwards
Rd., Arnoldsville, GA 30619, USA
E-mail: cjhancock1@hotmail.com

Reviewing editor:
Mark Boylan, Sheffield Hallam
University, UK

Additional information is available at
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TEACHER EDUCATION & DEVELOPMENT | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Online and out of synch: Using discussion roles in online asynchronous discussions

Cheryl Hancock^{1*} and Barbara Rowland¹

Abstract: We completed a qualitative study focusing on our students' use of Discussion Roles in our general and entry level online classes and presented the information at a Brown Bag presentation for University of Phoenix instructors and staff in October 2016. The following contains the results of the study including: (1) ways to use Discussion Roles in class discussions without assigning them, (2) ways to encourage students' use of Discussion Roles, (3) how students reacted to using Discussion Roles, (4) results of students' use of Discussion Roles, and (5) How instructors' future use of Discussion Roles can help adult students acclimate to asynchronous, online discussion. Discussion Roles provide scaffolding that helps students create written responses that reflect higher level thinking. Implications for improving practice relate to asynchronous discussion, students' use of higher level thinking skills, and instructors encouraging students' use of Discussion Roles. Finally, ideas for new types of Discussion Roles led the researchers to suggest further study of Discussion Roles and how they can be used by students to take control of their learning and maximize the benefits of asynchronous discussion.

Subjects: Adult Education; Lifelong Learning; Educational Research; Teaching & Learning; Design & Delivery; Teacher Training; Teachers & Teacher Education; Teaching & Learning; Technology in Education; Language Teaching & Learning

Keywords: asynchronous; online discussion; discussion roles; scaffolding; roles; nontraditional adult student; higher level thinking

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Cheryl Hancock, PhD, began teaching English in the public school system until finding her niche in online higher education. She developed Discussion Roles seeking to help online students, as well as online instructors, and actively promotes the use of roles, as well as other topics that seek to help online students in an ever-changing educational world.

Barbara Rowland, PhD, has researched the link between students' attitudes about learning and academic success while continuing to research and develop strategies that promote success in the online learning environment. She consistently incorporates discussion roles and other strategies into course activities to encourage the active learning processes.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Seeking new ways to help online students participate in written discussions prompted the creation of Discussions Roles. Discussion Roles give students a starting point from which to develop quality, higher level written responses. For example, the Devil's Advocate asks students to politely disagree while the Connect to Theory role asks for background theory. Students can begin with a familiar role like Vocabulary Seeker and then move to a complex role like Connect to Research. We completed a research study focusing on our students' use of Discussion Roles in our general and entry level online classes and presented at a Brown Bag for University of Phoenix in October 2016. These are the successful results of that study, which reveal how the roles were successful in helping students to interact deeply with course content, allowing them to consider, apply, and create new ideas for a more meaningful college experience.

1. Introduction to the problem

Inside the general online classroom, asynchronous discussion environments regularly trouble many entry-level online students new to this environment or in the beginning stages of learning it. Even graduate level students new to asynchronous discussion may need help with developing written responses for discussion. Asynchronous discussion is also new territory for many instructors who are unsure how to help students adjust to an uncomfortable and unfamiliar environment, and the instructor's efforts are important in helping and guiding students.

Other challenges exist as well. Many students prefer to be the quiet kid in the back of the class and do not *appreciate* discussion requirements. Some students aren't strong writers, some are ESL learners, some cannot type well, and still, others just don't know what to say, how to say it, or where to go for help or answers (Hancock, 2012). In many discussions there is a lack of participation, thread extension, critical thinking, and substantive engagement with others (Baran & Correia, 2009; Bradley, Thom, Hayes, & Hay, 2008; Dennen, 2005). The asynchronous discussion form has been considered problematic (Berge & Muilenburg, 2006; Ouzts, 2006; Yeh, 2010). It can offer students a more stressful learning situation causing frustration and missed learning opportunities.

Furthermore, finding ways to learn that students will use on their own is difficult. Most students don't want "extra" work and won't seek out opportunities on their own (Hancock, 2012, 2016). Finding "volunteers" to learn new strategies or use new skills can be difficult in entry-level online classes where new online college students may already be overwhelmed with navigating a new platform of learning.

The problems associated with asynchronous discussions hamper this type of beneficial learning. However, students can learn new strategies and incorporate them into their learning "bank" of helpful strategies for learning to analyze, evaluate, and interpret information. This presentation suggests that Discussion Roles are one successful solution that can help the asynchronous, online discussion forum become a more effective learning forum.

1.1. What can help? A structured discussion

Inside an online, asynchronous discussion, structure makes an enormous difference. Darabi, Arrastia, Nelson, Cornille, and Liang (2011) propose that the online discussion that maintains structure creates more opportunities for engagement in the critical thinking process where meaning can be constructed. According to Gao (2014), a structured discussion provides learners with a clear set of directions, which helps students overcome the challenges within the online discussion.

Structured settings offer specific protocols for student participation and engagement. The stress of creating a response on one's own is removed as students understand and meet general requirements. Feeling less stress, students can feel safer interacting with complicated topics and personal experiences (Lynch, 2002). Instructors should provide well-defined, clear roles for interacting (Bassett, 2011; De Noyelles, Zydny, & Chen, 2014; Gerbic, 2010). Structured discussions guide the learner, and students can learn to take charge of their own learning. In this more self-directed learning environment, students are more engaged in the learning process. When students are engaged, they become active learners (Johnson, 2013).

1.2. Discussion roles structure asynchronous discussions

Discussion Roles (Hancock, 2012, 2016) offer a successful technique for helping students new to online, asynchronous discussion. Discussion roles were developed from similar roles used in Student Book Clubs (Faust, Cockrill, Hancock, & Isserstedt, 2005) that were inspired by Literature Circles (Daniels, 1994). Literature Circles were used with young, elementary aged students to guide them in the unfamiliar territory of group discussion. Daniels writes “[The role sheets] exist to help spark or sustain natural conversation, not to guide or provide the bulk of the talk” (1994, p. 61). The role sheets provided a guided starting point from which to guide discussion of ideas.

Faust redesigned Daniels’ role sheets to work with middle and high school readers in order to scaffold the “how” of reading with intent. This “book club” course supported Rosenblatt’s Reader-Response theory by offering its students a new way to talk about reading because it “makes a case for understanding literary reading as a process, whereby personal responses are continually transformed to create an ever-widening net of relations connecting individual readers with the world at large” (Faust et al., 2005, p. 168). In the “book club class,” older students combined interpreted the reading selection and used book club role sheets for more intense critical thinking experiences.

Hancock (2012) redesigned the roles in order for them to become applicable inside online, asynchronous discussions. The natural progression offered an excellent way to scaffold responding to discussion questions in writing. When used, the roles help students feel more comfortable responding in writing to discussion questions, peers, and instructors. The structure of each role is specific, removing the stress of developing a response completely on one’s own. Further, each role offers a different lens through which to view a question. Identifying the role first provides students the “safe” way to discuss ideas because all students understand the role’s purpose (Hancock, 2012; Lynch, 2002).

The 10 Discussion Roles are: Discussion Starter; Key Terms Define; Passage Seeker; Connect to Research; Connect to Theory; Connect to Social Constructs; Summarizer; Devil’s Advocate; Class Clown; Quiet Kid in the Back (see Appendix A).

These 10 roles, each with a different critical focus, allow students to begin with a tool or starting point-structure. Students can understand various ways in which they can identify, examine, and make connections between ideas. Students can practice responding using higher level thinking skills and quality ideas. Roles allow students to be able to transform the way they think and “talk” in asynchronous discussion, and they can learn to take responsibility for their own learning. Most importantly, students can use the discussion roles in any class where asynchronous discussion takes place, and finally, they can transfer the technique to their personal and business lives.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Constructing meaning through structure

A structured asynchronous discussion forum provides the ideal environment for the social constructivist mode of learning. When students respond to instructor questions or even peers’ responses, they must “construct” a written response in order to articulate their ideas. Driscoll (2000) explains that “Constructivist theory rests on the assumption that knowledge is constructed by learners as they attempt to make sense of their experiences” (p. 376). Vygotsky, the father of constructivist theory, believed that social interaction is key in the learning process, and asynchronous discussion certainly offers dialog between learners (Hancock, 2012). The collaboration is what Bruffee (1999) calls *constructive conversation*. “... Students learn by joining transition communities in which people construct knowledge as they talk together and reach consensus” (p. 84). Students must be able to compare their ideas with others, negotiate those ideas through the ideas of their classmates, and construct new knowledge. Discussion Roles can alleviate the stress behind “constructing” meaning from the learning and then “constructing” a written response.

The goal of the structured discussion is not to limit student interaction or inhibit students from responding but instead to offer skills in order to promote higher order thinking, enhance problem solving skills, encourage examination of various perspectives, and promote collaboration (Darabi et al., 2011; Gao, 2014). Gilbert and Dabbagh (2005) found that when elements of structure are implemented into the discussion, students demonstrated the ability to make inferences and engaged in complex thought processes which resulted in meaningful learning. The elements of structure within the discussion help move students toward engaging in higher order thinking and collaboration (Andresen, 2009; Bassett, 2011; Berge & Muilenburg, 2006; Salter & Conneely, 2015).

2.2. Collaboration

Collaboration allows students an opportunity to become active learners with peers (Tibi, 2016). Salter and Conneely (2015) found that active learning is a critical part of student success in the on-line environment, and students are more actively engaged when sharing ideas and knowledge while utilizing critical thinking skills. When students collaborate and negotiate meaning, they are conveying, explaining, analyzing knowledge then comparing that knowledge with that of their peers and experts (Gilbert & Dabbagh, 2005). Students can learn to do this while using Discussion Roles.

Discussion Roles help students make extended connections that can increase their motivation to participate. The discussion then becomes an incentive for students to collaborate more (Gerbic, 2010). This productive social environment fosters more student-centered discussion, where a community of learners interacts to create a shared knowledge (De Noyelles et al., 2014; Gao, 2014; Zydney, deNoyelles, & Kyeong-Ju Seo, 2012).

Furthermore, using Discussion Roles, students can engage in the learning experience while taking responsibility for their learning (Gerbic, 2010; Salter & Conneely, 2015; Tu & Corry, 2003). When received well or encouraged by others, students gain more confidence to express their ideas and dialogue with others. Those who may not have participated previously may now engage because they are given a “starting point.” Discussion Roles allow students to take more and more risks when creating responses for discussion.

2.3. Self-directed learning

Discussion Roles allow students to take charge of their learning and become more self-directed in the active learning process. Self-directed learning is seen when the learner takes the initiative to engage in a learning experience and assumes responsibility for completing the learning (Skiff, 2009). Conrad and Donaldson (2011) suggest that in online settings, self-directed learning activities foster engagement as students are able to take ownership of the discussion. They are free to select which topics they wish to discuss and can choose discussion threads or create their own conversations based on their own interests. Discussion Roles allow students to experiment with varying roles in order to practice these skills with others. The roles allow for substantive interaction among learners who work to explore, assimilate, and synthesize ideas (Slagter van Tyron & Bishop, 2009). Discussion Roles push students to think further than the superficial or textbook response until the learner is actively engaged with the text or topic.

When students are given choices of how to respond in discussion, as with Discussion Roles, they will learn to become more engaged in the learning process (Salter & Conneely, 2015). They will begin to think about how to make the discussion work for them. There is a sense of empowerment as students begin to take control over their learning (Zyngier, 2007). Engaging students in the learning process increases motivation, attention, and focus and promotes more meaningful learning experiences. The benefits of asynchronous discussion can be more fully realized.

2.4. The instructor

The instructor has the ability to foster engagement learning activities/ discussions. In adult education settings, research has shown that selecting specific learning strategies most suitable for specific learning tasks might have a positive impact on instructor—student interaction (Mellard, 2006).

Johnson (2013) proposed that if instructors create a learning environment that engages students and motivates them to learn, the students will do all the work, and the instructor will purely facilitate the learning environment.

Andresen (2009) pointed out that when an instructor makes significant contributions to the discussion the length and frequency of discussion, student posts tend to decrease. De Noyelles et al. (2014) agree that when instructor intervention is minimal, students are more likely to express their thoughts and opinions. Students could begin to rely on the instructor too much to grow the discussion. If an instructor posts too frequently, students might only focus on the instructor's posts and not consider the other posts made by fellow classmates or subsequent topics (Salter & Conneely, 2015). Tu and Corry (2003) further agree that students should be given more opportunities for collaboration and less instructor intervention. The presence of the instructor within the discussion forum does not generate engagement among learners, but instead, the Discussion Roles, or the techniques the instructor employs are what engages students.

2.5. Safe experimentation

Discussion Roles offer the structured environments a "safe" space where ideas are respected because students know the others are also using the role sheet. For example, identifying the Devil's Advocate role (see Appendix A) when posting shows the others that the student is not being obstinate but argumentative, a legitimate literary genre. Students can then relax and experiment with ideas, fostering learning. When in this safe space, Lynch (2002) states that "students report that they actually learned more, felt closer to peers, and got to know their instructor better than they ever did in the traditional classroom" (p. 69). Discussion Roles allow students to take intellectual risks and worry less about looking foolish for their ideas, suggestions, or personal experiences.

Students using a structured form of discussion are more engaged and find the structure helped them explain their ideas (Hancock, 2012; Salter & Conneely, 2015). The structure helps them consider how to respond to questions and the topics presented (Hancock, 2012, 2016; Nussbaum, Hartley, Sinatra, Reynolds, & Bendixen, 2002, p. 23). Students using structured roles offer more evidence to support ideas in their posts and seek more defense for their ideas (Hancock, 2016; Oh & Jonassen, 2007). Scheuer, McLaren, Weinberger, and Niebuhr (2013) determined that students provided more elaborate and meaningful comments in structured discussions and stated they had a more positive learning experience. The goal of a successful asynchronous discussion is to form a structured and safe environment that will maximize the benefits of an asynchronous discussion and help students participate and learn more effectively.

3. Methodology

3.1. Limitations of study

The study was an informal analysis of how students and instructors use Discussion Roles in asynchronous discussions to increase engagement in asynchronous discussions. Results and conclusions were presented in a Brown Bag presentation in October 2016 to University of Phoenix instructors and staff in order to promote further analysis of techniques that increase student engagement in asynchronous, online discussions. IRB permission to publish the study findings was awarded in March 2017.

The study relied on student volunteers, even when instructors assigned roles. This means that requiring the use of Discussion Roles might have produced more distinct and in-depth findings. Furthermore, students who would have benefited most from using Discussion Roles in order to create meaningful responses often did not use them, and those students declined to be surveyed as to the reasons. Instructors observed that students who struggled in discussion were those who did not use Discussion Roles or dropped the course before using the roles.

3.1.1. Ethics

Students involved in the study were volunteers. No extra credit or grade was given for using Discussion Roles, and no credit was taken away for lack of role use. Instructors encouraged students generally to use the roles and encouraged students after the role use in a response to the student. Students' names were changed on all surveys, where they were coded and kept confidential. Students were encouraged to contact instructors if they had questions or concerns. Confidential surveys are stored in a secured area with limited access and stripped of any identifying information. The researchers followed the ethical framework of The Belmont Report for ensuring human participant research regulations.

3.1.2. Courses

The researchers taught basic entry level courses GEN 201 *Foundations for University Success* and ENG 147 *University Writing Essentials*. Students entered and left the course according to their own schedules. The instructors did the same. The discussion requirement for these classes is to post eight messages over three different days during the work week, which began anew on Monday at midnight and ended the following Sunday at midnight. This work week schedule continued until the end of the seven-week course. The courses did not utilize Skype or any other visual method.

3.1.3. Student demographic

Students in this study were adults, from 18 to 50+ years old, enrolled in entry-level, general education courses under the College of Humanities and Sciences of The University of Phoenix (2015 Academic Annual Report, 2016, p. 87). The majority have never engaged in asynchronous discussion academically. The majority identify themselves as parents with full- or part-time jobs, having a GED (General Educational Development), or high school graduation equivalent, and little to no college experience before enrolling (2016, p. 18, 24). Most of the older students who have college experience have not attended courses in many years. To add, entry level students overwhelmed with navigating a new course platform and design comment that they don't want extra work (Hancock, 2012, 2016). They mention being overwhelmed with navigating a new platform and seem to focus more on meeting minimum requirements and completing assignments.

The average age of students involved in the College of Humanities and Sciences in 2015 was 15.2% 22 and under with the majority aged 30 to 50 and over (2015 Academic Annual Report, 2016, p. 87). They are mostly women at 59.4% and mostly Caucasian at 51.5%. The average years of work experience are 3.5 at the Associate's level and 4.1 at the Bachelor's level (2016, p. 87). The majority of students are considered "first-generational college students" as well as "nontraditional working students" and have jobs, children, and other adult responsibilities (2016, p. 16). These statistics correlate with those the instructors found in the classes studied.

3.1.4. Lack of assigned roles

The basic entry level courses, GEN 201 *Foundations for University Success* and ENG 147 *University Writing Essentials*, included in this study did not allow for assigning grades to using Discussion Roles, and to avoid bias, Discussion Roles were not required. They were, however, encouraged in the beginning of the courses throughout and to the end of each course.

A discussion learning activity created for students in Weeks 1 or 2 (See Appendix D) encouraged students to read over the roles and analyze how they feel about writing discussion responses. The research question asked: Would using Discussion Roles help them utilize higher level thinking skills when creating responses?

Inside the asynchronous discussions studied, students were encouraged by the instructors to use the roles throughout the discussions each week. One instructor created separate posts entitled "Use a Discussion Role" (Instructor A). Another instructor assigned roles for students, encouraging them continuously to use the assigned role, and then expands upon other roles in future weeks (Instructor B). Both instructors agree that the more students were encouraged or rewarded with praise, the more they utilized the roles.

A variety of methods for using Discussion Roles is typical per individual instructor personality. When instructors do not support a method, the method will usually fail with students (Hancock, 2012). However, when instructors encourage a method, as in this study, students are more inclined to find the method useful and valuable.

3.2. Findings

This research study confirmed that asynchronous online discussion challenges entry level online college students face are conquerable. Conventional discussion strategies do not work the same in the asynchronous environment, so new strategies are encouraged. Discussion Roles are successful as scaffolding for written responses. The roles allow students to feel comfortable creating discussion responses, they ask students to use higher level thinking skills, and they allow students to take control of their own learning in order to transfer these learned discussion skills to outside situations and experiences.

4. Qualitative methodology

4.1. Use of discussion roles in this study

This research is an informal, qualitative inquiry focusing on instructors and students' perspectives concerning their experiences using Discussion Roles in online asynchronous discussions. Discussion Roles were presented differently by instructors in this study. All of the following methods were used with students, and they can be adapted per individual instructor use. Strategies that failed or were awkward were either removed or adapted to meet the needs of the individual courses. For example, one instructor determined that creating specific messages with prompted subject headings such as, "Use a Discussion Role," had more responses from students than just asking students to use the roles.

Instructors can add a learning activity/ discussion in Week 1 (See Appendix D) specifically designed to encourage talk about asynchronous discussion challenges and how Discussion Roles can help. Students could be guided to simply use the roles at their convenience when responding in discussion.

When using learning teams, instructors could assign each team member a role to use when working together. The roles can be switched each time students meet, so all students have a chance at experiencing each role. Additionally, an entire learning team may be assigned a role and must assume that role as a team. This might work for the more difficult roles such as "Connect to Theory" or "Connect to Social Constructs." As a team the students must respond using the Role. This may help students begin to understand the more difficult roles and how to use them.

Instructors can add a first message with the subtitle, "Use a Discussion Role," and add a discussion question employing students to use a role and also identify the role used. The identification of the role used is important in creating a safe space to learn and in helping readers better understand the writer's objectives.

Private messages (PM) can be sent to students who are strong in discussion asking them to respond to others using the Discussion Roles. This will both model and encourage peers to use the roles themselves (see Appendix G). When calling struggling students who have difficulty writing quality responses in discussion, instructors can recommend the student use the roles. While encouraging their use, the instructor can review the roles, and ask the student specifically to use the roles when responding.

Instructors can provide weekly feedback to students that encourage them to use the roles. The instructor might mention how the participation goals could be met more specifically if the student used the roles. Also, if the instructor notices a student struggling with a certain concept in the weekly assignment, he or she might mention how using a discussion role could have helped the student

understand that concept a better. As a way to review roles, instructors could have students assume roles, but not reveal the exact role, and the other students must then “guess” what role the student has assumed. This may be a way to reflect on the roles or to begin a discussion of the roles.

4.1.1. Data collection

Undergraduate, first-year, general education online asynchronous discussions were studied during the year 2016 at The University of Phoenix in order to study the usefulness of Discussion Roles. An informal study was conducted from January to December 2016, covering 18 separate, five-week classes, in order to test the strategies and procedures of using Discussion Roles with students. The results of the study were presented in October 2016 to faculty and staff of the University of Phoenix. Permission to publish the findings was granted in March 2017. All names were changed to protect student privacy.

Cheryl Hancock, PhD (Instructor A) taught nine online courses of GEN 201 *Foundations for University Success*, and Barbara Rowland, PhD (Instructor B) taught nine courses of ENG 147 *University Writing Essentials* for The University of Phoenix during 2016. Each class contained 20–30 students, respectively, at the start. Both courses are made up of freshmen adult students new to online, asynchronous discussion. Online asynchronous discussion occurs weekly in first-year courses with new topics beginning each Tuesday. The University of Phoenix instructors are actively encouraged to help students learn using proven methods.

Students involved in this case study were volunteers, and no grades were given or taken away for participation or not participating in the use of discussion roles inside asynchronous discussions. Data were collected in the form of student surveys, instructor surveys, asynchronous discussion threads and responses, and “ready-made” information. Participating instructor and students were surveyed before, during, and/or after the use of discussion roles to better understand their perspectives on how the roles helped students write responses in asynchronous discussions.

Discussion roles (Appendix A) were explained to students in week 1 (Instructor B) or 2 (Instructor A), and throughout the courses. Students were observed by the instructors and then surveyed (Appendix B) privately at the end of each course. Data were extracted from students’ surveys and discussion responses. The participating instructors were interviewed at the end of classes (Appendix C). Data were taken from instructors’ surveys, including how discussion roles were viewed and used, as well as the ease or difficulty of use. Reminders to students (Appendix E) can be posted in individual, private forums in order that students not forget to use the roles in future discussions (since participation is voluntary). This was necessary some of the time.

4.2. Data analysis and findings

The results of the data from this particular study support previous studies (Hancock, 2012) concerning the use of Discussion Roles in asynchronous, online discussions. Students, who used Discussion Roles, created higher level thinking responses. “There is no doubt students who used the roles created responses that were more detailed, thoughtful and engaging” (Instructor B). Instructor A noticed an immediate change in students’ written responses. She writes, “When they use the roles, they do write ‘better’ responses. The word ‘better’ encompasses length of responses, types of thinking inside of responses, and even examples and details included in responses.” Instructor B further commented on the success of role use. She writes, “I found that after the first time I used [the roles] I needed to be sure that I provided students with plenty of instruction [first]. I didn’t do this as much the first time around, and I could tell that it affected the way the students used the roles. Getting the students familiar with the roles, what they are, how to use them, and why they should use them, is very important. Without that connection, students are apt to see this as just ‘one more thing’ they have to do.”

Students found that using Discussion Roles created a safe learning environment. One student mentioned that while the assignment was difficult, he was able to overcome his fears and realize that he can “do this” (Matthew). He further states, “I think assigning this assignment was the best

because you have over six roles commenting on the same chapter in six different ways or more. I also feel that the information from the role discussion introduced you to the fear of change ... This was difficult because it was something I wasn't used to, but once I participated it wasn't as hard as I made it."

One student who tried the Discussion Starter role "for the first time" stated, "I found this one challenging because I was not sure if any of my peers would respond to my questions. Turns out that one did. I was pretty excited!" (Karla).

Instructor B describes how students relax into discussion: "I saw students engaging with one another more often. At first they might have just commented on the role itself (that their peer used), but as time wore on, students began to engage in conversation with one another and build on the ideas presented in the conversations." Instructor A also mentions, "One thing I did notice is that when lots of students used the roles, others used them, too. Like, seeing peers using roles encouraged other students to use them." A response from Frank, a student participant, agrees: "Discussion [roles] is a good idea to help the student get involved in the discussion more easily by giving them a target objective." Another student participant further agrees: "After reading through discussion roles, I do feel more comfortable now when responding to a discussion. I also know how to respond and ask questions or challenge the statements made in the discussion and [make] an argument or [agree] with the statements" (Jennifer).

Students commented on learning 10 different ways a person can view one topic or question. For example, Jennifer, a student participant stated, "After reading through discussion roles, I was actually very surprised to see how many different ways a person can respond to almost any topic!" Here, Jane, another student participant reacts similarly: "Wow. What [an] eye opener. I had no idea there were so many ways to put yourself into a discussion." Not only are they commenting on what they learn but also what they learn from each other, such as this response from participant Susan: "Also I like hearing information on the same topic from different people because they all (even if they have the same viewpoint) have their own spin. It creates more vibrant understanding and makes it easier to have a conversation on the topic."

Students practiced research skills and learned how to defend their ideas. They learned to question popular beliefs and assumptions about themselves and the world around them (specifically while juggling work, children, and college classes). Students learned to focus on vocabulary and grow their own as the Key Terms Definer. One student comments that as the Key Terms Definer she had the "opportunity to read the entire chapter and provide [her] classmate[s] with some valuable information; broaden their vocabulary" (Carrie).

Students learned to extend the thinking of the discussion. One student states, "I realize sometimes when responding to someone else's post, just saying I agree is not enough. I have to muster up enough conversation without sounding redundant" (David). Another student participant states, "[Roles] made me think outside my own thought process and helped me see things that I missed when reading" (Mary). Still another describes having fun with the roles: "I used the devil's advocate because it comes natural to me. I like to argue, and this role allows me to argue in a positive way" (John).

Lastly, students can learn to think independently of the discussion roles, and they can transfer the skills to their outside lives. One student mentioned, "I use discussion roles without even realizing it. In my experiences in life, I encounter many people ... I cannot deal with everyone the same way. I have to change my approach often to better serve myself and others" (Jason).

The data collected are both positive and encouraging, and it should encourage more use of Discussion Roles in asynchronous online classrooms of all kinds.

5. Conclusion

The first conclusion is that Discussion Roles work. In other words, “Discussion roles help a student to become aware of one’s writing as well as how it comes across to others. Creating awareness in one’s writing is a step toward creating meaningful, interesting, and quality responses” (Hancock, 2012, pp. 106–107). As students began to use the discussion roles, they engaged in social interaction with others creating a dialog between learners which helps build an awareness of one’s writing and how others perceive that writing (Driscoll, 2000). This second finding is also true: “The assignment of roles is a crucial structuring tool to enhance the knowledge construction processes in asynchronous discussion groups when roles are introduced right at the start of the discussions” (De Wever, Van Keer, Schellens, & Valcke, 2009, p. 521). Students are more likely to use the roles if the roles are introduced in the beginning of the course and encouraged throughout.

A third finding includes the way students become more aware of 10 different ways to view one discussion topic or question. Students take responsibility for their learning and can examine others’ perspectives (Darabi et al., 2011; Gao, 2014). “Now that I have been made aware of the different roles, I feel I can better understand where the person is coming from that falls under each role [and because of this] we can learn more from each other through the discussion process” (Hancock, 2012, p. 75).

Introducing students to the roles in week one was very important in helping students understand each role and the reason behind using them. Without this formal introduction to the roles, students had much more difficulty using and understand the purpose for using the roles. Students were more comfortable using the roles when given them in week one. Next, assigning roles took the pressure off students to figure out what role to use or only using easier roles. Students became aquatinted with *all* the roles. This allowed for direct feedback to be given to the student about the particular role as well as suggestions for using the role throughout the week.

Finally, the roles gave students a purpose when responding and helped them move beyond the simple “I agree” posts or plagiarizing the reading and other students’ posts. Using the discussion roles helped students explain ideas and consider others’ responses (Hancock, 2012, 2016; Nussbaum et al., 2002). Discussions that are structured can be for extracting information, but most importantly, for enjoyment, making connections, and formulating new perspectives. The structure does create a “safe” space for students to express themselves without fear of embarrassment. The scaffolding of higher level thinking skills means students can take control of their own learning in college and transfer this thinking to real-world environments.

6. Future study

Future studies should involve ways to entice students to use Discussion Roles. “I was excited about using them in my class; however, I wasn’t exactly sure how I would implement them so that students would actually use them. I think that is always our greatest challenge—getting students to use the tools that will help them” (Instructor R). “They needed me to trick them into using the roles. I’m not allowed to force students to use the roles. I can’t give a grade for using them or take a grade away either. There was no incentive, other than using a great learning method that enticed students to use the roles. They appreciated encouragement and modeling, but in the end, finding ways to entice students to use the roles proved difficult” (Instructor A).

Future studies could expound on Discussion Roles and include Character Roles or Imaginary Roles. Character roles might allow students to experiment with point of view, and imaginary roles might allow students to step into another’s experiences.

Future research can study team roles where an entire learning team may be assigned a role and must assume that role as a team. This might work for the more difficult roles such as “Connect to Theory” or “Connect to Social Constructs.” As a team, the students must respond as the Role. This may help students begin to understand the more difficult roles and how to use them.

Future studies could compare data of voluntary student use of roles and mandatory student use of roles. Focus could identify the extent to which students who are required to use roles, benefit from using roles. This would allow for all students, no matter their individual description, to be studied.

Since more students are finding themselves in such discussions, further research should be continued in order that asynchronous discussion best serve students and so students can grasp all the benefits of asynchronous discussion.

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Author details

Cheryl Hancock¹

E-mail: cjhancock1@hotmail.com

Barbara Rowland¹

E-mail: dbrowland98@comcast.net

¹ College of Humanities and Sciences, The University of Phoenix, 390 Old Edwards Rd., Arnoldsville, GA 30619, USA.

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Appendix A

Online asynchronous discussion roles

Online discussion can create uneasy feelings in students who do not always know where to “start” when responding, and the requirement means discussion cannot be avoided. The following Discussion Roles can help when responding in discussion by offering step-by-step “scaffolding,” or a formula for constructing your responses.

Each role offers an important perspective to discussion. Read through all 10 of the discussion role explanations and examples below. The topic used for the examples is, “The important traits of the college essay.” The topic and examples can be written for any and all types of courses and discussion topics.

Choose a role you would like to fulfill for your own discussion. Identify the role at the bottom of the post. (Using these roles is suggested and not required in order to participate in discussion.)

1. Discussion starter

For this role, think of being a discussion leader, and consider questions that will begin a particular discussion about a part of the students’ post. Identify your thoughts, concerns, and feelings about the person’s post and the topic. Find something noteworthy about another student’s post, and ask for further information or research findings.

Examples of questioning include:

- (a) Questions that ask for verification or additional information.
- (b) Questions that probe assumptions.
- (c) Questions that probe reasons.
- (d) Questions about alternative viewpoints.
- (e) Questions that probe consequences or implications.

Example: What is the organization of the essay? Which paragraph comes first, second, etc.? How do you know?

2. *Key terms definer*

This role allows students to focus on identifying, defining, as well as analyzing and explaining key terms being studied.

Example: As I was reading, I learned the definition of “thesis statement.” A thesis statement is one short, concise sentence, usually found at the end of the introduction that states one’s essay topic. Now, I’m having difficulty making just one sentence. Is anyone else having this problem? ☺

3. *Passage seeker*

This role allows students to focus on specific passages that “jumped out” or grabbed his or her attention. Relate the passage or quote to the context of the story, and make another connection to real-life events or character motivation.

Example: In Chapter 25 of our reading materials, Smith (2010) states, “Asking questions is one way to draw in the audience” (p. 20). Wow. I never thought of that before, but now I’m wondering what types of questions I might ask my audience. How does this sound? “Are you afraid of the hairdresser? Have you gone in for a trim and come out with a bowl cut?” These questions might get my reader’s attention. I think this has happened to everyone!!

4. *Connect to research*

For this role, students should provide citation information for further research on the topic. Determine your source, whether it is credible, and how the information connects to the discussion topic. Be sure to follow correct citation format.

Example: I was thinking about the statistics on how many professional jobs wrote essays on a regular basis. I really hoped that I wouldn’t have to as an accountant! However, I found on www.accountantslive.com that 90% of the job requires writing! I almost fainted! ☺

5. *Connect to theory*

This role requires students to offer the theory behind the topic at hand. What is the appropriate theory? Relate and link your theoretical input with the discussion topic, and think of those you might be lacking or that might be suggested. Ask fellow students for feedback on the theoretical concepts you have brought to the discussion.

Example: In one of my other courses (Sociology), we were discussing the effects of errors in writing. We decided that not only do errors show laziness, but they can also make us seem uneducated. Smith (2010) states, “Errors in writing made me choose not to hire someone. I figured that if the person couldn’t try to write well, then he wouldn’t be a good food server either. It’s about attention to detail” (p. 240).

6. *Connect to social constructs*

This role requires students to focus on a social aspect of the topic at hand. Who is the group identified, and what cultural uniqueness is offered or did you notice?

Example: I researched other countries’ emphasis on essay writing because I thought American schools were too tough on writing practice. However, I learned otherwise! I found that China, Europe, and Canada also require students to learn to write essays (Brown, 2010, p. 3). In fact, most other countries learn to write essays in English and their native languages.

7. Summarizer

This role allows students to summarize the main ideas of the reading or his or her ideas about the topic.

Example: Smith (2010) tells us that essays have three basic parts: the introduction, the body, and the conclusion (p. 4). I would like to offer that the thesis statement should also be one of these parts that it's just that important to remember. We shouldn't neglect to recognize its importance. Without it, one's paper lacks the statement of purpose.

8. Devil's advocate

For every idea, there is an opposing idea; this is where devil's advocate comes in. The role allows students to argue, politely of course, with students' ideas. Argumentation is a skill best learned in discussion, but it also allows students practice with debating ideas.

Example: Evelyn, you stated that your essay would work better as process analysis, but I disagree. Wouldn't your topic be better organized with the cause and effect order? It seems you want to define the disease, but I think your topic would be much more interesting if you show the cause of the disease and then the effects. You could use a good example and then extend your ideas more than in an information essay.

9. Class clown

This role is not as it seems. The idea is not to disrupt the class but to disrupt our thinking. Satire is a useful tool used by many, many writers. Hyperbole is extended exaggeration.

Example: When I was a kid, I thought essays were invented to make my hand cramp and cause kid-sized headaches! My brother used to call them "baby vampires" because they would suck the life out of us, and the teacher was their evil ruler!! Ah-ah-ahhhh! But, now that I'm older, I can see the usefulness of being able to write so that others can understand my ideas. I don't want my writing disorganized and full of errors.

10. Quiet kid in the back

We all know the quiet kid in the back of the class who never says a word, not even when called upon. Well, now, the quiet kid in the back can have a distinctive role. This role allows students to provide a generic and general response in order to receive credit for a substantive response. This person can also agree but is asked to explain why he or she agrees, and add an example to expound ideas.

Example: The reading tells us that an essay should have an introduction, body, and conclusion, a thesis statement, and at least five paragraphs. Most importantly, each paragraph should have a topic sentence with supporting sentences. Organization is important and is determined by the purpose of the essay.

Appendix B

Private message: Request for student to complete survey

Dear Student,

I am wondering if you had a chance to read through or even use the Discussion Roles that were posted in week one. If you did read through them or use any of the roles at any point during our discussions, could you please fill out the brief student survey I've attached here?

Your comments and experiences will help me better serve future students in discussion. I want to know your thoughts on whether Discussion Roles helped you.

I would really love to hear from you! Your responses are private, and honesty is much appreciated. Thanks so much for your help!

Sincerely,
Instructor

Student survey questions Name _____

- (1) Are you new to online discussion? When was your first online class discussion? What was your experience?
- (2) Knowing you *must* participate, what are your specific feelings or emotions about the weekly discussion requirement?
- (3) What do you find is the most difficult aspect of responding to discussion questions? What about to other students?
- (4) Do you think your discussion and participation responses are good? Why or why not?
- (5) What were your first thoughts about the use of discussion roles (week 1 discussion)?
- (6) Have the discussion roles helped or hurt your discussion experience? Explain.
- (7) Choose a discussion role you used. Specifically, which of the discussion roles did you find most helpful or interesting? Explain.
- (8) When you enter the discussion forum, do you have the role sheet near your computer? Where? If not, why?
- (9) Will you continue to use the discussion roles in future courses? Why or why not?
- (10) What improvements do you think you need to make to your discussion responses?
- (11) Did you feel pressure to use the discussion roles in our course? If so, explain.

Appendix C

Instructor survey questions

Name _____

- (1) Describe your previous experiences as an instructor participating in online asynchronous discussion. (Try to be as detailed as possible, and use examples.)
- (2) What were your initial thoughts about the use of discussion roles (week 1 discussion)?
- (3) After offering students the discussion roles, what specifically did you notice?
- (4) Did you notice students favoring one role over another? If so, which one?
- (5) In your opinion, did the discussion roles help or hurt online students participating in asynchronous discussion? Why or why not?
- (6) When students used the discussion roles, how were their responses different than before using the discussion roles?
- (7) Will you continue to use the discussion roles in future courses? Why or why not?
- (8) Are there any other comments you would like to mention?

Appendix D

Week 1: Initial discussion roles learning activity example

View the attached document on using Discussion Roles. Then, read and respond to the following bulleted list of questions.

- Do you have trouble when responding in discussion? Do you get "stuck," wonder if you sound silly, or just don't know where to begin or what to say?
- Consider how you normally participate in discussion. What is your usual participation level?
- Do you know how to respond by including the reading? Can you bring in outside sources or theory? Can you respond in various ways (or do your responses sound like everyone else)?

If this is you, then please read the attachment to the right (see Discussion Roles link).

- Consider the roles presented to you in the attached document. Could utilizing these roles help you when participating in discussion? How? Why or Why not?
- Could the roles help you when responding to other classmates in discussion? How? Why or why not?
- Please explain your ideas.

Appendix E

Week 2: Learning activity

In Week 2 let's try something new that may help us meet the weekly participation requirement and help us respond to the readings. In the Week 1 Learning Activity I posted a list and a description of Discussion Roles that can help us discuss the readings and offer another tool to help respond to classmates' posts.

I will assign you a particular discussion role from the list. You will assume this one role which you may use anytime you respond to the readings or your classmates' posts. I will notify you of your role in a private message at the beginning of each week. I challenge you to use that discussion role throughout the week. You do not need to use the role every time you respond. Feel free to use your role whenever you get stuck.

Think about those difficulties we mentioned in our Week 1 discussion. One of those difficulties was repeating what others have already said. This is a great time to use a discussion role because it offers an alternative response from those of your peers. Remember to identify your role when you use it. I just know you will be great at this!

Private message to student assigning role to be used:

Student, your role assignment for the week 2 discussion is Quiet Kid in the Back:

When you respond to the discussion please first announce what role you have been assigned and then respond to the reading or your classmate using that role.

Please do not stress out over this. This activity is just a fun and interesting way to think about the readings. There is no “right answer” here. This is a way to challenge your thinking.

Here is the definition of your discussion role:

Quiet kid in the back

We all know the quiet kid in the back of the class who never says a word, not even when called upon. Well, now, the quiet kid in the back can have a distinctive role. This role requires you to provide a generic and general response to the conversation. This is the one time that you can simply say that you “agree” or “disagree” with a comment from the discussion; however, you must explain why you agree or disagree, and add an example to expound ideas.

Example: Tim, I agree that writing is a part of the way we communicate with others. If I didn’t text or email I do not think I would communicate with anyone these days! I often wonder if anyone actually uses a phone to talk to someone anymore.

I know you can do this and I am looking forward to reading your response!

Appendix F

Class messages: To all

Class, you did an excellent job with the Discussion Roles Activity during Week 2. Let’s keep this going! You have received a private message assigning you a new role for Week 3. Don’t be afraid to just jump in and give it a shot. I will guide you through this, but if you have questions, ask them. I am impressed at the discussion responses being generated! Here are a couple of things to remember:

- (1) Read over your assigned role, and ask questions about what you are to do.
- (2) Don’t be afraid to make a mistake. This is a way to challenge yourself to dig deeper into the material. You will get credit for your response if you make a solid effort. The goal is to stretch yourself to think about and talk about the readings in a different way.
- (3) Don’t forget to interact with and encourage one another.

Thanks for your hard work! I love the conversations!

Private message: Second role assignment

Greetings Student!

Last week, I assigned you a Discussion Role, and you did a great job using it! I am really impressed that you challenged yourself to use the role, develop a great response, and even encourage someone who used roles (tailor feedback toward the student’s effort in week 1).

Discussion Roles offer such a variety of perspectives. Students who use the roles tell me that using them helps give them ideas that they had not thought about before.

Here is your new role for Week 3:

Quiet kid in the back

We all know the quiet kid in the back of the class who never says a word, not even when called upon. Well, now, the quiet kid in the back can have a distinctive role. This role requires you to provide a generic and general response to the conversation. This is the one time that you can simply say that you “agree” or “disagree” with a comment from the discussion; however you must explain why you agree or disagree, and add an example to expound ideas.

Example: Tim, I agree that writing is a part of the way we communicate with others. If I didn’t text or email I do not think I would communicate with anyone these days! I often wonder if anyone actually uses a phone to talk to someone anymore.

I look forward to reading your creative and critical thinking responses this week. Keep up the great effort!

Appendix G

Private message: Encouraging students feeling discouraged

Dear Student,

I would love for you to be a part of the Discussion Roles Activity. I know it can be scary to jump into something that is different, but don’t worry. I’m here to help you!

I remember when you commented in Week 1 about how participating in the discussion can be difficult (tailor to specific student’s comments). You mentioned that many times when you begin to make your posts for the week, you find that someone has already made the comment you were going to make. You mentioned feeling “beaten to the punch.” I totally understand how frustrating that can be.

Keep in mind that using the Discussion Roles can be one way to help avoid some of that frustration. When you run this situation, try using a discussion role.

Each roles offers a different way of responding to the discussion. Roles help you view the topic from a variety of perspectives, so you can create a unique response. Students who use the roles tell me that using them helps give them ideas that they had not thought about before, so I’m sure this will happen with you, too!

I really think you would be great at this! I would love to see how unique your ideas become when using Discussion Roles. Why don’t you give it a try? Let me get you started it.

One time this week make a response as the “Quiet Kid in the Back.” Take a look at the role below and see how you might be able to include this in one of your posts this week. I will look forward to reading what you develop!

Quiet kid in the back

We all know the quiet kid in the back of the class who never says a word, not even when called upon. Well, now, the quiet kid in the back can have a distinctive role. This role requires you to provide a generic and general response to the conversation. This is the one time that you can simply say that you “agree” or “disagree” with a comment from the discussion; however you must explain why you agree or disagree, and add an example to expound ideas.

Example: Tim, I agree that writing is a part of the way we communicate with others. If I didn’t text or email I do not think I would communicate with anyone these days! I often wonder if anyone actually uses a phone to talk to someone anymore.



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