

Student perceptions of peer versus instructor facilitation of asynchronous online discussions: further findings from three cases

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Abstract This study aims to extend a previous work on the role of peer facilitation of asynchronous online discussions. Specifically, in this paper I report three cases that examine students' preference for peer or instructor facilitation of online discussion forums, as well as their respective reasons for it. These three cases involved the following samples: (a) full-time undergraduates ($n = 39$), (b) full-time postgraduate diploma students ($n = 65$), and (c) practicing professionals in training settings ($n = 64$). Overall, the findings of the three cases suggested that most students irrespective of student samples still preferred an instructor to peer facilitation when it comes to online discussions, despite the reported benefits of peer facilitators in the literature. Cross-comparison of the three cases revealed the following reasons why instructor facilitation is preferred: (a) to prevent the discussion from going off track, (b) to resolve conflicts in the discussion, (c) to provide information particularly when the topic of discussion is new, and (d) to motivate the discussion when students' participation wanes. On the other hand, peer facilitation is preferred: (a) when the participants desire greater freedom in voicing their own views, (b) when the participants desire greater ownership in determining the direction of the discussion, and (c) when the participants want actual hands-on-facilitation-experience. Implications of the findings are discussed.

Keywords Peer facilitation · Instructor facilitation · Online discussion · Asynchronous discussion · Forum

Introduction

Many colleges and universities around the world have sought to increase student enrollments by expanding learning opportunities using online or blended courses (Hew et al. 2004). However, it is not sufficient to merely place content on a web site for students to

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download materials or to complete online quizzes and assignments for an online or blended learning course to be successful. Contemporary discussions of education increasingly stress the social nature of learning (Palincsar and Herrenkohl 2002), which emphasizes interactions or discussions among students. Probably the major impetus behind the stress on social learning is the belief that interaction among students could generate additional activities such as explanation, disagreement, and knowledge sharing which could augment individual learning (Dillenbourg 1999).

Typically in an online or blended learning environment, students and instructors may interact with one another synchronously or asynchronously. However, the time-independent nature of asynchronous discussion makes it particularly well received by many educators compared to synchronous discussion (Romiszowski and Mason 2004). One of the advantages of communicating at their own pace means that students who are shy, quiet, or who prefer more time to think before responding can have the opportunity to participate in the discussion.

One important means to foster student participation is through online facilitation which can be done by an instructor (instructor facilitation) or by students (peer facilitation). Examining students' perceptions of these two forms of online facilitation (instructor and peer) is relevant and important because it can affect students' desire to participate in the online discussion. Previous research has identified student participation in online discussions as one of the activities that students found most beneficial to their learning (Ertmer et al. 2007; Richardson and Swan 2003). Students who participate in forums tend to receive higher grades and higher course retention rates (Coetzee et al. 2014; Palmer et al. 2008; Yukselturk 2010).

Role of instructor as facilitator

Traditionally, the instructor serves the role of an online facilitator. Examples of instructor facilitation include keeping the discussion on track, establishing ground rules and good discussion behavior, helping students overcome technical problems, and asking questions to help participants understand a particular issue or topic, or drawing students' attention to opposing perspectives (Beaudin 1999; Cifuentes et al. 1997; Goodyear et al. 2001; Lang 2000; Yeh and Lahman 2007). However, recently, some scholars have begun to question whether an instructor is the right candidate for the role or not (Arend 2009; Correia and Baran 2010; Light et al. 2000; Mazzolini and Maddison 2007; Pearson 1999; Seo 2007; Zhao and McDougall 2005). Overall, there are two main concerns raised about an instructor being an online discussion facilitator.

First, facilitating an online discussion could be very time consuming as it requires the facilitator to read the posts, monitor any opinions that may be going off-track, answer students' questions, and ask appropriate questions to keep the discussion going. Consequently, not all instructors may be able to dedicate the amount of time and energy needed to facilitate the discussions properly (Correia and Baran 2010; Seo 2007). Hiltz (1988) described the task of facilitation an online discussion as being a parent: "You are on duty all the time, and there seems to be no end to the demands on your time and energy" (p. 441).

Second, a discussion facilitated by an instructor may result in an instructor-centered discussion (Light et al. 2000), and limit students' participation and voice (Zhao and McDougall 2005). A majority of students felt nervous in expressing their opinions when the instructor was present in the discussion (Hew et al. 2010). Many students also treated the discussion questions as short answer essay questions instead of interactive discussions

when the discussion was facilitated by the instructor (Correia and Baran 2010). It seems that students were more interested to tell their instructor that they had posted something in the forum so that they would be noticed and, hopefully, gain a better participation mark or grade, rather than to exchange ideas with their peers. An instructor facilitated discussion could also lead to a “crutch mentality” among the students because they have learned to depend on the instructor to initiate, direct, and close the online discussions.

Role of student as peer facilitator

Therefore, it is not very surprising to hear some scholars advocating the use of students as facilitators of online discussions. Results of previous research on peer facilitation have suggested that students felt more comfortable vocalizing their views, brainstorming for ideas, and challenging one another’s ideas in a peer-facilitated discussion environment (Baran & Correia 2009; Correia and Davis 2007; Cheung and Hew 2010; Poole 2000; Rourke and Anderson 2002). Rourke and Anderson (2002), for example, reported that a majority of students expressed a preference for peer-facilitated discussions over instructor-facilitated ones, explaining that peer-facilitated discussions invited more responses. An instructor-facilitated discussion, on the other hand, may create an “authoritarian presence” (Rourke and Anderson 2002, p. 4) that is not conducive to genuine conversation. Correia and Davis (2007) found that peer facilitation was the most popular collaboration design preferred by online learners. This appears consistent with Poole’s (2000) analysis which found that students post longer and more messages when peers moderated the discussions.

Research gaps and purpose of present study

Thanks to the aforementioned previous studies, researchers and educators now have a better understanding about students’ perceptions of peer and instructor facilitation. However, certain research gaps exist.

First, despite the potential of peer facilitation in online discussions, it has not been widely explored (Baran & Correia 2009). The present study therefore attempts to address this gap.

Second, previous studies that examined the use of facilitation strategies in peer-facilitated contexts lack theoretical grounding. The present study focuses on two theories to inform the results—Helsing et al. (2004) constructive-development theory, and Hofstede’s cultural dimensions theory.

Third, previous studies are primarily restricted to graduate participants in the U.S.A. The present study extends the research to other participants such as practicing professionals and undergraduates in an Asian country.

In this paper, I report three cases with the main objective of understanding the reasons why students prefer their instructor or peers to act as an online discussion facilitator. An awareness of these reasons is important given the increase in the use of web-based courses in both universities and secondary schooling in today’s context. Understanding these reasons may also infer some possible implications for practice.

Method

A multiple case study method was adopted in this study (Yin 2003), involving three different student samples—undergraduate students, postgraduate diploma students, and

working adults. Specifically, this study examined students' perceptions after initial engagement with peer and instructor facilitation. Table 1 provides a summary of the three cases. All three cases were taught by the same instructor.

Case 1: full-time undergraduate students ($n = 39$)

Case 1 was a one-semester long blended course in Instructional Design and Technology involving both face-to-face and asynchronous online discussion components. The participants of the course were 39 full-time undergraduate students, consisting of seven males and 32 females. Their ages ranged from 19 to 22 years old. The students enrolled in the course as part of their teacher education major program. Many of the students were familiar with the use of technology particularly blog, facebook and twitter for social networking purposes. However, this was the first time they were using the BlackBoard learning management system, and its discussion forum.

The objective of the Instructional Design and Technology course was to introduce students to the field of educational technology and its influence on teaching and learning. Some of the topics covered include the use of web 2.0 technologies, online discussion forum, and online facilitation. There were two main activities involved in the course—design tasks and dilemma discussions. In design tasks, students in pairs or in groups of 3–4 designed a technology integrated lesson for education or training use. Examples may include a lesson that uses an audio-based discussion forum to help grade six students practice their oral reading skill, or a lesson that incorporates the use of a text-based discussion forum to enhance students' argumentative writing. After the students had designed the lesson, they uploaded their lesson proposals onto the discussion forums in BlackBoard. Each pair or each group of students was given their own discussion forum. Each pair or each group of students was then tasked to lead the discussion in their respective forums to get feedback from their classmates to improve their lesson proposals.

Students also engaged in dilemma discussions as part of the Instructional Design and Technology course requirements. This activity aimed to introduce students to the use of computer-mediated communication tools such as an online discussion forum as a means for students to exchange opinions and interact with one another. In dilemmas, there is often no solution that satisfies all people, and there are compromises implicit in every solution (Jonassen 1997). In this study, ethical dilemmas were used such as “Do you think it is okay for people to buy or sell organs? Justify your opinions”.

Prior to the peer online discussions, the instructor taught students certain facilitation techniques. These facilitation techniques may be grouped into four types (see Table 2): (a) organizational, (b) social, (c) intellectual, and (d) technical (e.g., Berge 1995; Goodyear et al. 2001; Hew and Cheung 2008; Klemm 1998; O'Grady 2001; Salmon 2004; Winiecki & Chyung 1998).

The instructor involved students in ethical dilemma discussions involving the use of BlackBoard's threaded forum for about two hours. An example of the topic of the discussion was “Recently there has been much talk in the local newspapers about giving money to students who display good behavior. What do you think of using money as a reward strategy? Post your opinions and justify them.” Another example of a topic being discussed was “There has been a spate of debate about the influx of foreign talents into the country recently. Some quarters believe that foreign talents are indispensable for economy growth but some are upset they took up jobs meant for the locals. What do you think about the use of foreign talents? Post your opinions and justify them.”

Table 1 Characteristics of cases 1, 2, and 3

Characteristic	Case 1 (n = 39)	Case 2 (n = 65)	Case 3 (n = 64)
Mode of learning	Blended with face-to-face and online components	-same as Case 1-	-same as Case 1-
Topic of study	Instructional Design & Technology	-same as Case 1-	-same as Case 1-
Duration of course	12 weeks	-same as Case 1-	1 week
Profile of students	Undergraduate students, 7 males, 32 females	Postgraduate diploma students, 15 males, 50 females	Full-time working adults in corporate training settings (practicing professionals), 54 males, 10 females
Nature of students taking course	Full-time	Full-time	Part-time
Online task	Design tasks, dilemma discussion	-same as Case 1-	-same as Case 1-
Discussion platform	Threaded discussion forum in Blackboard	-same as Case 1-	-same as Case 1-
Discussion requirement	Course credits given for contribution, no number of posting quota imposed	-same as Case 1-	-same as Case 1-

Table 2 Description of facilitation activity related to the organizational, social, intellectual, and technical facilitation types

Facilitation type	Description	Source	Example
Organizational	Spur participation when it is lagging	Paulsen (1995)	Please comment and give feedback on each other's suggestions/comments
	Require regular participation	Klemm (1998), Paulsen (1995)	Please respond to each other within 24–48 h
	Keep discussion on track	Winiacki & Chyung (1998)	Please focus on the topic and refrain from post irrelevant messages
Social	Be responsive by posting a personal message to the contributor or by referring to the author's comment in the discussion	Paulsen (1995)	Thanks Anita for the insightful comment
	Reinforce good online behaviors	Berge (1995)	Please remember the ground rules for discussion—post only one idea in one post, and no personal attacks
Intellectual	Ask questions to help participants understand an issue better or deeper	O'Grady (2001)	What actually constitutes <i>good student behavior</i> ? How can this be identified and measured?
	Challenge ideas or opinions. Draw attention to opposing perspectives, different directions or conflicting opinions	Paulsen (1995); Goodyear et al. (2001); Hew & Cheung (2008)	Why do you think that is true? What is an alternative?
	Insist that opinions posted by participants are supported with rational reasoning	Klemm (1998)	Do you have any evidence for that?
Technical	Summarize relevant discussions to prevent information overload	Hew & Cheung(2008)	The discussion so far has produced three main points. Do you have further comments about these points?
	Help students be familiar with the online discussion environment	Berge (1995), Salmon (2004)	We will practice posting messages, replying messages, and creating discussion threads

The instructor first introduced students to the threaded discussion forum in BlackBoard, then showed students how to reply to a participant's post and create new threads. The instructor posted the topic of discussion onto the forum and prompted students to contribute their ideas and opinions in the discussion. Ground rules for the online discussion such as post only one idea or theme in one post, and no personal attacks were also established by the instructor. The instructor also monitored the students' postings, urged students to respond to other people, questioned several students' ideas or opinions, and drew attention to alternative perspectives. At the end of the activity, the instructor summarized the discussion activity.

After the conclusion of the instructor-facilitated discussion activity, student facilitation began. The online discussions for the design tasks (i.e., designing a technology integrated lesson for education or training use) and dilemma discussions (i.e., organ trading) were facilitated by the students and took two weeks long. Although course credits were given for contribution in the discussion, students had the freedom to choose to contribute in whichever thread or respond to whom they wished. It was up to the each pair or each group of students to use various facilitation techniques to encourage and attract their classmates' contributions. No number of posting quota (e.g., you have to post at least two messages) was imposed.

Case 2: full-time postgraduate diploma students (n = 65)

Sixty-five full-time students (15 males and 50 females) participated in this study. Their ages ranged from 22 to 35 years old. The students enrolled in the course as part of their teacher education major program. Many of the students were also familiar with the use of technology particularly blog, facebook and twitter for social networking purposes. However, similar to the undergraduate students in case 1, this was the first time they were using the BlackBoard learning management system, and its threaded discussion forum.

Other similarities between case 1 and 2 are listed in Table 1. The main difference between case 1 and 2 was that the latter was a postgraduate diploma level course. The students in case 2 already had their undergraduate degrees and were pursuing a postgraduate diploma course in education. The same instructor who taught case 1 was responsible for case 2. Prior to the online discussions, the instructor also taught and demonstrated to the students the facilitation techniques shown in Table 2. Although course credits were also given for contribution in the discussion, students had the freedom to choose to contribute in whichever thread or respond to whom they wished.

Case 3: practicing professionals in training settings (n = 64)

Case 3 was a week-long course on Instructional Design and Technology. Similarities between case 3 and the other two cases can be found in Table 1. The major differences between case 3 and the other two cases were twofold. First, the participants in case 3 were fulltime working adults in training settings. The participants of the course were 64 practicing professional trainers back in their own organizations, consisting of 54 males and ten females. Their ages ranged from 25 to 45 years old. These practicing professionals were trainers back in their own organizations. A majority of them hailed from the same organization. This was the first time the participants used the BlackBoard learning management system, and its threaded discussion forum.

Second, the participants in case 3 took up the course voluntarily on a part-time basis to shore up their knowledge on the use of instructional design and technology, unlike the

participants in case 1 and 2 who were required to sign up for the course because it was a mandatory module in their teacher education major program and who studied on a full-time basis. The same instructor who taught the other two cases was responsible for case 3. The instructor also taught and showed the students the facilitation techniques shown in Table 2.

Data collection and analysis for each case

In each of the three cases, data were gathered through an end-of-course student reflection activity. Each student in the three cases was asked to respond to the following question: "If you were given a choice, would you prefer your instructor or your peers to facilitate the discussion forum? Why or why not? Please elaborate." Students typed out their responses using the Microsoft word processing software. Students' reflection notes were then printed out at the end of the course and examined.

The unit of analysis was each student's reflection note that reported their preference for an instructor or a peer to facilitate an online discussion. According to Srijbos et al. (2006), a note can be considered to be a fixed unit that can generally be determined objectively and reliably. Each participant's reflection notes was coded using the inductive iterative coding method (Corbin and Strauss 2007) to identify and categorize the specific reasons related to why students preferred their instructor or peer to facilitate an online discussion.

One coder (coder A) independently coded all the notes. Seven categories of reasons were identified. To establish the reliability of the coding categories, coder B coded 30 % of the notes (randomly selected). The percent agreement of the coding categories was 90.4 %. This is higher than the minimum standard of 80 % (Riffe et al. 1998).

To help illustrate how the data were coded, some representative examples are provided below. The first example is: "I prefer my peer to facilitate the discussion board as I would feel more comfortable to voice out my opinions." The example described here was coded as a preference for peer facilitation, along with the response category of "helping participants feel more at ease". This is because the most salient element here appeared to be making the student feel less unpleasant or afraid in posting their viewpoints online.

The second example is: "I prefer the instructor to facilitate the discussion forum because the instructors are more knowledgeable. Thus, the instructor is able to guide me in the discussion and make me think critically." This example was coded as a preference for instructor facilitation, along with the response category: "as a subject matter expert to guide student learning" because of the emphasis on the instructor being more knowledgeable and could help students learn.

The third example is: "I would prefer to have my instructor to facilitate the discussion forum. This is because I think having an instructor's presence in the discussion helps ensure that we are on the right track. Especially when our discussion is going out of topic, he can divert it back to the main discussion." The example described here was coded as a preference for instructor facilitation, along with the response category: "keep the discussion on topic". This is due to its emphasis on the instructor making sure that the participants did not side-track from the topic being discussed.

The fourth example is: "I think it will be good to have an instructor to facilitate the discussion forum as there will be bound to have differences in opinion and this might create problem for students and there might be no end to it." This example was categorized as a preference for an instructor to facilitate the discussion, along with the response category of "resolve conflict". This is because the most salient element here appeared to be settling differences in opinions among students.

The fifth example is: “I prefer an instructor to facilitate because he/she can motivate and encourage participation from students.” This example was categorized as a preference for instructor facilitation under the response category of “motivate participation”. This is due to its emphasis on the instructor playing the role of a motivator to spur students to contribute in the online discussion.

Results

The results of a comparative analysis across all three cases are presented in this section. Overall, more participants appeared to prefer instructor facilitation—about 65 % of all participants expressing a preference for instructor facilitation compared to about 35 % for peer facilitation, despite the reported benefits of peer facilitators in the literature. There are four main categories of reasons for the participants’ preference for instructor facilitation. Table 3 provides a listing of the reasons, the number of times each reason is mentioned (i.e., count), and some representative participants’ comments. In subsequent paragraphs, each reason will be described in more detail with one or more representative excerpts from the reflection data, both to define the empirical results and to show that each one was supported by data from the participants.

Reasons for instructor facilitation

As a subject matter expert to guide student learning

One of the main reasons is that students believed an instructor could provide more information and perspectives about the issue being discussed compared to their peers. For example:

I prefer my instructor to facilitate because I feel that an instructor has more information than my peers. Not that I think my peers lack the ability to find information and use those information to facilitate any of the discussions, but it is just that I feel instructors, having collected more experience and facts as well as good examples, could use all these and share them with us so that we can really learn and see, for instance, the application of concepts into real-life situation. (Student Z, Case 1)

I feel that I trust my instructor more than my peers. In other words, I would trust and be more convinced by the information put up by my instructor rather than my peers. (Student A, Case 2)

Students usually perceive the instructor as the most knowledgeable person in the class. So students will normally listen to the instructor if the instructor guides and corrects them. If we have chosen a student to facilitate, the buy-in from other students may not be good if he/she corrects their view. (Student F, Case 3)

Keep the discussion on topic and to ensure equity in the discussion

Students across all three cases also expressed a preference for an instructor to keep the discussion on track and to ensure equity in the online discussion. This was illustrated by the following comments:

Table 3 Reasons for instructor facilitation

Case	Reasons	Count	% of total counts	Representative comments
Case 1 (undergrads)	Keep the discussion on topic	13	39	Personally, I prefer an instructor. He/she can lead the discussion back on track should it start to stray out of topic
	As a subject matter expert to guide student learning	18	55	I prefer an instructor to facilitate a discussion forum because he/she usually has more knowledge and can question your thoughts. Peers, on the other hand, tend to merely agree with your ideas
	Resolve conflicts in the discussion	2	6	A complicated situation whereby two participants are beginning to be really 'aggressive' with their use of language
	Keep the discussion on topic	21	34	The instructor already knows what the learning outcome is and hence can steer the conversation in the right direction. If it is solely peer facilitation it may end up as a case of 'blind leading the blind'
Case 2 (post graduate diploma students)	As a subject matter expert to guide student learning	31	51	I prefer an instructor to facilitate a discussion forum. This is because the instructor would be more knowledgeable and would be able to see areas that we would not be able to see
	As a motivator to spur the participants to contribute in the discussion	2	3	I prefer an instructor to facilitate because he/she can motivate and encourage participation from students, and highlight that all contributions made by the students are crucial to the discussion
	Resolve conflicts in the discussion	7	11	In all discussions, there are bound to be disagreement. Hence, it is important to have someone to resolve the disagreement. I prefer the instructor because it will be more effective when it is done by someone with authority rather than fellow peers
Case 3 (practicing professionals)	Keep the discussion on topic, and/or ensure equity in the online discussion	32	48	Sometimes, the discussion is dominated by one or two participants, depriving others of the opportunities for contribution. The instructor can help ensure that others have opportunities to contribute
	As a subject matter expert to guide student learning	22	33	I will prefer the instructor to facilitate so that the focus of the discussion will be on track
	As a motivator to spur the participants to contribute in the discussion	4	6	I prefer an instructor to facilitate because it allows the participants to seek clarification on certain concerns which the peers might not be able to address
	Resolve conflicts in the discussion	9	13	The instructor can help ensure the continuity of the discussion (sustain the discussion) since usually after the second day, the replies seem to dwindle down An instructor will be in a better position to settle differences and conflicts

He/she [the instructor] would also ensure that the discussion is on track and keep track of the students that are not participating. (Student R, Case 1)

Since the whole purpose is for us to have a meaningful discussion of a particular topic, it is important for the group to stay on task. As students, we may not be very clear of the purpose the discussion. Therefore I prefer the instructor to facilitate the discussion forum because he is able to keep the discussion on track and steer it towards the intended objectives. (Student N, Case 2)

I prefer the instructor to facilitate so that the discussion will not go out of context. At one point, I saw the discussion going out of context when someone just threw in an out-of-context idea but the idea caught on and continued for some time before it eventually died down. (Student H, Case 3)

Resolve conflicts in the discussion

During an online discussion tensions and conflicts may sometimes occur. Participants preferred an instructor to facilitate because they believed that an instructor can handle disagreements among participants better.

I prefer the instructor to be involved because sometimes tension occurs in a discussion whereby two participants are beginning to be really 'aggressive' with their use of language. An instructor would be a better person than other students to handle the situation. (Student N, Case 1)

I prefer the instructor because conflict resolution will be more effective when it is done by someone with authority rather than fellow students. (Student Q, Case 2)

I prefer instructor facilitation because he is in a better position than peers to settle differences. (Student B, Case 3)

As a discussion motivator

Finally, there were participants in case 2 and 3 who believed that a discussion would be more active if the instructor acts as a discussion motivator. For example:

An instructor may lay down expectations or ground rules which will compel students to contribute to the discussion. This is regarded to be more effective because an instructor is often viewed as someone with more authority compared to a peer. (Student S, Case 2)

The instructor can probe those who are not actively involved or who are adopting a passive attitude. (Student M, Case 3)

Table 4 shows the reasons for instructor facilitation, ranked in terms of the frequency of each reason being reported by all the participants in case 1, 2, and 3.

Reasons for peer facilitation

Table 5 provides a listing of the reasons for peer facilitation, the number of times each reason was mentioned (count), and some representative responses from each case.

Table 4 Reasons for instructor facilitation (ranked)

Reasons	Rank
As a subject matter expert to guide student learning	1
Keep the discussion on topic, and/or ensure equity in the online discussion	2
To help resolve conflict in the discussion	3
As a discussion motivator to spur student participation	4

Make participants feel more at ease

A majority of comments noted that peer facilitation enables students to feel more at ease and comfortable in sharing their views. Basically, participants felt awkward to question, or post something contrary to the instructor's posts since an instructor is usually seen as a source of authority whose views are usually deemed the right ones. This was illustrated by the following remarks:

It [peer facilitation] eliminates this sense of fear of posting the "wrong" thing in the forum. With an instructor facilitating the discussion I will be more cautious in posting my thoughts because I'm afraid of posting the "wrong things". Moreover, I have the tendency to believe that whatever my instructor says is the "truth" and thus I seldom challenge his opinions. However, in a peer facilitated discussion, I feel more confident in putting up my point of view into the discussion. (Student P, Case 1)

Peer is preferred because it is less intimidating and participants are more willing to share their views and opinions, especially when these views and opinions are not 'popular' with the instructor. (Student J, Case 2)

In a peer facilitated discussion, the participants dare to challenge each other. However, if the instructor is there to make comments, the participant will assume that the comments are the 'right' answers and less discussion is going to take place. (Student L, Case 3)

Fostering a sense of student ownership or responsibility

Some participants in case 1 and 3 indicated that the use of peer facilitation allows them to take greater responsibility or ownership in the online discussion. For example:

Assigning students the role of facilitator will allow students to take responsibility and ownership in the success of the discussion and thus they will make an effort to keep the discussion going. (Student L, Case 1)

I prefer peer facilitation because the onus of learning [through discussion] should be on the learners, rather than the instructor. (Student D, Case 3)

Allows practical hands-on experience of being a discussion facilitator

Finally, some participants in case 2 and 3 felt that it was useful to have actual hands-on experience of facilitating a discussion forum. They believed that being peer facilitators

Table 5 Reasons for peer facilitation

Case	Reasons	Count	% of total counts	Representative comments
Case 1 (undergrads)	Make participants feel more at ease	12	80	I would prefer my own peers to facilitate the discussion so that it would be less pressurizing. Often when instructors are around, I tend to not to speak up as much
	Fostering a sense of student ownership, or responsibility in the online discussion	3	20	Peer lead discussions will help to foster a sense of ownership of the students in the discussion
Case 2 (postgraduate diploma students)	Participants feel more at ease	30	88	I prefer peer facilitation as I tend to be more comfortable speaking up among peers in contrast to having an instructor facilitating and keeping track of the discussion
	Allows practical hands-on experience of being a discussion facilitator	4	12	Peer facilitation enables participants to develop valuable qualities such as leadership skill and questioning techniques. We will also understand the role of a facilitator through the experience as a peer facilitator. Peers can learn from one another when they take turn to take up the role of the facilitator
Case 3 (practicing professionals)	Make participants feel more at ease	12	67	I would prefer peer facilitation. The discussion will be freer and livelier when we are at the same level. I will not feel that I am "forced" to change my thought
	Fostering a sense of student ownership, or responsibility	1	5	I prefer peer facilitation because I feel that the onus or responsibility of learning [through discussion] should be on the learners
	Allows practical hands-on experience of being a discussion facilitator	5	28	Peer facilitation enables us to have actual hands-on experience and we can learn how to deal with adverse comments and feedbacks

Table 6 Reasons for peer facilitation (ranked)

Reasons	Rank
Make participants feel more at ease to express own opinions	1
Allows practical hands-on experience of being a discussion facilitator	2
Fosters a sense of student ownership, or responsibility	3

could help them develop better questioning and critical thinking skills. The following comments illustrate this point:

Peer facilitation enables participants to develop valuable qualities such as leadership skill and questioning techniques. (Student U, Case 2)

Letting us be peer facilitators is good as it enables us to learn the proper and appropriate way to manage others' opinions, and to control and steer the discussions. (Student V, Case 3)

Table 6 shows the reasons for peer facilitation, ranked in terms of the frequency of each reason being reported by all the participants in case 1, 2, and 3.

Discussion

I began this article by stating that an awareness of the reasons why students prefer instructors or peers to facilitate an online discussion is increasingly important given the growing use of web-based courses in both universities and secondary schooling. Understanding these reasons may help infer or suggest certain situations or conditions where certain type of facilitation may be better employed. Three case studies were presented in the current study.

Preference for instructor facilitation

Overall, a comparative analysis across all three cases revealed that more comments were made expressing a preference for instructor facilitation, despite the reported benefits of peer facilitators in the literature. Four main reasons for instructor were surfaced. In each case, the two most frequently mentioned reasons for an instructor facilitated discussion were "as a subject matter expert to guide student learning", and "to keep the discussion on topic, and/or ensure equity in the online discussion". However, more comments were made by undergraduates and postgraduate diploma students (in terms of percent of total counts, see Table 3) about their preference for the instructor to guide their learning compared to working professionals.

On the other hand, the practicing professionals made more comments about their preference for the instructor to monitor their discussions in order to keep them on track, instead of being a sage of learning. Many of the practicing professionals had wide experience in training settings and dealing with various clients which probably helped them recognize the multiple nature of knowledge. It is also likely that through the interactions with various clients, the practicing professors are able to construct new knowledge. Thus they might not depend on the instructor as a main provider of information as much as the undergraduate and postgraduate diploma learners.

Undergraduate and postgraduate diploma students' preference for the instructor to act as a guide for their learning may be explained using the lens of constructive-developmental theories. Specifically, a constructive-developmental theory is a stage theory that focuses on the growth of a person's ways of understanding the self and the world (McCauley et al. 2006). Helsing et al. (2004), for example, described four possible levels.

Level 1 learners are students who understand knowledge as something that is absolute and not subject to multiple interpretations. They expect their instructors to communicate knowledge clearly. Level 2 learners believe that knowledge is only 'partially certain' (Baxter Magolda 1992, p. 30)—which means that knowledge will ultimately be complete but that complete stage has yet to be discovered by experts in the field. Level 2 learners still tend to look to the instructor for acknowledgement that they have learned. Level 3 learners believe that knowledge could be multiple and infinite. Finally, level 4 learners are students who understand that context can affect the interpretation of knowledge. Learners at this stage see good students as those who can create and explain their own ideas which may be at variance with the instructor's views.

If one views Helsing et al. (2004) explanation of constructive-developmental theories, one may infer that many undergraduate and postgraduate diploma students fall under the level 1 and 2 categories. Many undergraduate and postgraduate diploma students probably associate an online discussion with classroom teaching where the instructor still remains as the subject matter expert to provide correct answers. It could be that undergraduate and postgraduate diploma learners' meaning system or understanding of the nature of knowledge might not be as matured or developed as that of working professionals.

The two remaining reasons for instructor facilitation (instructor as conflict mediator or discussion motivator) were only sparsely mentioned by the participants. This implies that such reasons were not important as far as the current three cases are concerned. The online discussions that took place in the three cases occurred as part of an institutional based course activity, not in public online forums. It is likely that in an institutional setting, participants are aware of the proper code of conduct expected of a student. This creates a sense of accountability on the part of the participants to be responsible in their posting of comments instead of being aggressive and malicious. Hence, the need for the instructor as a conflict mediator is minimized.

In addition, an incentive such as marks for online discussion was given in all three cases. It is likely that the award of marks itself has a positive effect on the participants' willingness to contribute to the online discussion, thereby reducing the need for an instructor to act as a discussion motivator. Findings from other studies also suggest that the use of marks or grades a successful method to get students to contribute (Cheung and Hew 2005; Cifuentes et al. 1997; Yeh and Lahman 2007).

Preference for peer facilitation

On the other hand, some students preferred peer facilitation. The most frequently mentioned reason was that peer facilitation made students feel more at ease in expressing their ideas in the online discussion. Many expressed the worry or anxiety that their postings would be judged or assessed when an instructor gets involved in the discussion. The perception that a peer facilitated discussion helps students feel more comfortable in expressing their views may be attributed to the cultural context of the study. All the participants were Asian, with a majority of them being Chinese. Brick and Louie (1984) found that Asian students typically regard correctness as a highly desirable quality. Hence,

students may fear being reprimanded or embarrassed by the instructor should they make comments that turn out to be trivial or incorrect.

In addition, the findings related to students' perceptions about peer or instructor facilitation could be linked to Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory (CDT), in particular the dimensions of collectivism–individualism, and power distance (high versus low). “Individualism pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family. Collectivism as its opposite pertains to societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in groups, which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty” (Hofstede 1991, p. 51). The power distance dimension analyzes people's attitudes toward authority. People in high power distance environments (Hara et al. 2010; Sweetman 2012) have less tolerance for challenging authority figures while those in low power environments tolerate or even encourage challenging authority.

Asian students have been typically characterized as being collectivist in culture which tends to focus on values such as obedience to authority (Hofstede 1984). Obedience to authority is linked to power distance which refers to the extent to which power, prestige, and wealth are unequally distributed in a culture (Hofstede 1984). Typically there is a large power distance in collectivist culture. When there is large power distance, teachers or instructors are perceived as having absolute authority in the learning environment (Tu 2001) and should command compliance (Westwood et al. 2004). All the participants in the present study were Asian, with a majority of them being Chinese. Student O (Case 2) explained it this way:

It is in our Asian culture to follow our elders, instructors included, and to take whatever they say as correct and unquestionable. I feel that for my generation, born in 1980s, it is quite natural for us to sit back and listen to what the instructor is saying. Even if our views are not similar to that of the teacher's, we will not voice it out freely. Therefore, peer facilitated discussion would be more suitable and more learner friendly as it would create an environment where differing views are shared more freely.

As a result, some students may go to the length of simply posting something that they think would satisfy or please the instructor, rather than their true opinions: “In a teacher facilitated discussion, there is a pressure of trying to give the correct answer to the question so as not to be questioned by the teacher, who is usually deemed as a knowledgeable person and has a higher rank in class. However, in a peer facilitated discussion, everyone is of equal status (student N, Case 2).”

The remaining reasons for peer facilitation such as enabling students to have practical hands-on experience as a facilitator or taking ownership of discussion were only sparsely mentioned by participants in case 2 and 3. No mention at all was made by participants in Case 1 concerning practical hands-on experience. This implies that on the whole these reasons were not very important as far as the participants in current three cases are concerned.

Conclusion, limitations and future research

In this paper, I report three cases with the objective of understanding students' preference for instructor or peer facilitation of online discussion forums, and their respective reasons

for it. Overall, the results of the three cases suggested that most students still preferred an instructor to peer facilitation when it comes to online discussions, despite the reported benefits of peer facilitators in the literature.

Students' preference for instructor facilitation seems to hinge on two primary reasons: the instructor would serve as a better guide to their learning particularly when the topic of discussion is new or complex, and the instructor commands a greater authority to keep the discussion on track. We also see that working professionals made more comments about their preference for the instructor to monitor their discussions in order to keep them on track, rather than being a sage of learning. On the other hand, students in all three cases who preferred peer facilitation explained that it provides them a more relaxed environment to express their views without the fear of being judged by the instructor.

Therefore based on the above findings, I tentatively propose the following implications or guidelines for practice:

- (a) Have students, rather than an instructor take on the role of a peer facilitator when the purpose of the discussion is to stimulate frank exchange of opinion among students. By staying out of the discussion, the instructor could encourage symmetrical interaction between the students and give each student voice more authority (Dysthe 2002). This is because when students take on the role of a facilitator, participants would feel less intimidated to express their own personal views as each student is usually considered being equal in status (i.e., symmetrical interaction); none of the participants are usually viewed as having more authority or power over others (Dysthe 2002).

However, it is important to note that the success of symmetrical interactions is contingent on several factors, including students' willingness to display open-mindedness in the discussions, and their familiarity with one another. Students who display open-mindedness in the discussions help build a safe online environment for participants to post their opinions without the fear of being harshly criticized. Students' sense of familiarity with one another helps to foster shared understandings and social presence both of which can increase the likelihood of student contribution (Hewitt 2005; Wise et al. 2004).

- (b) On the other hand, if the purpose of the discussion is to achieve some specific learning or to attain a consensus of opinions, it would be better to get an instructor to facilitate the discussion. This is because the instructor is still viewed as a more trusted source of knowledge than peers particularly as far as new topics are concerned. Analyses of several respondents' reflection data seem to support this point. For example, student H (Case 3), explained:

[In this case], the online discussion was on organ trading. It is a current affair topic that does not really need in-depth specialized knowledge to sustain the discussion. As a result, the instructor's facilitation wasn't really required [hence peer facilitation is preferred in this case]. On the other hand, if the discussion forum had been on something on educational psychology which most of us are still relatively new at, then the facilitation of our instructor, an expert in the field, would be crucial.

This was supported by student L (Case 3) who commented:

If the subject is a brand NEW subject, where no one knows anything about it (e.g., discussing the BIG BANG Theory), then therefore, it is difficult to begin a

discussion, because you would not even know what you don't know. In this situation, an instructor who is familiar with the subject must be present so that he can help make sense with the discussion.

Students also tend to view the instructor's comment as the authoritative one (Zhao and McDougall 2005). The view of an instructor as an authoritative figure would help negotiate different opinions among students to achieve a common consensus more effectively.

Limitations and future research

This study involved Asian Pacific students in the discussions of design projects and dilemma-based topics. The respondents participating in this study were convenient rather than random samples. Furthermore, due to the structure of the courses, only two weeks of online discussion were available for students in cases 1 and 2; and one week for students in case 3. The present study investigated students' perceptions after initial engagement with instructor or peer facilitation; it is very likely that their responses would shift after some degree of exposure and familiarity. It is therefore too early to attempt any generalization about the findings of this study to other contexts or other types of discussion activities such as discussion of class readings. Caution should also be exercised in interpreting the results due to the relatively short time of online discussions. Nevertheless, the findings of this study may be useful to similar contexts such as undergraduate and postgraduate diploma level instructional technology course at other large Asian Pacific universities. However, future studies should investigate participants from other cultural environments and disciplines of study. Future studies should also extend the online discussions to longer periods of time (e.g., a semester long).

In the current study, demographic data were not collected from the participants of the three cases. An analysis of the participants' demographic data such as gender or learning orientation may help explain the results a little more deeply. An example of a questionnaire that measures learning orientation is that of Martinez (2001). This questionnaire describes four specific learning orientations: transforming learners, performing learners, conforming learners, and resistant learners. It would be useful to examine if participants' learning orientation might influence their preference for instructor or peer facilitation of asynchronous online discussions. Such an effort will help us develop a more complete understanding of peer and instructor facilitation of asynchronous online discussion forums. Finally, it would be useful to objectively measure the impact of peer or instructor facilitation on student outcomes such as the number of their postings.

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