

GROUND RULES IN ONLINE DISCUSSIONS: HELP OR HINDRANCE?

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ABSTRACT. Discussions play a key role in both online and traditional classrooms (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005) and the number of family science classes taught partially or exclusively online is increasing each year. Thus, consideration of issues related to the use of online discussions in family science classrooms is critical to understanding both the benefits and risks of online discussions. This study investigated the role of discussion ground rules in an online family science class. Results support the notion that ground rules play an important role in the facilitation of a positive online discussion experience. They also highlight the need to reflect on the role of online discussions in the family science classroom and the use of practices and policies such as ground rules to support quality discussions. Implications for the use of discussions and ground rules in family science classrooms, including the development of professional skills for future family science professionals, are presented.

Discussions are an important part of both traditional and on-line college classrooms, but they may play a particularly key role in on-line classrooms because of their critical role in providing interaction necessary for a learner-centered classroom. In family science classrooms, discussions play a key role in learning, as well as provide a mechanism for the development of interpersonal and professional skills that are necessary for future family science professionals. Thus, family science instructors teaching in both traditional and online classrooms should be aware of strategies for supporting and promoting discussions. This paper will discuss one such strategy for the facilitation of effective discussions in on-line classrooms: ground rules.

Discussions

Discussions address a wide variety of pedagogical goals including, but not limited to, the development of a learner-centered classroom (Huba & Freed, 2000). In a learner-centered classroom, the focus is on the student as a learner in contrast to the traditional methods that focus on the instructor as teacher. Learner-centered classrooms assume that students should be active

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participants in learning (Brookfield & Preskill, 2000). In learner-centered classrooms, students construct their own knowledge through the processes of synthesizing and applying new information, asking questions, thinking critically, and actively engaging in the process of addressing challenging issues and problems (Huba & Freed, 2000). Discussions are one of the tools instructors can use to support the goals of a learner-centered classroom as they provide a means through which students can actively participate in the learning environment (Brookfield & Preskill, 2000). Discussions provide students with the experience of cocreating knowledge, connecting with class topics at a deeper level, and synthesizing and integrating new materials and information presented through lecture, readings, or other means (Brookfield & Preskill, 2000, 2005; Hacker & Neiderhauser, 2000).

Discussions may also promote the development of interpersonal and professional skills necessary for work in the family science field. Skills noted as relevant for family life educators are: intellectual skills, self-awareness, emotional stability, maturity, awareness of one's own personal attitudes and cultural values, empathy, effective social skills, self-confidence, flexibility, understanding and appreciation of diversity, verbal and written communication skills, and the ability to relate to others (NCFR, 1994). Although discussions cannot support the development of all of these skills, discussions promote many of these critical skills. In particular, discussion promotes the development of listening skills and respect for the experiences and voices of others (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005). Awareness of one's own attitudes, biases, beliefs and values may also become apparent during discussion, and, in an ideal context, students will be lead to reflect on the assumptions they hold about specific topics (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005). Self-confidence, development of effective social skills, and the skills needed to relate to others flourish in effective classroom discussions.

Discussions in Different Classroom Settings

Discussions are an important part of traditional and online classrooms (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005; Fauske & Wade, 2003-2004; Gill, 2006). Many of the rewards and challenges of discussions are the same in both settings. In both settings, discussions play a key role in shaping student learning. Research conducted specifically on online learning supports this assertion (Gill, 2006; see Moore & Marra, 2005 for a review; Swan et al., 2000). On the other hand, discussions in both traditional and online settings can detract from the learning experience if managed poorly. For example, if individuals are allowed to monopolize the conversation, if discussions are off topic or unfocused, or discussions are allowed to remain at the superficial level (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005).

Online discussions pose unique challenges. One of the challenges is the impersonal nature of the communication and the lack of social cues that occur in face-to-face interactions (Hacker & Niederhauser, 2000). Social rules and norms for interaction in the “internet environment” may not be as well understood as rules and norms in the traditional classroom (Pankoke-Babatz & Jeffrey, 2002). Another unique aspect of online discussions is that in online classrooms, discussion may be the only forum available for students to discuss their thoughts and experiences about the class materials (Morrison & Guenther, 2000), whereas in a face-to-face classroom other opportunities for discussion may occur either formally or informally. In an online classroom, effective discussion is the vehicle that transforms the environment from a teaching to a learning environment (Morrison & Guenther, 2000). Therefore, an understanding of techniques and tools that can be used to facilitate effective online discussions may be all the more critical for family science instructors in the online classroom. Another challenge is that effective classroom discussions rely on the support and structure provided by the instructor. A

conscious effort on part of the instructor to create an environment supportive of discussion and “buy in” from the students is necessary to realize the benefits of discussion (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005).

Instructors that have used discussions have found specific rules and guidelines to be a necessary component of the classroom’s structure. Ground rules prevent problems from occurring that can interfere with learning such as lack of participation, monopolization, lack of focus in the conversations, or student anxiety. Rules and guidelines also help support a positive learning environment and maximize the beneficial aspects of discussions (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005; Bryant, 2005; Suler, 2004). Ground rules can serve as a means of clarifying instructor expectations regarding the content and/or quality of online discussion postings, which enhances the overall experience for all participants. For example, some instructors have specific rules regarding, grammar, tone, and use of formal language, and others do not. Ground rules also make standards explicit, which is a benefit to all (Moore & Marra, 2005) and can detail norms and social conventions specific to online discussion forums in an academic setting (Pankoke-Babatz & Jeffrey, 2002).

In addition, ground rules may serve as a means to assure all student voices are heard. Issues regarding differential participation due to gender, sexual orientation, power and ethnicity need to be considered in online discussions. Providing voices to those who have traditionally been without can be a powerful advantage of online discussions (Lobry de Bruyn, 2004; Peters & Swanson, 2004). For example, in a class discussing issues related to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) community, Peters and Swanson (2004) found that the students who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered participated in online discussions in a more in-depth and reflective manner than the same students did in face-to-face interactions. It is

hypothesized that the online environment allowed students to “construct and rehearse” their thoughts on the subject matter more freely than they could in a face-to-face interaction.

Ground rules may also help to guard against on-line discourse strategies that may alienate and divide students. Reviews of the research acknowledge that men and women tend to have differing styles of communicating in online discussions. Men tend to make longer and more frequent posts, make stronger assertions, and use language that is self-promoting and distancing. Women tend to make suggestions versus assertions, discuss thoughts and feelings more, and use language that focuses on creating a welcoming and accepting environment (Herring, 2001). However, not all men or all women use such strategies in on-line discussions. At least one study has found men and women equal in their use of inclusive, community building, and supportive conversation strategies such as expressing appreciation, posing questions, and considering the perspective of others (Fauske & Wade, 2003-2004).

Discourse strategies may also vary between members of the majority and minority groups in an on-line classroom. It can be tempting to think that online discussions solve problems that are inherent in our society today related to differential status; indeed, some have referred to electronic forums as “ideal public spheres for students who feel marginalized in the classroom” (Flores, 1990, p. 109). However, issues of power, bias, and privilege always be considered as potential factors in the effectiveness of on-line discussions. Some argue that computers are not culturally neutral, rather, they amplify the traits of those that use them (Bowers, 2000). Which, in some cases, may mean that the environment is predominantly “white”, and the subtleties of discourse that give power and status to one group over the other may still be present in online discussions. Instructors must continue to examine and monitor their own discourse and that of their students for signs of signs of bias, power, and privilege (Sujo de Montes, Oran, & Willis,

2002). Because of the subtle nature of issues related to power, bias, and privilege, it is unlikely that ground rules alone will solve these challenges. However, the role that ground rules may play in shaping civil and democratic discourse that is empowering to all participants is worth considering.

Effective strategies for facilitation of online discussions are particularly relevant to family science instructors. In order to succeed as professionals in the field of family science, our students must have the skills to interact with others in a socially appropriate manner (Powell & Cassidy, 2001). Our students must be able to discuss and reflect on controversial issues and challenging content (sexuality, gender roles, substance use and abuse, discipline, etc). The provision of an environment that enhances learning and allows for individual expression and development of professional skills is a critical task for family science instructors. In an online course, this goal can be achieved using discussions. Ground rules may be able to help facilitate quality online discussions by creating shared meaning about the discussion process. However, it is also important to consider any potential unintended consequences of online discussion ground rules, including the potential of ground rules to stifle or limit conversation. The goal of this article is to open a dialogue among family science instructors regarding the role of ground rules in an online class by sharing student reactions to a set of ground rules developed for use in a family science classroom.

Method and Background

I was interested in learning more about student reactions to ground rules developed to enhance and support positive group discussions in an online family science class. This interest stems from concerns regarding ground rules voiced by two students at the start of class. The students expressed concerns regarding how the instructor was going to monitor and grade their

input, and, in particular, how they needed to balance the sharing of their personal experiences within the course context. Based on this concern, the instructor decided to solicit feedback regarding the ground rules at the end of the semester and use the input to guide future use of ground rules in the context of an online class discussion.

The class was an upper division course, “Parent-Child Relationships,” offered in a department of Family and Consumer Sciences. There were thirty-five students in the class. The class is required for students pursuing a degree in family and community services, but is open to other majors. Students were required to participate in a weekly online asynchronous discussion (i.e., threaded discussion). The students responded to a question posed by the instructor based on the readings or lectures and respond to at least one of their classmates’ postings. For example, in the unit on adoption, the instructor posed the following question: “Based on what you read in your text, lecture, and websites, what are your thoughts on open vs. closed adoption? What are some of the pros as well as some of the cons?”

Participation in the online discussions was worth approximately 25% of the grade for the class. Students received points for posting two original comments, and responding to three other posts. To receive full credit they had to post the appropriate number of times, and provide commentary that was relevant to the course and related to the questions posed by the instructor. The points awarded for participation in the threaded discussions were a significant portion of their grade. The instructor monitored the discussions, but in general, did not participate.

The ground rules for course discussion were presented in the course syllabi and introduced in the introductory unit (see Appendix for a copy of the ground rules). The ground rules were developed based on input from instructors who had taught the class previously, readings on effective on-line instruction (Palloff & Pratt, 1999), readings on feminist pedagogy

(Allen, 1988) and knowledge gained from University and family science professional organization sponsored workshops on teaching effectiveness. Student input regarding the ground rules was encouraged; students were encouraged to discuss any concerns they might have regarding the ground rules with the instructor via email, phone, on campus appointment, or discussion board. After the completion of the semester, I sent an email to all students who had completed the class requesting their feedback regarding the course ground rules. I asked the following questions in the e-mail:

- Thinking back, what was your initial response (to the course ground rules)? Now, what do you think?
- Do you think these rules helped to stimulate class discussion, stifle class discussion, or did they really matter?
- Did they make a difference in how you as an individual responded to me, to your classmates, or to the group in general as part of our threaded discussion?
- Other comments or ideas you would suggest regarding netiquette and civility/respect in online classes.

The email included a copy of the ground rules. Students were asked to reply via email or, if they wanted to remain anonymous, they could fax their response in to the department office.

The department secretary was instructed to “blind” any faxed responses.

The questionnaire was distributed to all 35 students and five replied to at least one part of the questionnaire; all responses were returned via email. All respondents had been in at least one other online class prior to taking this course and two of the students were enrolled in an undergraduate degree program that is offered exclusively online. Four of the respondents were female and one was male. I analyzed responses for overall content and themes.

Although this evaluation existed as part of standard course evaluation procedures, approval for this study was solicited and obtained from the University's Institutional Review Board. Student names have been modified to maintain confidentiality.

Results and Discussion

The themes that emerged from student comments reflected both concerns and acknowledgement of the benefits of ground rules in promoting effective and positive online discussions. The feedback from students in this particular family science class provide support for the notion that ground rules may provide an important role in the development of effective and quality online discussions in family science classrooms.

In regards to general comments regarding ground rules, the responses were slightly negative in tone, but yet, appreciative of the role ground rules can play in online discussions. One student reported feeling that the rules were redundant due to the number of online classes that she had taken in the past:

The netiquette rules that you laid out for your online class for me, at least, were redundant, by the time I had gotten to your class I had taken TONS of online classes.

Another student noted the common sense notion of the ground rules:

I only had one real thought when I read them. That was "duh". Only because to me its just basic things to not be offensive blah blah and to be confidential.

One student made note of the necessity of having ground rules in place to prevent problems from occurring:

So do I think they (ground rules) are necessary? Yes I do! Just because should something happen you dont need some upset whinny student that complained you never set any rules or boundaries. So as a precaution I think that it is an excellant idea. Even if

everyone claims to know it-- its a good just in case informant. Just as it is when year after year we have to read the stupid rules teachers give us on plagerism. We all know the rule- but maybe someone might not? You may not be able to enforce a reprimansion or a consequence to someone maybe a deduction of points for that discussion or journal if you never said anything at all. Its almost a cover your butt and everyone elses sorta thing. So I think that it was a good thing you did!!

Students noted the role ground rules may have played in allowing discussions to stay on topic and focused, helping the class to “flow,” prevent problems, and be an enjoyable experience.

My initial response was, “wow that’s deep” but now I think that it was necessary to keep the class flowing. It also helped make the TDs (threaded discussions) enjoyable.

Students also appreciated having clear expectations and the opportunities to clarify expectations with the instructor:

I thot I had a pretty good grasp of netiquette by the time I arrived in your class, so the rule intimidated me and would have stifled my conversation had you not been such a great (and I mean that and am not kissing up – after I don’t have any reason too right?) instructor and communicated with me about the net rules when I emailed you.

The student comments provide support for the important role that ground rules may play in providing for a supportive environment including the expression of a range of opinions and points of view. Students specifically noted that they felt their opinions and the opinions of others were respected in this class and that they felt safe in expressing their thoughts, opinions and interpretations. One student, in particular, noted the contrast in this class compared to another online course in which she was enrolled:

Yes, it (ground rules) did make a difference. I felt safe expressing my thoughts. I recently have been “attacked” by some of my fellow classmates in an online class. I seriously considered dropping the course after this. With the rules in place it seemed like there was more structure in the TDs (threaded discussion).

Although this student did not say so specifically in this response, in conversations with the instructor, she revealed that she had been attacked in other classes because of her religious beliefs. Granted, we cannot know for sure if the ground rules are the reason she felt welcomed, and safe, in this class. However, it is an important point to reflect on and warrants further study. Online courses are not immune to issues of discrimination or hostile interactions (see Fauske & Wade, 2003-2004). Without respect and civility, and a sense of safety, the goals of discussions will not be realized (Gill, 2006).

The issue of particular individuals dominating discussions is a key concern of both live and online discussions. This issue was noted by one of the students in this study as a frustration in other online course she was taking:

I liked these rules. I think that they helped give a clear view of what was expected. I also think that it helped the discussions to flow well and stay on task. I am currently taking a class that has no real expectations for the TDs (threaded discussions) and it is frustrating.

There are two people who dominate the conversation every time. I counted today and one of them has 32 responses. It gets a little dull hearing from the same people so much.

When one person dominates a discussion, the voices of others can be limited, and in particular, the voices of those with less power or who are not from the dominant culture (Sujo de Montes et al., 2002). Dominance of discussion occurs for a variety of reasons including gender (see Fauske & Wade, 2003-2004), interest in winning the instructor’s approval, and personality traits

including a desire to control and be an authority (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005). Students and instructors alike can be challenged by a dominating classmate. One of the benefits of online discussions has been the belief that it can allow for a wider range of students to feel comfortable in participating (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005), and yet, research has shown that issues of dominance and power are still very real in online classes (see Fauske & Wade, 2003-2004; Sujo de Montes et al., 2002).

Ground rules in online discussions can also support and promote professional development for family science students. The ability to communicate well, and in a manner appropriate to the setting is key for professionals in our field (Powell & Cassidy, 2001), and for true learning to take place. As one student noted:

Being allowed to bring one's own thoughts and opinions into a classroom setting is imperative if real learning is going to take place but it must be understood by all those who participate that the opinions of others must be respected. I believe your class did just that. There were issues that brought about discussions that each of us may have felt strongly about but I do not believe anyone really got out of hand.

This comment alludes to the controversial nature of many of the topics covered in family science classes. Future family science professionals must be able to discuss controversial topics. In this class, several controversial topics were addressed including gay and lesbian parenting, discipline strategies (including spanking), and drug use in adolescence. Students reported feeling safe in expressing their feelings in this class and that others were respectful of their feelings, opinions and interpretations.

An unexpected result of the open dialogue created between the students and instructor in this class was the one on one discussion that occurred between the instructor and several of the

students. In one case, the ground rules prompted one student to reflect on and discuss with the instructor how to best integrate personal examples into discussions. This reflection is evident in the following statement:

I wasn't so much worried about conversations w/ other students but I WAS worried before our communication that you might take any conversation that got a lil "earthy" or when it was mentioned that "it is not a therapy session", conversations that involved personal experience w/ your own children and/or parent/child relations (would be a problem).

The issue of balancing the personal with the professional is an important topic related to professionalism in our field and one that this student, and others, will encounter when working as professionals. Online discussions may serve as a forum to learn to "speak" the language of the profession.

Implications for Family Science Instructors

Four implications for professional practice emerge from the existing literature and the results of this study. The implications relate to the need for regular reflection on classroom practices, the role of discussions in the development of professional skills, and issues related to making ground rules specific for classroom goals and grading of online discussions.

Reflect Regularly on Classroom Practices. Family science instructors must reflect on the practices used in their classrooms, both live and "online" that support positive discussions. As new technologies for teaching become available, it is essential that instructors consider the role of technologies within the learning environment (Morrison & Guenther, 2000). The usefulness of the technologies used in family science classrooms and how technologies enhance and support learning must be continually, and thoughtfully, questioned (Grigar, 1999). Family

science instructors must work to develop procedures and policies, such as ground rules, that facilitate the application and use of new technologies.

Family science instructors must also reflect on how they structure their classroom, and in particular, discussions, to allow for participation from all students. It is not enough that we have “good intentions”; we must actively reflect on how we can create an environment that provides voices for all students (Sujo de Montes et al., 2002). We must constantly assess how issues of race, ethnicity, language, sexual orientation and power are dealt with in our classrooms (Allen, 1988; Walker, 1993). We must develop teaching strategies that promote and model effective dialogue, reflexivity, and integrity (Blaisure & Koivunen, 2003). Sujo de Montes and colleagues (2002) raise the following thought provoking questions as a challenge to instructors:

How do we construct safe places for all students to voice their thoughts and be held accountable for respectfully examining the resulting conversations? How do we manage issues of race, ethnicity, language and power to block or facilitate learning? How do we encourage some students to find their voices and speak powerfully and others to find their ears and learn to listen? (p. 269)

Instructors must continually reflect on how to best support an environment of respect and civility (Gill, 2006).

Consider the use of discussions in the development of professional skills. Online discussions are a key component of many family science classes and may play a positive role in promoting the development of skills essential to family science professionals. Further research is needed to verify the role that discussions play in the development of professional skills; however, it is reasonable to assume that discussions can support development of professional skills. Online discussions must be structured in a way is beneficial to all learners. Instructors may

wish to reflect on specific ground rules that can be implemented to promote and enhance the development of professional skills. For example, rules regarding the number of postings required and how to respond appropriately to others may be useful.

Make the ground rules fit your goals. Ground rules should fit the objectives of the course and be modified for each course (Moore & Marra, 2005). Depending on the objectives of the class, it might be appropriate to have ground rules regarding grammar, tone, and use of formal language. In other classes, such rules may not be necessary. For example, when I taught this particular class (parent-child relationships), issues of formality, grammar and punctuality were less relevant—the goal of the discussion was to provide a forum for the exchange of ideas and reflection on course materials. However, when teaching a class with a specific focus on professional development, formal writing, grammar, and punctuation were considered when assigning a grade to the online discussion. Ground rules can also serve as a reminder of some of the “basics” of class discussions such as confidentiality and basic civility as well as standards of netiquette for online discussions. For example, ground rules can introduce students to the use of emoticons as a means to express emotions or add humor and the use of capitalization to “shout” or show strong emotions. Ground rules can play a key role in structuring and supporting intellectual discussions (Bryant, 2005) but must be adapted to fit the goals and objectives of each class. A “one size fits all” policy is not appropriate.

Grading Discussions. Students must know that their participation in discussions is valued and important (Bryant, 2005; Swan et al., 2000). Grading policies are one way to address this concern. Discussion should count for a significant percentage of the course grade, frequent discussion should be required, and discussions should be both open and well-defined at the same time (Swan et al., 2000). Grading on process (e.g., participation and quality of postings) vs.

“right” or “wrong” answers has been found to contribute to a higher quality discussion (Bryant, 2005).

The findings reported in this exploratory study provide additional support for the contention that ground rules may be a necessary part of any class with a discussion component (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005; Moore & Marra, 2005; Suler, 2004). However, these findings should be considered tentative at best due to the limits of the small sample size and the self-selecting nature of the sample. Certainly, the voices of five students cannot speak for the all students enrolled in online discussions. However, their appreciations of and concerns regarding ground rules do provide support for the need for further investigations in this area. Continued research on the role of discussions, and in particular, research on the strategies and techniques to support effective online discussions, would be beneficial and provide further understanding of the issues raised in this study. Continued dialogue among family science teaching faculty regarding the merits of discussions and the use of ground rules to provide support and structure in the family science classroom would be beneficial. In particular, discussion regarding the use of discussions to scaffold the development of professional skills would be useful.

In summary, discussions are an important part of family science courses, particularly online courses. Instructors may wish to consider the use of guidelines, such as ground rules, to provide structure and enhance the quality of discussions in these types of classrooms. Researchers and instructors should continue to critically evaluate the effectiveness and use of online discussions and, in particular, the role that online discussions can play in supporting the development of professional skills for future family science professionals.

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Appendix

Ground Rules for Discussions

An important part of this class is the ability to discuss the content of the class with each other. One of the interesting parts of this class is that we all have experience with the subject matter-- we have all been children or had parents! So, it is useful to be able to blend our personal experiences with the information from the research articles, book, and lectures. Yet, it's important to keep in mind that this is a classroom, and not a chat session with our best friend or therapist!

We also need to keep in mind that what we "say" can contribute (negatively or positively) to the experience of others, including their willingness to share or be an active part of our discussions. There are lots of different "things" that contribute to our ability or interest in sharing. Some of the things that come to my mind are stated in the syllabus:

Respect/Course Ground Rules: I ask that we treat each other with respect, professionalism, and courtesy. We will “discuss” this further in class. But, when in doubt, a good rule to follow is to think about how you would like to be treated, and act accordingly. In terms of e-mail and other postings, please keep in mind the “disconnected” nature of e-mail and chat/threaded discussions. Sometimes our meaning can be lost in what we write. So, it is often best to err on the side of being overly “polite”—using emoticons (☺) for example, can make things seem a lot “softer” sometimes. I ask that we treat each other as we would if we were meeting face to face. If you would not say what you are writing to me (or one of your classmates) in person, don't write it!

Other factors that contribute to our willingness to share include:

- Confidentiality: Know that what is said in class stays in class.
- No "bashing" of anybody or any group. You can disagree or have differences, but express them respectfully.
- Participate fully in threaded discussions or chats.
- Know and respect boundaries--of what others are willing to share, and also what you should share. It can be awkward when others share things that are too personal.
- Don't monopolize the discussion.
- Watch the irrelevant tangents.
- Taking offense when none was meant.
- Respecting the ideas of others, rather you agree or disagree.