

Luring the Lurkers: Increasing Participations in the Online Discussions of a Blended Learning Course

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ABSTRACT

Despite the popularity of online discussion threads, there is a growing concern on the lack of participations among the learners. The number of responses in discussion threads is dropping and has discouraged healthy exchanges of ideas among the learners. Most learners tend to be online lurkers who rarely provide feedback although they are rather active in reading others' posts. In this study, a few techniques were employed in the online discussion threads of a blended learning course on academic reading and writing in order to promote lurkers' participations. Discussion topics were posted throughout the 14-week course offered at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) using different techniques in order to supplement the activities conducted in face-to-face classes. Based on the discourse analysis of responses posted by 122 participants, three techniques were noted to be successful in luring the lurkers to be more active in the discussion, which include the use of a comic strip as a topic starter, incorporation of social talks and instructor's frequent intervention. At the end of the course, semi-structured interviews were conducted to find out the lurkers' overall perceptions on their behaviour in online discussion. The analysis revealed that the number of responses is not directly incremental to the mastery of the subject matter. However, it is the learner's sense of belonging to the online community that persuaded them to be more active in sharing their ideas. Thus, cohesion and deeper scrutiny of the discussion topic are largely facilitated by the cultivation of social elements in each discussion.

Keywords: online discussions, online engagement, lurkers, blended learning

INTRODUCTION

The prevalence of internet and web-based learning tools has prompted many universities to complement their courses with various technology-supported media apart from the traditional lecture format and classroom discussion. Computer-mediated communications (CMC) are one of those media that has been widely employed as a supplement to daily face-to-face lectures. CMC is defined as communication between two or more people via networked computers and can be categorised into asynchronous and synchronous (Henry

& Li, 2005). Asynchronous CMC refers to communications that are time-independent or delayed in response such as email and discussion boards. Synchronous CMC, on the other hand, occurs real-time and resembles features of face-to-face interaction. This includes text and voice chats and video conferencing (Warschauer, 1996). Of the two types, asynchronous CMC primarily online discussions are more widely used as teaching tools and the discussions boards provides valuable opportunities for educational researchers to analyse discussion threads in order to investigate whether deep learning is facilitated in such medium of learning (Hew & Cheung, 2003; Meyer, 2004). Thus far, although the benefits of online discussion are widely acknowledged (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2003), there is a growing concern on the decreasing level of interactivity and participation in various discussion platforms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Online Discussions

Asynchronous online discussions or commonly known as threaded discussions, can refer to a variety of medium that allow users to communicate with one another without being online at the same time. As mentioned by Swan (2001), asynchronous online discussions are largely text-based and not confined to time and space since users can reply a message at their own convenience unlike in synchronous discussion. The use of asynchronous online discussions has been evaluated positively in many studies and most findings revealed that online discussions encourage cognitive engagement, critical thinking and social collaboration (Pawan *et al.*, 2003; Son, 2002). Moreover, Biesenbach-Lucas (2003) stipulates that asynchronous discussions allow students, in groups to cooperate with each other in terms of sharing of ideas as well as understanding of course content. Thus, the asynchronous nature of the discussion affords participants the opportunities to not only collaborate but also to reflect on their peers' contributions and their own writing before posting them. This tends to create a certain mindfulness or critical thinking among learners and a culture of reflection in an online learning environment (Garrison *et al.*, 2001; Pawan *et al.*, 2003). Many learners in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses are benefiting from the use of online discussions in order to improve their proficiency as well as the mastery of content knowledge (Greenfield, 2003; Warschauer & Meskill, 2000). Thang and Bidmeshkia (2010), for example, reported in their study on English for science and technology course that learners perceived the blended mode of having online discussions contributed highly on the improvements of their reading skills and strategies. In addition, Yamada (2009) found out that text-mediated system in online discussions increases learners' confidence in terms of grammatical accuracy.

The pervasiveness of asynchronous online discussion as a potential tool for social and cognitive development has led many researchers to relate the success of asynchronous discussion to how the technology is integrated into the curriculum, the coursework and the roles of the instructors in assisting the discussion to take place (Wu & Hiltz, 2004).

However, these studies have paid great attention on students or users who are actively involved in the online discussion since their activities are easily observable. In recent years, there is a growing interest in investigating the passive users who are known as lurkers (Nonnecke *et al.*, 2004) as they are increasingly prominent in various discussion threads. They are often labelled as “passengers” and perceived as those who lack the efforts to be part of an online community. Furthermore, the social network phenomenon has shifted learners’ attention from engaging in threaded discussion to more appealing platforms like Facebook and Twitter (Chuah, 2013; Kenney *et al.*, 2013). These social networks, however, provide lesser control for the instructors to keep track of the learning artefacts that could be used to improve teaching and learning process. It is therefore timely to find out ways to encourage higher participations among the learners especially the lurkers so that the benefits of online discussion can be maximized.

The Lurkers in Online Discussions

The term “lurkers” is often used to label the inactive users within a virtual community especially in online discussion threads. They are believed to be the “passive readers” of what others have posted but never or very rarely respond. Several researchers have come up with different definition of the term. Rafaeli *et al.* (2004) regarded lurkers as “a persistent but silent audience” (p. 2) while Nonnecke *et al.* (2004) claim the lurkers are members who had never posted in a community at any time. However, Salmon (2003) provides a slightly more positive viewpoint by stating that a lurker is “someone initially reluctant to commit themselves to public participation in conference” (p. 36).

A review of literature also provides three main perspectives on the lurkers. The first perspective is known as “free riding” (Nonnecke *et al.*, 2004) in which those who refuse to post due to their perception that knowledge should not be shared in order to maintain one’s value. The second perspective is legitimate peripheral participation (Soroka & Rafaeli, 2006) that describes lurkers with “wait-and-see” attitudes but willing to participate whenever possible. The third perspective is knowledge sharing barriers (Ardichvilli, 2008) that cover three barriers that lead the lurkers to be passive. These barriers include interpersonal, procedural and technological barriers. Based on these perspectives, Neelen and Fetter (2010) investigated lurkers’ and active participants’ behaviour and found out that lurkers considered their behaviour of “observing from far” as a learning strategy and they do learned from the process.

Clearly, the lurkers are the silent majority in most online learning environments and it is crucial for them to participate more actively especially in ESP courses since the contact hours in face-to-face instructions are rather limited. In this study, several techniques were trialled and tested in figuring out the means to motivate the lurkers to be more active in online discussion threads of an academic English course.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, it aims to uncover the appropriate techniques that can be incorporated in the online discussion threads so that the lurkers would be more active. Specifically, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

- i. How to encourage the lurkers to participate more often in online discussion?
- ii. Why did most students choose to be lurkers in online discussion?

METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of this study, a case study research design was employed. The research design is selected due to the nature of the research questions, which deals rather extensively on subjective data. By using this research design, it allows the researcher to scrutinise a general statement and understand the specific concept holistically (Wiersma, 1991) in order to answer the research questions. It is also appropriate since the research problem focuses only on a specific case that involves a small group of participants.

In this study, the online discussion forum of an ESP course (Academic Reading and Writing) at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, was selected to be studied. The students' posting habits on the forum were observed for ten weeks. The participants' consent was obtained formally prior to the use of their postings in this study. The study was carried out from week 4 to week 13 of the course. The first three weeks of the course were marked as "buffer period" in which students might not be aware of the forum since the course is offered to students from different fields of study. They need some time to familiarise themselves with the structure of the course as well as with the blended learning environment. Besides, during the first three weeks, students are allowed to drop the course. Hence, the finalised number of students can only be obtained in the fourth week.

Participants

A total of 122 students participated in the study but only 65 of them were identified as lurkers. The students are marked as lurkers if they did not post for the first three weeks of the study (i.e. Week 4 to Week 6 of the course) although they logged into the discussion forum actively during that period. Among the 65 lurkers, 20 of them were male while 45 of them were female. To measure their English language proficiency, their Malaysian University English Test (MUET) bands were used. As shown in Table 1, out of the 65 lurkers, 43% of them obtained Band 3, 38% obtained Band 2, 13% obtained Band 1 and only 6% of them obtained Band 4. Students with MUET Band 5 and Band 6 were not among the lurkers.

Table 1 Distribution of lurkers' MUET Band

MUET Band	Percentage (n = 65)
4	6%
3	43%
2	38%
1	13%

It is interesting to note that the majority of the lurkers actually have higher English language proficiency than initially expected. Among the sample (n = 122) almost 30% of them (n = 36) reported to obtain Band 1 in MUET but only four of them were observed as lurkers. The rest of them were rather active in the online discussion threads.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Topics related to the course (academic English) were posted weekly focusing on several techniques. Each technique was used for two threads. These include:

- i. statement only topic starter – a discussion that is started by using only statements. This can be a quotation or a topic.
- ii. comic-strip as topic starter – a discussion that is started by using comic-strips related to the topic.
- iii. video as topic starter – a discussion that is started by using short video clips related to the topic.
- iv. more social talk – allowing more leisure or social conversation which may not be directly related to the topic.
- v. frequent instructors' intervention – instructors' involvement or intervention is higher in this thread.

These techniques were selected based on the researchers' initial observations from several other discussion threads. Although they are not directly supported by previous studies, these techniques are believed to be useful in encouraging participations in online discussions.

Each discussion thread was used as a continuation of the topics discussed in class but from different perspectives. Some of the topics covered are the technicality of writing a specific academic genre, techniques in paraphrasing, the use of citations and referencing, and also the culture of “copy and paste” among university students. An example of how a thread looks like is shown in Figure 1, which uses a comic strip as the starter of the discussion. It has to be clarified that students were not made compulsory to post as this would defeat the purpose of the study, since their willingness to participate was being observed.



Paraphrasing: More than just "In Your Own Words"...

by Chuah Kee Man - Thursday, 7 March 2013, 10:15 PM

Reflect on the following comic strip. Paraphrasing is more than just "In Your Own Words". The aim of paraphrasing is to ensure the meaning is retained though changes have been made to the original text.



Figure 1 A thread using comic-strip as topic starter

The responses from the online discussion threads given by the lurkers were compiled and coded accordingly as shown in Figure 2. LS stands for "Lurking Student", "005" was used as student identity code, and 02 was used to mark the number of post made by the student. The number of posts by the lurkers was counted and their "online behaviours" were observed.



Re: Academic Writing: Creativity vs. Technicality

by [redacted] - Friday, 22 March 2013, 1:20 AM

LS-005-02

It depends on what we are going to write. However, technicality aspects are required more than creativity though sometimes students, including myself, tend to be creative until at one point my essay has no meaning at all. I do agree with Calvin. But since I am a student, I think technicality is more important in academic writing because everything that deals with my assignment need to be cited and paraphrase otherwise I will be in a BIG TROUBLE! wink

Show parent | Edit | Split | Delete | Reply

Figure 2 Coded response from the participant

At the end of the course, interviews were carried out on 30 of the 65 lurkers. The interviews' responses were qualitatively analysed to obtain useful insights on their lurking behaviour. It mainly focused on the question "Why did they choose to lurk?". The responses were thematically grouped according to interpersonal, procedural and technological barriers as categorised by Ardichvilli (2008). The coded responses were then counted and tabulated.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 2 Lurkers' posts according to threads

Week	Techniques used in thread	Total posts	Mean
1	statement only as topic starter (a1)	45	0.692
2	comic-strip as topic starter (b1)	75	1.153
3	video as topic starter (c1)	60	0.923
4	more social talk (d1)	70	1.077
5	frequent instructors' intervention (e1)	72	1.107
6	comic-strip as topic starter (b2)	78	1.200
7	statement only as topic starter (a2)	40	0.615
8	frequent instructors' intervention (e2)	65	1.000
9	more social talk (d2)	72	1.108
10	video as topic starter (c2)	55	0.846

Table 2 shows the number of posts made by the lurkers within each thread that emphasised on different techniques. The techniques were used twice at a specific interval so that its impact can be observed. For example, the threads with comic-strip as topic starter were posted on week 2 and week 6. The total posts for both weeks were then calculated. It can be noted that three types of techniques were successful in motivating the lurkers to post more, which were indicated with a slightly higher number of mean scores as well. The three techniques were comic-strip as topic starter (153 posts), more social talk (142 posts) and frequent instructors' intervention (137 posts). Apart from that, threads with video as topic starter produced a reasonable number of responses from the lurkers (115 posts) while threads that used statement as topic starter generated the least (85 posts).

Comic-strip seems to be a good stimulus in encouraging the lurkers to participate. It generated the most posts among the lurkers in the two instances. Perhaps, the nature of comic strips which can be interpreted from different perspectives has allowed the students to be more participative as opposed to the type of statement or question that may trigger a similar response from all students. Furthermore, by allowing a slight diversion to social topics (more social talk) which are not related to the subject matter, lurkers tend to be more active. For example, in discussing the technicality of discussion essay, the lurkers were more interested to respond when the instructor diverted the topic to their favourite movies. Indirectly, the students were actually learning the structure of a discussion essay as they were arguing on which movie should be considered as the best of the year though the initial topic was on the pros and cons of the Internet. Moreover, the intervention or moderating role of the instructor is also very important. Whenever

the instructor responded to a specific post, the lurkers were more willing to reply. Posts which were left unattended by the instructors were largely abandoned by most lurkers. This shows the need for the instructor to acknowledge the presence of the students so that they would feel appreciated in sharing their views. It is also interesting to note that the use of videos as the start of a discussion topic did not seem to encourage the lurkers to participate as often as initially expected by the researcher. It could be the result of Internet bandwidth problem as the loading of video requires more time and most lurkers might have no intention to wait for the whole video to be loaded.

Table 3 Lurkers' posting habits

Posting periods	Percentage of posts
Beginning (the first 20 posts)	7%
Middle (between the 21st – 50th posts)	64%
End (after 50th post)	29%

Table 3 illustrates the posting habits of the lurkers. Based on the total number of posts made by the lurkers within each discussion thread, 64% of them were posted slightly towards the middle of the discussion (between 21 st and 50 th post). Only 7% of the posts were posted earlier (in the first 20 posts) and the remaining 25% posted almost at the end of the discussion. In the analysis, it is rather clear that most of lurkers waited for others to respond first before they started to respond. The analysis of the transcript also revealed that lurkers tend to respond after reading the posts made by those that they perceived as the “good” or “intelligent” ones. These included those with higher MUET Bands, active in classroom interactions and higher marks in course assessments. The students with MUET Bands 5 and 6 usually were among the first to respond to any discussion topics since they were more proactive. This observation is also apparent in the interview data whereby the lurkers acknowledged the role of these students in helping them to respond better due to their initial lack of confidence.

The data from the post-course interview showed that 30% of them stated that they did not really like to share their views in online discussion mainly due to the existence of an online audience, which they think can affect their reputation since their feedback would be in written form and cannot be deleted. A total of 23% felt they were not part of the group or class. This could be due to the fact that the course involves students from various faculties and they might not be familiar with each other. Surprisingly, language was not perceived as a barrier with only 10% stated it as the primary reason. Most of them seemed comfortable to respond online though some are rather weak in terms of English proficiency. In addition, none of the lurkers actually stated lack of course content knowledge as the reason for being less active online. In fact, most of them agreed that

they have benefitted from reading others' posts even though they did not participate frequently. They have chosen to adopt what Soroka and Rafaeli, (2006) termed as "wait-and-see" attitude and only respond whenever they think it is necessary. In addition, although they are not active, the findings from this study showed that the lurkers are not "free riders" as all of them stated they gain benefits from the course, which is similar to the findings by Neelen and Fetter (2010) who discover lurkers employ lurking as a learning strategy that correspond to their microlearning hypothesis.

Thus, the findings revealed that subject matter knowledge or even English language proficiency is not the main factor in influencing online participation among the learners. A sense of belonging to the online community is noted to be an important element in encouraging and sustaining healthy discussion. The existence of social elements within each discussion thread, as shown in this study promoted deeper inquiry of the discussion topics.

CONCLUSION

This study has suggested and tested several techniques to encourage lurkers' participations in asynchronous online discussions. The findings have shown how the lurkers can be lured to be more active in online discussions although they may seem reluctant during the earlier stage. Nevertheless, pedagogical considerations are pivotal as course instructors need to spend time to design the topic well so that more students would feel motivated to respond. In addition, the role of lurkers is still very important to virtual communities and their silence should not be ignored. As mentioned by Salmon (2003), the lurkers may seem to be inactive but they are actively reading the posts, giving the much needed audience to the participants of online discussions. Their silence will be broken once they are properly directed or motivated. Hence, the lurkers should be facilitated in the process of being more active by injecting more social elements in the discussion thread. It would be good to allow some rooms of informality in discussing a subject matter as it reduces the barriers in communicating via the online discussion platforms. Besides, there is an apparent need for instructors to understand lurking behaviour not only to make students more active but to maximise the potentials of online discussion in developing their critical thinking. In the context of ESP and blended learning environment, online discussions should be utilised frequently and appropriately so that learners can continue to practise specific language features beyond the usual weekly contact hours.

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