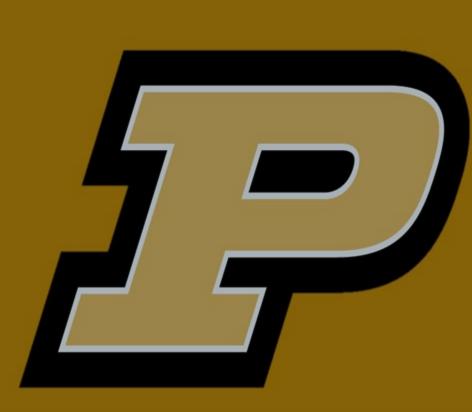
## Should Discussion Forums be Eliminated from Online Courses?

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#### Introduction

- Distance education is increasing in popularity in higher education
- Online discussion forums or discussion boards are one pedagogical tool that is often used in online classes (Crawford-Ferre & Wiest, 2012).
- Talpin & Wojik (2010) concluded that online deliberative discussions impacted participant learning.
- Some recent studies, however, have suggested that the use of online discussion boards are outdated or irrelevant for student learning and therefore should not be included in online courses (Jayaratne & Moore, 2016; Moore, Warner, Jones & Bachelor, 2016).
- This study challenges those findings.

### Research Questions

- 1. How do students in an online intercultural competence course perceive the use of online discussion boards?
- 2. Should online discussion forums be eliminated from online classes?

#### Methods

- Document analysis
  - 163 final reflection essays written between Summer 2014 and Spring 2015 (6 semesters)
    - Reflection questions:
      - In what ways has this course helped you to develop a better understanding of your multicultural self and cultural others?
      - From your perspective, describe your stages of your growth from the beginning of the semester until now?
- Used Nvivo to assist with data analysis
  - Searched essays for those that talked about discussions
    - Coded those essays for themes

## Findings

- **62**% (101) of students mentioned the course discussions as a part of their reflections
- An additional 6 students used a form of the word "discussed", but it was unclear if they were referring to the discussion forum or using the term generally
- 91% (92) students who mentioned the discussion board found it useful

## Relevant themes:

## New Perspectives

"The discussions, especially, I figured I would grow extremely tired of. Again, the discussions became very helpful and eye-opening. I liked that everyone had their own opinion, so I got to read a perspective from many different angles."

"...but I was shocked to read in the discussion that some don't believe that racism exists. It is this ignorance or naivety that also contributes to the problem"

## Similarities across Cultures

Process and Structure

## Self-Awareness

"The raw materials that were taught in the class didn't really do anything for me, I knew most of it anyway. It was the discussions, the questions that lead to deep thought, the movies, videos, articles that changed the way I not only see others, but the way I also see myself."

"I have learned that despite how open minded I think I am, I still judge others based on their background."

## Voice

"I learned to try to communicate and have my voice be heard. I feel as though I gained a lot through the discussion boards. I was able to here the thoughts and opinions of my classmates in a safe learning environment. It felt as though the forum was a safe place where students felt comfortable voicing their opinions."

## **Negative Cases**

- 5 students indicated the discussion board was not useful
  - Would have preferred face-to-face interaction
  - Was not opposed to student-to-student interaction, just did not like the nature of this discussion
     board



# Better Understanding of Topics

## Challenged Beliefs

"But when we began

talking about

immigration, that's one point I knew I needed to work on being more open and diverse. I don't like saying I'm racist, but I came to realize that in a way, I was." "It made me step back and realize that by fighting to [sic] vehemently against religion...that I had become the close minded type of person I had learned to avoid."

#### About the course

- Communicating across Cultures
- Cultural diversity course for agriculture students to increase intercultural competence
- Taught online summer, fall, and spring semesters
- Relevant Course objectives:
- •Examine one's beliefs, values and assumptions regarding cultural differences and social group memberships and experiences
- •Examine cultural differences in verbal and nonverbal communication within multicultural interactions and settings.

## Implications and Further Study

- In designing online courses, instructors should consider the type of course and course objectives when determining whether to include a discussion forum
- Although Jayaratne & Moore (2016) surveyed students and found they did not prefer discussion forums as an instructional activity, the present study presents findings that suggest students benefitted from them in this course
- Further studies should be conducted to determine the usefulness of studentto-student interaction in various course contexts

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References available upon request