Beyond the Thread: Reimagining Online Discussions for Authentic Learning

Diane Johnson, Kelly Brown, and Kaye Shelton
Lamar University

J. Kenneth Young
Tarleton State University

Abstract
Traditional threaded discussion boards have become a staple of online education, yet faculty and students both report dissatisfaction and frustration with their capacity to foster intellectual engagement. This collaborative self-study examined the perceptions of five graduate faculty members at two Texas universities who transitioned from threaded to collaborative discussion formats in their fully online programs. Using reflective practice and regular collaborative meetings as the primary methods, the researchers documented their experiences across multiple semesters of implementation. Utilizing the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework of encompassing social, cognitive, and teaching presence, the study explored faculty perceptions of learning outcomes, student engagement, and participation quality. Findings revealed that collaborative discussions, in which students selected their own platforms, meeting times, and conversational approaches in smaller groups, produced deeper critical thinking, stronger relational development among peers, and greater student ownership of the learning process compared to traditional threaded discussions. Faculty consistently described threaded discussions as performative and compliance-driven whereas collaborative formats encouraged authentic dialogue, higher-order thinking, and real-world application of course content. Iterative refinement was necessary to address challenges such as citation accountability, participation balance, and scheduling logistics. The study concludes that carefully scaffolded collaborative discussion formats offer a promising alternative to traditional threaded discussions, particularly in graduate-level online programs. Researchers included implications for instructional design, faculty professional development, and future research directions.

Keywords: Collaborative online discussions; Community of Inquiry; student engagement; higher-order thinking

Johnson, D., Brown, K., Shelton, K., & Young, J. (2026). Beyond the thread: Reimagining online discussions for authentic learning. *Online Learning, 30*(S1), 29-54. https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v30i3.6269

As teaching online developed, threaded discussion boards were used to try to simulate face-to-face class discussion. Douglas et al. (2015) noted that when assessed, students felt critical of discussion boards; however, when unassessed, students felt a greater sense of collaborative sharing but did not feel critical thinking was important. Overall, especially since the COVID pandemic, discussion boards can play vital roles for student success in achieving objectives as well as increasing engagement in asynchronous classes (Kaushik, 2023; Schulz & Sandidge, 2022); however, both instructors and students are often disappointed in the results.

In this paper, we offer preliminary research for another option for online class discussions: collaborative discussions in which students, with a small group of peers, choose when and how to complete them. Lohmann and Boothe (2023) support the necessity of collaborative discussion boards for student learning but note they must include structure and student choice to be viable and educational, similar to Chou's (2012) original outline of utilizing various platforms with guidance and structure in place. This research study centers on the perceptions of five online instructors who use collaborative discussions instead of threaded discussions.

Literature Review

Student Perspectives of What Works

Student autonomy in choice of platform can assist in alleviating the frustration of having only one option. Students do perceive their learning as student-centered by addressing the needs of multiple learning styles within discussion boards when given choices (James et al., 2022, p. 12). For example, students found more emotional connections to the group as well as investing more thought into discussion boards when completing via a video chat (Milovic & Dingus, 2021). Furthermore, James et al. (2022) found that students internalized more when assisting and mentoring peers in discussion board interactions. In addition, Mohebi (2023) uncovered students' knowledge of external platforms that enhance communication, such as WhatsApp, Google Docs, Zoom, Telegram, Nearpod, Padlet, and even Twitter (now X), and their preference for these as modes of communication with peers.

Issues

Sandidge and Schultz (2024) reported that most online students found traditional discussion boards boring, with the majority of their learning coming from writing the original post and interacting with the instructor. Brunton et al. (2022) claimed discussion boards should be re-labeled, as most are question-and-response only, limiting actual discussion; however, using platforms that encourage discussion-like behavior, such as "liking" a post, creates avenues for students to discuss openly. In addition, Faulconer et al. (2022) emphasized that students exhibit lower levels of cognitive presence in traditional discussion boards. Students decrease their activity on discussion boards when only one format is used due to frustration stemming from technical issues with the platform (Irvin & Hee-Joo, 2022). Even with some choice, students do not derive value from online discussion boards without autonomy and a sense of community building through innovative formats and tools (Leow Wai Yee & Lee Cheng Ean, 2020).

Additionally, Schultz (2021) found that students did not perceive a collaborative practice or feel discussions were worth participating in unless graded and scaffolded with instructor

guidance and interaction. Finally, Cooper (2022) noted that instructors belabored the amount of time needed to grade a fully text, back-and-forth style discussion while implementing a “tweet”-based style of online collaborative discussion.

Current Best Practices

Common best practices can help establish better online discussion boards that foster both discussion and collaboration. In general, one suggestion is to use different formats and form smaller groups (Kaushik, 2023). Another is to set posting timelines or dedicated time slots to complete the initial post, followed by a second dedicated time period for responses or per-response (Casebeer & Pontoriero, 2022). Hasani et al. (2022) identified two areas of best practice: group connectivity and students' knowledge gained through drawing conclusions. Both rely on instructors establishing collaborative groups as well as higher order of thinking inquiries. Groups need a framework for being selected to help in building community, then provided a framework for how to collaborate (Oyarzun & Martin, 2023). Allon et al. (2025) even attempted to use a platform that ranked student responses based on their interest and connection to the topic. Because students preferred to read and respond to innovative rather than redundant ones, this platform increased participation and engagement.

When online students actively participate in meaningful activities, they reach levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy such as application, analysis, and evaluation (Kerrigan & Aghekyan, 2022). Students are more engaged when completed in an innovative format (Hamadi et al., 2023). Carr (2020) allowed students to use three online recording options, to which students responded positively, and recommended further research on expanding optional formats. Mohebi (2023) perceived discussions work best in platforms that allow for personal characteristics and voice to be shown when sharing experiences. In a study where students created audio/video posts, students perceived positive impacts such as higher engagement, creativity, and support for diverse learners (Lane, 2025). Furthermore, Shin et al. (2025) discovered that students within groups assumed leadership and support roles when students collaborate outside of a traditional structure. Student satisfaction increases with interactivity, but the medium of the discussion needs to be further considered and developed (Irvin & Hee-Joo, 2022). Payne (2021) asserted that instructors proctoring online discussions must embody a cognitive, social, and teaching presence while facilitating online discussions utilizing personalization methods such as social media, personal humor, and Socratic questioning to fully engage students.

AI Misuse

While these best practices demonstrate how intentional design can foster higher-order thinking and meaningful engagement, the growing use of artificial intelligence introduces challenges that may undermine these gains if left unexamined. In graduate-level contexts, where synthesis, critique, and original contribution are essential, the misuse of AI can shift learning from active engagement to passive completion. Students may rely on AI-generated responses in place of constructing their own ideas, limiting opportunities for deep learning and weakening critical thinking. This form of cognitive offloading reduces the development of independent reasoning and disciplinary expertise that discussion-based learning is intended to cultivate (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019).

The use of AI also complicates traditional definitions of plagiarism and authorship. AI-generated work often appears original, yet it does not reflect the student's intellectual effort. This creates ambiguity around academic integrity and challenges the validity of assessments designed to measure learning. Kasneci et al. (2023) noted that generative AI enables the production of coherent, high-quality responses that may mask a lack of understanding. In collaborative discussions, this is particularly problematic, as authentic engagement and individual perspective are central to knowledge construction. When AI substitutes for participation, both the integrity of the learning environment and the purpose of discussion are diminished.

AI systems further present risks through hallucinations, at times, generating false or fabricated information with confidence. Graduate students may unknowingly incorporate inaccurate claims or non-existent citations into their work, which weakens both scholarly rigor and information literacy (Alkaissi & McFarlane, 2023). Despite these concerns, AI can support learning when used with intention and accountability. Ethical use includes refining grammar, organizing ideas, and serving as a tool for brainstorming rather than authorship. Students must remain responsible for verifying information and maintaining their own intellectual voice. When used in this way, AI aligns with the goals of graduate education by enhancing, rather than replacing, critical engagement.

Framework: Community of Inquiry

Garrison and Arbaugh (2007) defined the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework as combining social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence in an online learning environment to establish a meaningful educational experience. The CoI framework best fits our study as we center our experiences as instructors within the collaborative discussions and reflect on the social and cognitive outcomes we perceive occurred from our students. Shea et al. (2022) pointed out the combination of the three presences as a theoretical framework for online classes aids in building and maintaining best collaborative practices. Popescu and Badea (2020), as well as Wertz (2022), added learning essence to the framework to show that social media-based instructional practices, such as innovative discussion boards, enhanced online learning environments, as long as the learning was authentic, collaborative, and complex. The learning essence in combination with the three original dimensions from Garrison form a framework to outline our own experiences with assigning our version of collaborative online discussions rather than traditional discussions.

Social

The social presence of the framework outlines students' interactions within an online learning environment (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). The framework outlines social presence being fostered through meaningful and supportive collaborative practices to enhance the online experience and increase knowledge (Rahmatalla et al., 2024). Pham et al. (2022) emphasized establishing effective and open collaboration to increase engagement and social presence. Students ascertain that social presence increases when faculty present structure, organization, and intentional design for online collaboration to be student led (Wang, Y., 2022). Furthermore, social presence occurs when collaboration shows unity and common respect during online discussions (Chandrawati et al., 2024). However, Bromer (2021) declared students will experience isolation without collaborative structures in place to ensure social connectedness. For

this study, social presence included student engagement and dialogue in our collaborative discussions versus traditional online discussions.

Cognitive

The cognitive presence within the CoI framework focuses on students' perceived cognitive achievement, gains in knowledge, and higher-order thinking engagement (Martin et al., 2022). Chandrawati et al. (2024) assert cognitive presence appears when educational tasks, such as discussions, trigger enhanced processing and learning. Aslan and Turgut (2021) outlined the process of establishing higher-order thinking questions followed by reflective discussion to increase cognitive presence, which aligns with social and teacher presence. The highest level of cognitive presence only occurs during creation of the initial post (Faulconer et al., 2022). This emphasizes the importance of well-crafted questions that lead to discussion rather than recall.

Teaching Presence

Teaching presence within the COI framework is "the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes" (Anderson et al., 2001, p. 5). In fact, Garrison (2019) refers to teaching presence as the "connective tissue within a functional framework" (para 1) and recommends that both facilitation and direction of the course are needed. His research supports how important the role of the online instructor is in student satisfaction. In addition, Alfoldi (2025) discovered that high instructor presence enhances cognitive, social, and learner presence in online discussion boards, with social presence being the most impacted. Overall, the literature now shows that online teaching presence is central to creating meaningful, inquiry-based learning communities online.

Quality

For the purpose of this study, we defined "participation quality" as the product produced by students due to the social and cognitive impact. Since students could communicate in various ways (voice, written, etc.), the focus was not on the quality of text but rather in the quality of content given during active collaboration within the discussion. Through CoI, constant communication in collaborative discussions showcases a composition and application of the knowledge at a higher order of thinking (Bongiwe Zulu, 2024). This aligns with the CoI framework in that our perceptions center around social, cognitive, and learning presence with our commentary as the instructors.

Gap in Literature

Milovic and Dingus (2021) conducted a study of students utilizing video to help build social bonds in an online discussion but further recommended student choice in selecting a format to address varying learning styles and student time zones. Tawalbeh and Al-husban (2023) requested further research in online discussions that analyzes student engagement to help instructors further understand best practices. Lane (2025) noted students' perceptions of various tools in a collaborative discussion but called for more research on how the tools were used collectively in the collaborative discussion process. Finally, Alsayer et al. (2025) observed a lack in the literature regarding studies covering all four elements of CoI in regard to higher-order thinking within online learning. This study hopes to address all of the gaps by allowing for student choice in format in online, collaborative discussions.

Methods

A collaborative self-study is an explorative practice of reflection on educational experience to understand how the process works for all parties involved (Nash et al., 2023). In this current and preliminary study of collaborative discussion boards, we sought to explore our practices in implementation effectiveness, student engagement, and student participation. The researchers met approximately every six weeks via TEAMS to discuss as well as write reflections of their experiences with implementing the collaborative discussion boards.

The following research questions guided the study:

RQ 1: How do online faculty members perceive the effectiveness of collaborative discussions compared to threaded discussions in achieving learning outcomes?

RQ 2: In what ways do collaborative and threaded discussion formats differ in terms of student engagement as observed by faculty?

RQ 3: In what ways do collaborative and threaded discussion formats differ in terms of participation quality as observed by faculty?

Participants

Participants for this research were five full-time professors teaching graduate courses in fully online programs. Two different institutions are represented, both in Texas. Three of the participants taught in their university's doctoral program with class sizes averaging 15-20 students covering topics such as innovation in leadership, program evaluation, and adult learning theories. Two participants taught graduate students in an applied digital learning program with class sizes averaging 20-45 students. Topics covered innovation and digital resources in education, organizational change, and assessing digital learning and instructions. In all classes, discussions were weighted between 10-20% of a student's grade. The participants had a range of experience teaching online from 4 to 26 years. All five had become unsatisfied with the results of threaded discussions.

Design

The study lasted over six months with the instructors meeting monthly to bi-monthly to discuss collaborative discussions and changes made within the assignments for the discussions. One example from the original participant can be seen outlining why the students would be completing the new discussion format and suggestions for best practices (see Appendix A); however, due to the results from the first round, this was later changed. Changes made to the assignments from the original included a set list of options based on the university Appropriate Use policy per campus, timing limits, inclusion of course material and/or research, as well as how groups were formed. Each instructor adapted the specifics to the needs of their own courses.

Results

Research Question 1

Research question 1 explored how online faculty members perceive the effectiveness of collaborative discussions compared to threaded discussions in achieving learning outcomes. Overall, all five of us consistently described threaded discussion (or forums) as producing a pattern of participation centered on assignment completion rather than meaningful dialogue. In addition, we all noted participation in traditional threaded discussions often prioritized completion of the assignment for students rather than sustained dialogue or meaningful exchange among students. In addition, all of us described a consistent pattern in which students posted their initial responses at or near the assignment deadline. Even when we implemented structures intended to encourage earlier participation, the resulting engagement often remained performative. As KB noted, "the experiences of threaded discussions in online classrooms had become performative and redundant." Long time instructor KS stated:

> I have felt like threaded discussion boards were dismal failures in really simulating class discussion. I have tried numerous things to improve them, such as requiring an initial post earlier in the week so that the discussion can begin much sooner than the last two days of the week. I have made sure as an instructor that I am engaged and trying to prompt or redirect. I have provided clear rubrics and even for my undergraduate classes, I provided a model of what an A discussion posting would look like, a B discussion, etc.

We also observed students' initial posts frequently summarized assigned readings rather than engaging with, critiquing, or connecting ideas to students' broader contexts. Responses to classmates similarly tended to consist of brief affirmations, encouragement, or agreement rather than substantive engagement with the ideas presented. As GH explained when he, himself, was a student, "I responded to my classmates on Sundays because I was simply trying to 'check the box' and complete my discussion responsibilities."

All participants perceived that threaded discussions failed to stimulate genuine intellectual engagement, despite extensive and varied scaffolding to try to achieve deeper intellectual engagement. Instead, the structural design produced compliant but shallow behavior. It was out of frustration with not observing intended student engagement results within threaded discussion boards that we began to explore other options for collaborative knowledge construction. We were inspired to experiment because of conversations with other online teaching faculty and desires for innovation.

Even with the initial use of collaborative discussions, we each noted immediate improvements that moved beyond the use of traditional text-based discussion threads, as well as affirmations from the students regarding their innovative approaches to construct new knowledge and reinforce course learning objectives. Four themes evolved in addition to remaining challenges to be addressed in emerging collaborative discussions seamlessly into online courses: depth of student thinking, relational development, student development, and iterative refinement.

Depth of Student Thinking

We all found incorporating innovative collaborative discussions in our online class consistently led to a noticeable increase in the depth of student thinking during discussions. Rather than summarizing assigned readings, students frequently connected course concepts to their personal and professional contexts, thus creating an important social presence and interpersonal accountability that produced qualitatively richer learning exchanges. Most of us also observed that collaborative discussions encouraged greater creativity in how students engaged with course material. Instead of relying on traditional threaded responses within the course shell, students often selected alternative formats such as podcasts, Padlet boards, or Canva presentations. KY observed:

> The first semester of trying this, the results seemed to be close to what we were able to do in f2f [face-to-face] meetings, if not better. Unlike the f2f discussions, some of the students in the threaded discussions included sources and would integrate outside, self-directed readings into their discussions. The other positive I saw was that all the students engaged, unlike the f2f course in which some of the more introverted or underprepared students would often sit silently while more verbose students dominated conversations; even when I set class expectations to limit domination by any one person.

Overall, we observed a shift from information recall toward deeper critical engagement with course material. Students increasingly demonstrated higher-order thinking, moving beyond summary toward analysis and application. This level of engagement is more aligned with our expectations for graduate-level learning.

Relational Development

We also noticed the development of stronger relational connections, which are often stripped away in online learning environments, among students during collaborative discussions. Conversations became more personal, reflective, and sustained than those typically observed in threaded discussion forums. Some of us reported recorded discussions occasionally extended to nearly an hour, suggesting a level of engagement that exceeded minimum participation requirements.

These relational dynamics were often reinforced as students connected course readings to their professional and personal experiences. KB explained:

> Interestingly, most students chose Zoom, which allowed them to see and hear each other and engage in genuine conversation. After reviewing the first set of discussions, I was deeply impressed. The quality of thought and connection far exceeded what I would have seen in traditional discussion boards. Students were not only building relationships but also delving more deeply into course topics and making meaningful real-world connections.

Taken together, these interactions appeared to strengthen both academic dialogue and peer relationships within the learning environment.

Student Ownership

All of us described an increase in student ownership of the discussion process. In traditional threaded discussions, instructors typically developed the discussion prompts, monitored participation, and evaluated responses. In the collaborative model, however, two of these responsibilities shifted toward students, thus restoring student agency and personal accountability. Students were responsible for determining when to meet with their discussion partners and how they would structure their conversations. For some students, this shift initially felt unfamiliar. However, we concluded students should be given flexibility on varying fronts provided their discussion remained connected to the course readings and content. Although several of us offered general guidance about possible formats, students were encouraged to approach the discussion creatively in their mode of collaboration and responses.

Iterative Refinement

As we all continued implementing collaborative discussions over multiple semesters, each of us began refining the structure of the discussion activity in response to both pedagogical and logistical considerations. Over time, we modified the collaborative discussion model in response to early implementation experiences. As both faculty and students, we adapted to the new format and introduced several adjustments to improve structure and sustainability (see Appendix A and B). For example, some of us observed that early discussions occasionally extended to nearly an hour. Although these conversations were often rich and engaging, they also required more time for the instructor to review and evaluate than traditional threaded discussions. In response, KY limited discussions to approximately 30 minutes while KB and GH suggested 20-30 minutes. KB and KS asked students to submit transcripts of their conversations so that the discussions could be reviewed more efficiently when listening to the entire recording was not feasible.

Additional refinements focused on maintaining academic accountability. KY required students to submit reading notes prior to the discussion to ensure that students continued engaging with the assigned material even when conversations were particularly dynamic. KS incorporated a post-discussion reflection to encourage deeper connections between the course content and students' personal or professional contexts. Although not every instructor adopted each of these strategies, we all described adjusting the collaborative model in response to student engagement and practical considerations. These iterative refinements allowed us to preserve the conversational strengths of the format while improving its structure and manageability.

Remaining Challenges

Despite these improvements, we also identified several ongoing challenges associated with collaborative discussions. One concern involved verifying citations during conversational discussions. When assignments required students to reference sources, several of us noted it could be difficult to confirm citations within spoken dialogue, particularly when conversations were not accompanied by written references.

Three of us also observed occasional imbalances in participation during discussions. In some cases, one student would dominate the conversation, limiting opportunities for more balanced dialogue. We addressed this issue by providing guidance about equitable participation, though the group dynamics could still influence the quality of interaction. Scheduling

discussions also presented logistical challenges for some students. While asynchronous participation remained an option in some courses, synchronous conversations sometimes required students to coordinate meeting times across varying work schedules.

Finally, we all noted in the earliest iterations of the model; some conversations resembled threaded discussions in structure. Even though students were speaking with one another, discussions occasionally leaned toward summarizing course readings rather than engaging in deeper dialogue. However, we all decided these challenges represented design considerations rather than fundamental limitations of the collaborative format. We each continued refining the approach and providing guidance to students in order to minimize these issues and strengthen the quality of discussion over time. Taken together, we conclude collaborative discussions shifted the focus of participation from completing assignments toward engaging in meaningful dialogue with peers and course content.

Research Question 2

Research question 2 asked us to consider whether the collaborative discussion produced a variation in engagement from students. Three distinct themes arose from our reflections: performative tasks versus authentic communication, the depth of the communication versus breadth, and connective engagement leading to learning.

From Performative Compliance to Authentic Dialogue

Based on our findings from RQ2, the experiences of threaded discussions in online classrooms have become performative. While students were able to complete the assignments, the intended conversation dissolved into a simple question-and-answer format. However, faculty participants across varying contexts believed that the collaborative formats led to a qualitative shift in engagement.

Overwhelmingly, participants described traditional threaded discussions as feeling more like a checkbox than authentic learning or something to complete, as opposed to learning from them. KB reflected, “While most students completed the assignments, the engagement often felt performative. It became a task to check off rather than an authentic opportunity for deeper learning and reflection.” Students also internalized this as some calculated that the discussion simply was not worth their time. As DJ recalled, “In previous online classes with traditional discussion boards, there would be students who accepted zeroes but managed to pass… This indicated a lack of value for the student in completing the discussion.”

Over time, each faculty member lost confidence in threaded discussions as a vehicle for deep learning or quality dialogue. KS, drawing on decades of experience, stated, “I have been teaching online for 26 years… and I have felt like threaded discussion boards were dismal failures in really simulating class discussion.” The conclusion for many was decisive. As KY put it plainly, “I determined I was never going to do threaded discussions again.”

Depth Over Breadth

Faculty recognized traditional threaded discussions tended to spread participation thinly, prioritizing breadth of response over depth of thinking. The move to collaborative discussions changed that dynamic considerably. KB remarked that whereas students in traditional

discussions "might spend ten minutes writing perfunctory responses, with the dyads they were engaging in authentic, in-depth conversations lasting up to an hour." Most understood that this time spent with a peer meant longer, richer exchanges than a discussion board could produce.

Students also embraced the change, often in ways faculty did not anticipate. KS reflected, "I expected some resistance from the students but I actually had one student state she was so glad that I did that because the two classmates she was assigned to work with were new to her in spite of them being in a cohort for over a year." That single detail quantifies the depth of the shift. When students are given the opportunity to hold genuine conversations instead of "talking" to a passive asynchronous audience, deeper learning can occur.

Faculty described a marked improvement in both the relational and cognitive dimensions of discussion. KB noted "the quality of thought and connection far exceeded what I would have seen in traditional discussion boards," with students more deeply addressing course topics and making meaningful real-world connections. The intended impact of deeper engagement with both peers and content had been realized.

Human Connection as a Catalyst for Learning

The limitations of threaded discussions extended beyond logistics or design. They reflected a deeper absence of the sensory and relational cues of human conversation. KY identified this gap directly: "They can see facial expressions and hear voice inflection that is missing in the threaded discussion with written or even recorded text." Threaded discussions could measure engagement through a rubric, but the deep conversations and learning were difficult to achieve without the relational foundation that collaborative formats provided.

What threaded discussions could not replicate, regardless of how they were designed, was the kind of connected, authentic conversation that grows from relational trust built over time. GH captured the longer arc of this: "I have watched students who likely would not have communicated with each other throughout their ten-course program and probably wouldn't have met until graduation 18 months later, come together for deep, authentic, and meaningful conversations." That trust also carried forward because the same participant noted group members would reconnect when the next course started, having developed comfort with one another from previous sessions.

When faculty introduced collaborative formats, the effect on participation was immediate and, for many, unexpected. One faculty member observed that across six courses, they had yet to see a student not participate or engage in some manner and had not assigned a zero since implementing the collaborative format. Even among students predisposed to resist group work, the response defied expectations. As KS noted, "Many online students hate anything to do with group work. However, that was not the case. They had had a positive experience in their prior course and were willing to use the same process." The accountability created by live, face-to-face interaction produced a qualitatively different relationship to participation and to one another.

Taken together, these observations suggest that human connection was the impetus to deeper engagement with both classmates and course material. Faculty described not simply more

participation, but a different kind of participation, one grounded in relational presence rather than tacit completion. When students can see and hear one another, they engage more deeply, both intellectually and personally. GH captured this shift through the words of his students: "I received feedback from students who emailed or called me, expressing that they were initially hesitant or even disliked working in groups…but eventually found the collaborative discussion format very beneficial and thanked me for implementing it." The smaller, more intimate group, along with choice, encouraged engagement on all levels rather than a participatory mandate.

Research Question 3

Research question 3 asked how collaborative and threaded discussion formats differ in terms of participation. Three themes emerged in our shared reflections: authenticity of the engagement, student empowerment in choice, and deeper learning in the structure.

Authentic Engagement and Meaningful Conversations

When reflecting on our experiences with students' participation quality, two different themes emerged as positive concerning engagement and the enhancement in the conversations occurring. First, our notes revealed an increase in involvement on an individual student level while a second presented an increase in the meaningful conversations presented in whole-group participation quality.

Concerning individual contributions, GH noted, "I have seen students come out of their shells, so to speak, and witnessed their involvement grow from the initial class discussion to the fourth or fifth, showing a clear change in personality as they developed trust and comfort within the group." Participant KS recalled an interaction with a student after assigning groups where "I expected some resistance…but…she was so glad that I did that because the two classmates she was assigned to work with were new to her in spite of them being in a cohort for over a year." In regard to the same student and her group, KS further exclaimed, "Their first discussion transcript from their video was 29 pages long!!!" When focusing on the types of individual engagement, DJ articulated, "Reading and rating responses felt more like an educational journey with students rather than a forced and still individualized form of learning." Participant KB further corroborated this idea, noting, "Instead of discussing ideas broadly with the entire class, students would engage deeply with one partner. The goal was to move from a wide but shallow model to a deep and meaningful exchange between two learners." This correlates with Lin and Wang (2023) expressing that individual learner contribution enhances in environments of positive interaction, such as threaded discussions.

A second aspect of the interaction theme centered around the quality of group participation as a whole. Authentic engagement must go beyond individual student efforts and be grounded in group efficacy. Within this new practice, we discovered that authentic group collaboration grew naturally. Participant GH confirmed, "I have watched students who likely would not have communicated with each other throughout their…program and…come together for deep, authentic, and meaningful conversations." Additionally, Participant DJ expounded that she found herself "enthralled in the responses, noting similar precedents, fresh epiphanies, and communing where educators began to focus on solutions for each other rather than commiserating." Almahmoud et al. (2025) suggested when discussions were community based, student and group contributions enhanced learning and the quality. However, DJ did caution

against groups potentially getting off topic and disclosed, “The rubric helped keep this in check to ensure students kept on task.”

Student Empowerment through Autonomy and Choice

The second theme to emerge from our reflections centered on student empowerment through collaborative discussions versus traditional discussions. One definitive area of student choice empowering students was on getting to select the online tool, while we all, based on the slight variations in requirements, noted additional areas of enablement for students.

Lohmann and Boothe (2023) explained student choice of the discussion format makes it more hands-on and personal and emulates modern social media culture. KB observed, “Interestingly, most students chose Zoom, which allowed them to see and hear each other and engage in genuine conversation.” However, KY revealed after granting choice of platform, “Some students continued to use threaded discussions, while others utilized tools provided by the university to video record their conversations or used AI tools to create professionally sounding podcasts.” Student choice in platform further encourages innovation and participation (Doss et al., 2025). KB further mentioned, “Some groups took a particularly creative approach; one created a podcast, others used interactive Canva presentations or Padlet discussions. Across all groups, the exchange of ideas was rich and dynamic.”

Beyond student selection of the discussion format, we recorded additional elements of student choice in the process. KB noticed that students looked beyond “the how” and chose “the where and when” because “They became responsible for determining when to meet, what to discuss, and how to make authentic, meaningful connections between the readings and their lived experiences.” KB’s reflections additionally reflected on timing when they “also allowed them to set their own pace with the supplementary text. They could move as quickly or slowly as they wished, if they met the established deadlines for submitting their dyad discussions.” Participant DJ expressed student choice in the responses and not just the timing showed when “students would comment in surplus with clips, but also memes and pictures, wanting to continue the conversation far beyond any requirements.” The additional effort and selection of how to respond led to discussions exploding “into a creative, think tank of educators sharing their experiences, research affirming the response, in addition to establishing group efficacy by the end of the semester.” However, KB cautioned, “At first, this freedom was unsettling for some. Many were unsure what to talk about or how to begin.” To get students excited about the new format, examples and a scaffolded introduction to the discussion were provided and would be beneficial for future classes.

Deep Learning through Structured Interactions

The third and final theme to arise from our responses centered around the depth of learning that evolved from collaborative, student-centered discussions. While much of the discussion was left to the discretion of students, we structured certain elements to ensure these remained academic, reflected best practices, and ascertained our students’ grasp of the class objectives.

As instructors, we all realized quickly that some structure had to be incorporated into the collaborative discussions, or the topics and students would spiral into a discussion not based

upon or proving mastery of objectives. By implementing time limits, the number of students per group, and specific topic outlines, KY recorded that "these subtle changes resulted in much richer conversations around the more pertinent topics in the readings and kept some students from being able to fake their way through the conversation." The structures added were not intended to hinder but rather to add guidance for students to establish deeper conversations while remaining focused and on topic. In regard to the depth these structures brought, KB added, "The quality of thought and connection far exceeded what I would have seen in traditional discussion boards. Students were not only building relationships but also delving more deeply into course topics and making meaningful real-world connections."

When mixing media of communication, we discovered that some formats require additional structures to ensure fairness and academic integrity. Professor KS claimed, "One challenge I found was that I required literature citations to support their responses." Students typically struggle to incorporate and embed literature into threaded discussions; however, seamlessly integrating it into filmed and live discussions adds an additional challenge. KS further added, "While I still encourage that in the live discussion, I didn't ask them to provide a references page of any author they mentioned outside the text. I should have done that for me to be able to check validity of sources." For DJ's courses, once setting the structures for all formats to include citations and references, she discovered, "One [student] emailed me exclaiming she was in a discussion with her principal when she found herself telling her principal about an article she had read in my class for her discussion as support for her idea she was pitching." While the usage of references takes frontloading in the case of structure, students quickly adapted and successfully included all required elements of the discussions, regardless of the group's use of videos, Padlet, or a Word Document.

In developing structures for collaborative discussions, the three themes of establishing best practices remained: timing, groups, research, and topics. Participant GH recommended allowing groups "to come together for a 20 to 30-minute virtual meeting, which often extends longer due to in-depth conversations." Without some cap on time allowed, a majority of us noticed student groups would typically surpass the time. KY agreed and "capped the discussions at 30 minutes, gave students discussion prompts more closely tied to specific topics in the readings, and provided mental models for how the discussions should proceed" to ensure the structure supported the best discussions. One additional structure KS suggested was that she "assigned the groups myself to make sure the students would not get too comfortable with each other." The practice of assigning the groups brought more diverse and unique discussions rather than allowing students to pick their own partner and just settling on an agreement. To ensure collaborative discussions stayed on topic and relevant to the objectives for the week, DJ advocated for "even comments had to be backed by research. In doing so, students would groan at first, but many found it became a habit." Finally, regarding topic selection, KY proposed, "I scaffolded the process by providing some broad topics to discuss, such as the most important or most confusing topics from the reading. Students were told they could use whatever means they wanted to record their meetings, if I was able to verify their participation." This practice perfectly balanced student choice with scaffolding necessary to produce academic discussions.

Discussion

Authentic student engagement for deep learning in online environments has been a longstanding concern and topic for debate and exploration. Research on learning has consistently shown the importance of practices such as the use of asynchronous tools, such as threaded discussion boards and journals, in online and hybrid courses (Saripudin, 2022; Sweet, 2022). As such, most learning management systems (LMS) used by online educators have included integrated tools to facilitate student reflection and asynchronous discussions. For years, virtual journals and threaded discussion boards within the LMS were the primary tools used, but with varying results (Hammond, 2020; Wu & Hiltz, 2019). Such tools were intended to increase engagement and build community within an online environment. However, offering multiple formats may foster creative expression but may not improve student collaboration or group efficacy in ways that deepen and broaden student discussions. This study examines the potential benefits of combining these approaches.

Over the last 10 years, the proliferation of low-cost and easily integrated tools into online environments has broadened the choices for online educators to explore as alternatives to the traditional tools provided by LMS providers. Tools that allow for recorded, synchronous discussions or alternative formats to the integrated discussion tools create space for online educators and students to engage in ways that were not previously possible or considered. The findings from our study overwhelmingly support the use of these tools as alternative formats for authentic dialogue that engages critical reflection behaviors and deeper learning in a more authentic manner, like what is often encountered in environmentally rich, face-to-face settings. When paired in dyads or in small groups for meaningful discussion, around topics of significance, students move from discussion as acts of compliance to acts of meaning. They also expressed a heightened sense of engagement with subject matter beyond the limits of the course curriculum and expectations.

One of the potential drivers of this may be the importance of real-time dialogue. Research has consistently shown that real-time dialogue and student interaction are important factors for improving or increasing student engagement in online and blended courses (Tsai et al., 2021), and that students valued frequent interactions as key drivers of engagement (Wang, Q. et al., 2022). The variations of discussions provided by the faculty in this study not only gave students an opportunity for real-time interactions but also provided faculty an opportunity to provide further instruction and interaction with the student dyads, which research has also suggested improved student engagement with the content as well as feelings that the course as a whole was less tense and more interesting (Wang, Q. et al., 2022).

Another potential driver is the role that agency, or self-directiveness, plays in student engagement. A common refrain from students to the faculty in this study was appreciation for being able to choose their preferred methods of discussion and to exercise creativity. The ability to practice self-directed learning has been found to have positive effects on increased motivation, satisfaction with learning (Chakraborty, 2024; Loeng, 2020; Morris, 2019), and engagement (Agonács & Matos, 2021). It is important, though, that agency is dependent on interpersonal factors, skills, and context (Pratiwi & Waluyo, 2023), so faculty seeking to integrate the flexibility of assignments that increase agency, such as the discussions used by faculty in this

study, consider learners' readiness and exercise intentionality in how students are paired and the supports for tools that can be integrated into their courses.

In essence, the use of other methods for discussions besides the threaded discussion boards provides the historical benefits of discussion, as well as providing learning experiences and tools for an increasingly digital culture. Although grading, especially of videos, may have taken longer, the discussions no longer felt like a burden. Discussions held on various platforms with innovative practices took less time to grade due to the flow of the conversation and seamless references to class resources and relevant examples. An added benefit for faculty who bear the responsibility of grading, it also breaks the monotony of grading the written word for assignments and poses a potential practice that limits the use of tools such as generative AI. Because of the unreliability of AI detection tools, there have been growing recommendations for faculty to find alternative assessments of student learning (Surahman & Wang, 2022). As such, the findings from this study provide a creative and engaging form of collaborative assessment that allows student voice to enhance class learning and content.

Conclusions

Implications for Best Practice

The findings from this study have important implications for both online instructors and learners, especially adult learners, as was the case of the participating faculty's students, where collaboration, critical reflection, and professional dialogue are important to the act of learning. Collectively, the experiences of study participants suggested that traditional threaded discussions may no longer adequately support the authentic intellectual engagement with content or peers in a fully online graduate program. Additionally, with the growing use of generative AI, there was a need to create assessments that were not as reliant on tasks that could easily be carried out with AI tools. The faculty found the use of collaborative discussion formats that incorporated synchronous or multimodal interaction appeared to foster deeper learning through engagement, stronger relationships, and a greater sense of agency in the learning process.

First, the findings challenge the long-standing assumption that threaded discussions are inherently effective for promoting graduate-level discourse for adult learners in online environments. Across the findings from this study, faculty consistently described threaded discussions as performative and compliance oriented, often lacking substantive reflection on learning or dialogue on course content. As such, students often considered the task as "busy-work" and less as an opportunity for authentic engagement, despite attempts to provide numerous mental models or guidelines for expectations for discussion threads. Although threaded discussions provided students with the logistical convenience of completing discussion assignments, the findings suggested that they rarely met the expected outcomes, such as spontaneity, relational trust, and dialogical exchanges associated with meaningful academic discourse. As such, faculty tasked with teaching graduate and adult learners in an online environment should consider some of the methods being reflected on in this study for creating opportunities for cultivating a scholarly identity, critical thinking, and deepening the relational aspect of the academic community with which they are tasked to create in graduate level programs.

Another implication from the current study is the importance of social presence for deep learning in online graduate programs. According to the participants, students engaged more deeply when they could see facial expressions, hear tone and inflection, and interact conversationally with peers. These findings align with social constructivist perspectives and Community of Inquiry frameworks that emphasize the interconnectedness of cognitive, social, and teaching presence in online learning environments (Garrison, 2019). The collaborative discussion formats appeared to reduce the transactional distance experienced in asynchronous online courses by humanizing interactions and strengthening interpersonal accountability. In graduate courses, where persistence and cohort cohesion are critical, these relational dynamics may contribute not only to learning outcomes but also to student retention and sense of belonging.

Third, the findings suggest that increased student autonomy can positively influence engagement and ownership of learning. Allowing students flexibility in selecting discussion platforms, determining meeting logistics, and shaping conversational approaches appeared to encourage creativity, innovation, and authentic participation. Rather than viewing structure and autonomy as competing forces, the experiences of the faculty participants in the current study suggested that carefully scaffolded autonomy may better reflect the expectations of both faculty and adult learners enrolled in online graduate programs. These findings imply that online graduate instruction may benefit from moving away from rigid participation structures toward more flexible, student-centered approaches that mirror authentic professional collaboration.

Additionally, the findings carry implications for the design and assessment of online discussions. The transition from the broad but shallow interactions often encountered in asynchronous threaded discussions to deeper conversations suggests the quality of engagement may be more educationally meaningful than the quantity of posts. Despite attempts to include criteria for post quality, students often focused on frequency and compliance, whereas collaborative discussions encouraged sustained analysis, reflection, and application of course concepts. However, the findings also indicate innovative collaborative formats required intentional scaffolding and iterative refinement. Faculty needed to establish expectations regarding participation balance, academic rigor, citation practices, time management, and accountability measures. Institutions and faculty should recognize that alternative discussion models are not inherently self-sustaining; rather, they require thoughtful instructional design and ongoing adaptation. Furthermore, for graduate programs focused on practitioners, institutions and faculty should consider using tools that best replicate what learners use in daily communication or introducing tools that serve as proxies for face-to-face communication.

Finally, this study has implications for faculty professional development and innovation in online teaching. The shift away from threaded discussions emerged largely from faculty frustration, experimentation, and collaborative reflection rather than institutional mandates. This suggests that faculty-driven pedagogical innovation may serve as a powerful catalyst for improving online learning environments. Institutions should create structures that encourage faculty experimentation, collaborative inquiry, and the sharing of emerging practices related to online engagement. Supporting instructional innovation may be especially important as online graduate programs continue expanding nationally.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are a few limitations to the current study that have implications for future research. One limitation was that this study was based on the perceptions of faculty teaching in relatively large online doctoral and graduate programs at two R2 Carnegie Classification university in Texas. Further investigations of the phenomena described in this study should be conducted within different fields, levels of study, and types of universities. Another limitation concerns the diversity of scaffolding and instruction provided to students who engaged in the threaded discussions and the alternative synchronous methods offered by the participating faculty. Future research should consider addressing this limitation by investigating specific types of scaffolding and instructions, and their potential in mediating or moderating the perceptions of faculty. Similarly, the findings of the study lacked student voice to validate the perceptions of the participating faculty. Future research should consider including student evidence to substantiate or refute faculty perceptions.

In addition to addressing limitations, future research should investigate the relationship between collaborative discussions and measurable learning outcomes. While faculty consistently perceived deeper critical thinking and richer engagement, this study relied primarily on reflective and observational data. Quantitative or mixed-methods research could compare collaborative discussions and threaded discussions across variables such as critical thinking performance, knowledge retention, course grades, persistence, or dissertation readiness. Such research would help determine whether perceived improvements in engagement correspond to measurable academic gains. Likewise, additional research could investigate how various technologies influence communication quality, accessibility, creativity, cognitive engagement, and social presence. As artificial intelligence and multimodal tools continue evolving, understanding how these technologies can support authentic collaboration will become increasingly important in online higher education.

Finally, additional research is needed to determine which scaffolds most effectively support meaningful dialogue while maintaining academic rigor. Studies examining faculty workload, scalability, and sustainability would also be valuable, particularly in large enrollment online programs. Longitudinal research could examine whether collaborative discussions contribute to stronger cohort cohesion, reduced isolation, improved retention, or enhanced professional collaboration after graduation. Such findings could further inform the design of online graduate programs seeking to foster both intellectual and relational development among adult learners.

Declarations

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank Glen Harrison who contributed to this work but did not meet the criteria for authorship. In particular, we acknowledge our students for taking this adventure with us.

Ethics Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with recognized ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and data were collected and reported with respect for

confidentiality and anonymity. According to the guidelines of Lamar University, this type of research did not require formal ethics approval.

Funding Statement
This research received no external funding.

AI Use Statement
Generative artificial intelligence (AI) was used in the preparation of this manuscript for APA 7th edition reference formatting using Recite Works. The AI tool was not used to generate, analyze, or interpret research data, nor to create original scholarly content. All content was reviewed, verified, and approved by the authors, who take full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the work.

Conflicts of Interest Statement
The authors declare no conflicts of interest related to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

References

Agonács, N., & Matos, J. (2021). Learner agency in distance education settings: Understanding language MOOC learners' heutagogical attributes. In Hase & Blaschke (Eds). *Unleashing the power of learner agency* (Ch. 9). EdTech Books. https://edtechbooks.org/up

Alfoldi, E. A. (2025). Yellowdig discussion boards as communities of inquiry: The impact of instructor participation on online student discourse. *Journal of Education for Business, 100*(1), 45–56. https://doi.org/10.1080/08832323.2024.2438659

Alkaissi, H., & McFarlane, S. I. (2023). Artificial hallucinations in ChatGPT: Implications in scientific writing. *Cureus, 15*(2), e35179. https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.35179

Allon, G., Carlstein, J., & Gur, Y. (2025). Leveraging consensus effect to optimize ranking in online discussion boards. *Manufacturing & Service Operations Management*, *27*(6). https://doi.org/10.1287/msom.2022.0451

Almahmoud, J., Facciotti, M., Igo, M., & Sripathi, K. (2025). Enhancing user engagement in large-scale social annotation platforms: Community-based design interventions and implications for large language models (LLMs). arXix, 1. https://doi.org/10.48550/arxiv.2501.01545

Alsayer, A. A., Templin, J., Niileksela, C., & Frey, B. B. (2025). Examining the structure of the revised community of inquiry framework: A multi-level approach. *Education and Information Technologies, 30*(5), 6785–6807. https://doi-org/10.1007/s10639-024-13090-3

Anderson, T., Rouke, L., Garrison, D. R., & Archer, W. (2001). Assessing teaching presence in a computer conferencing context. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks, 5*(2), 1-17. https://www.doi.org/https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v5i2.1875

Aslan, S. A., & Turgut, Y. E. (2021). Effectiveness of community of inquiry based online course: Cognitive, social and teaching presence. *Journal of Pedagogical Research, 5*(3), 187–197. https://doi.org/10.33902/JPR.2021371365

Blackmon, S. J. (2012). Outcomes of chat and discussion board use in online learning: A research synthesis. *Journal of Educators Online, 9*(2). 1-19.

Bongiwe Zulu, F. Q. (2024). Enhancing the quality of online teaching and learning of a research module through the community of inquiry framework. *South African Journal of Education, 44*(4), Article 2558. https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v44n4a2558

Bromer, B. L. (2021). Social presence in an online learning environment. In C. Crawford & M. Simons (Eds.), *eLearning engagement in a transformative social learning environment* (pp. 1-21). IGI Global Scientific Publishing. https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-6956-6.CH001

Brunton, R., MacDonald, J., Sugden, N. A., & Hicks, B. (2022). Discussion forums: A misnomer? Examining lurkers, engagement and academic achievement. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, *38*(5), 27-44. https://doi.org/10.14742/ajet.7627

Carr, J. (2020). Teacher candidate perceptions on alternative asynchronous online discussion boards. *Journal of Educational Technology and Online Learning, 3*(3), 288–310. https://doi.org/10.31681/jetol.752283

Casebeer, D., & Pontoriero, K. (2022). Promoting democratic engagement with low-stakes discussion board interventions. *Pennsylvania Teacher Educator, 21*(1), 1–9. https://www.pac-te.org/files/PTE_Spring_22_Journal_-_Final.pdf

Chakraborty, S. (2024). Empowering and engaging adult learners: Strategies to facilitate self-directed learning in adult education. *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research, 6*(3). https://doi.org/10.36948/ijfmr.2024.v06i03.22216

Chandrawati, T., Dewi, L., Nurhikmah H, Afriani, A., Arwadi, F., Safitri, H., & Shahbodin, F. (2024). Student's learning experiences in an online learning environment using Garrison's CoI framework. *Inovasi Kurikulum, 21*(3), 1359–1370. https://doi.org/10.17509/jik.v21i3.62813

Chou, P. N. (2012). Teaching strategies in online discussion boards: A framework in higher education. *Higher Education Studies, 2*(2), 25–30. https://doi.org/10.5539/HES.V2N2P25

Cooper, A. D. (2022). Using the discussion board during your online synchronous class to engage students. *Marketing Education Review, 32*(2), 177–180. https://doi.org/10.1080/10528008.2022.2062606

Doss, K., Poor, J., & Bloom, L. (2025). Student choice in online asynchronous higher education courses. *ELearn Magazine, 2025*(9). https://doi.org/10.1145/3760213.3708894

Douglas, T., Mather, C., Murray, S. A., Earwaker, L., James, A., Pittaway, J., Robards, B., & Salter, S. (2015). A comparison of undergraduate student experiences of assessed versus non-assessed participation in online asynchronous discussion groups. *ASCILITE Conference Proceedings*, 424–428. https://doi.org/10.14742/apubs.2015.944

Faulconer, E., Griffith, J., & Gruss, A. (2021). The impact of positive feedback on student outcomes and perceptions. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 47*(2), 259–268. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2021.1910140

Garrison, D. R. (2019). Online Community of Inquiry review: Social, cognitive, and teaching presence issues. *Online Learning, 11*(1). https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v11i1.1737

Garrison, D. R. (2021, January 18). T*he Community of Inquiry.* *https://www.thecommunityofinquiry.org/editorial29*

Garrison, D. R., & Arbaugh, J. B. (2007). Researching the community of inquiry framework: Review, issues, and future directions. *Internet and Higher Education, 10*(3), 157–172. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2007.04.001

Hamadi, H., Tafili, A., Kates, F. R., Larson, S. A., Ellison, C., & Song, J. (2023). Exploring an innovative approach to enhance discussion board engagement. *TechTrends, 67*(4), 741–751. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11528-023-00850-0

Hammond, M. (2020). A review of recent papers on online discussion in teaching and learning in higher education. *Online Learning*, *9*(3). https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v9i3.1782

Hasani, L. M., Santoso, H. B., & Junus, K. (2022). Designing asynchronous online discussion forum interface and interaction based on the community of inquiry framework. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning, 23(*2), 191–213. https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v23i2.6016

Irvin, C., & Hee-Joo, I. (2022). College students' perceptions of the use of collaborative discussion boards during COVID-19. *Multimedia-Assisted Language Learning, 25*(3), 39–60. https://doi.org//10.15702/mall.2022.25.3.39

James, A. J., Douglas, T. A., Earwaker, L. A., & Mather, C. A. (2022). Student experiences of facilitated asynchronous online discussion boards: Lessons learned and implications for teaching practice. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice, 19*(5). https://doi.org/10.53761/1.19.5.9

Kasneci, E., Sessler, K., Küchemann, S., Bannert, M., Dementieva, D., Fischer, F., Gasser, U., Groh, G., Günnemann, S., Hüllermeier, E., Krusche, S., Kutyniok, G., Michaeli, T., Nerdel, C., Pfeffer, J., Poquet, O., Sailer, M., Schmidt, A., Seidel, T., … Kasneci, G. (2023). ChatGPT for good? On opportunities and challenges of large language models for education. *Learning and Individual Differences, 103*, 102274. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2023.102274

Kaushik, N. (2023). Online discussion boards: Expectations and outcomes. *Journal of International Management Studies, 23,* 32–45. https://doi.org/10.18374/jims-23-1.3

Kerrigan, J., & Aghekyan, R. (2022). Beyond the discussion board: Engaging students in asynchronous online activities. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 33*(3), 488–495. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1366170.pdf

Lane, S. F. (2025). *To post or not to post, that is the discussion: An exploration of students' perceptions and experiences with using online collaboration tools in threaded discussion board postings* (doctoral dissertation). University of South Carolina. https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd/8066

Leow Wai Yee, S., & Lee Cheng Ean, C. (2020). Malaysian private university students' perceptions of online discussion forums: A qualitative enquiry. *Sains Humanik*a, *12*(2). https://doi.org/10.11113/SH.V12N2.1610

Lin, L., & Wang, F. (2023). Research on the influence mechanism of instructional interaction and course content on online learning engagement. *ICETM Proceedings of the 2023 6th International Conference on Educational Technology Management*, 169–175. https://doi.org/10.1145/3637907.3637970

Loeng, S. (2020). Self-directed learning: A core concept in adult education. *Education Research International*, *2020*. https://doi.org/10.1155/2020/3816132

Lohmann, M. J., & Boothe, K. A. (2023). Developing asynchronous online discussion boards to increase student engagement and learning. In I. Management Association (Ed.), *Research anthology on remote teaching and learning and the future of online education* (pp. 155-173). IGI Global. https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-6684-7540-9.ch009

Martin, F., Wu, T., Wan, L., & Xie, K. (2022). A meta-analysis on the community of inquiry presences and learning outcomes in online and blended learning environments. *Online Learning, 26*(1). https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v26i1.2604

Milovic, A., & Dingus, R. (2021). How to not disappear completely: Using video-based discussions to enhance student social presence in an online course. *Marketing Education Review*, *31*(4), 311–321. https://doi.org/10.1080/10528008.2021.1943447

Mohebi, L. (2023). Students' online engagement and usage of discussion boards on Blackboard: A study from the UAE. *Journal of Educators Online, 20*(3). https://doi.org/10.9743/JEO.2023.20.3.6

Morris, T. (2019). Self-directed learning: A fundamental competence in a rapidly changing world. *International Review of Education, 65*, 633–653. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-019-09793-2

Nash, B. L., Karkar Esperat, T. M., Mitchell Pierce, K., Shimek, C. H., Rose, C. D., Ivanyuk, L., & Fletcher, L. (2023). Investigating new literacies among teacher educators: A multi-institution collaborative self-study. *Literacy Research: Theory, Method, and Practice, 72*(1), 238–257. https://doi.org/10.1177/23813377231179192

Oyarzun, B., & Martin, F. (2023). A systematic review of research on online learner collaboration from 2012–21: Collaboration technologies, design, facilitation, and outcomes. *Online Learning, 27*(1). https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v27i1.3407

Payne, A. L. (2021). A resource for e-moderators on fostering participatory engagement within discussion boards for online students in higher education. *Student Success*, *12*(1), 93–101. https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.1865

Pham, C. K., Chong, S. L., & Wan, R. (2022). Students' experience of social presence in online learning. *Proceedings of the 14th International Conference on Education Technology and Computers,* 299–303. https://doi.org/10.1145/3572549.3572597

Popescu, E., & Badea, G. (2020). Exploring a Community of Inquiry supported by a social media-based learning environment. *Journal of Educational Technology & Society, 23*(2), 61–76. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26921134.

Pratiwi, D., & Waluyo, B. (2023). Autonomous learning and the use of digital technologies in online English classrooms in higher education. *Contemporary Educational Technology*. https://doi.org/10.30935/cedtech/13094

Rahmatalla, F., Harun, J., & Abuhassna, H. (2024). Mapping research trends in the community of inquiry framework within online courses: A bibliometric analysis. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business & Social Sciences, 14*(11). https://doi.org/10.6007/ijarbss/v14-i11/23598

Sandidge, C. R., & Schultz, B. F. (2024). Building connections and enhancing learning: Student perspectives of traditional discussion boards in online courses. *Journal of Educators Online*, *21*(4), n4. https://doi.org/10.9743/JEO.2024.21.4.1

Saripudin, M. (2022). Deeper learning, dialogic learning, and critical thinking: research-based strategies for the classroom. *Educational Review, 75*(3), 587–588. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2022.2028416.

Schultz, S. L. (2021) Discussion boards in the online classroom: Are they actually influencing instructor mediated immediacy, student motivation, student affective learning, student connectedness, and online learning climate? *Theses and Dissertations.* 1621. https://doi.org/10.30707/ETD2022.20221020070314422393.999967

Schultz, B. F., & Sandidge, C. R. (2022). Improving online discussion boards: What do students say? *The Northwest ELearning Journal*, *2*(1). https://doi.org/10.5399/osu/nwelearn.2.1.5643

Shea, P., Richardson, J., & Swan, K. (2022). Building bridges to advance the community of inquiry framework for online learning. *Educational Psychologist, 57*(3), 148–161. https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2022.2089989

Shin, J., Balyan, R., Banawan, M. P., Arner, T., Leite, W. L., & McNamara, D. S. (2025). Analyzing interaction patterns and content dynamics in an online mathematics discussion board. *Interactive Learning Environments, 33*(3), 2151–2174. https://doi.org./10.1080/10494820.2024.2392619

Surahman, E., & Wang, T. (2022). Academic dishonesty and trustworthy assessment in online learning: A systematic literature review. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning, 38*(6), 1535-1553. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcal.12708

Sweet, S. (2022). Using guided critical reflection to discover deepened and transformative learning in leadership education. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, *18*(4), 600–621. https://doi.org/10.1177/19427751221118951

Tawalbeh, M., & Al-husban, N. (2023). EFL students' perspectives on activities designed for asynchronous discussion forums: Transformative practices. *International Journal of Technology in Education, 6*(3), 507–520. https://doi.org/10.46328/ijte.519

Tsai, C., Ku, H., & Campbell, A. (2021). Impacts of course activities on student perceptions of engagement and learning online. *Distance Education*, *42*(1), 106–125. https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2020.1869525

Wang, Q., Wen, Y., & Quek, C. (2022). Engaging learners in synchronous online learning. *Education and Information Technologies*, *28*, 4429–4452. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-022-11393-x

Wang, Y. (2022). Exploring the relationships among the dimensions of a community of inquiry in an online learning environment. *Distance Education, 43*(3), 353–368. https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2022.2088481

Wertz, R. E. H. (2022). Learning presence within the Community of Inquiry framework: An alternative measurement survey for a four-factor model. *Internet and Higher Education, 52*, 100832. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.IHEDUC.2021.100832

Wu, D., & Hiltz, S. (2019). Predicting learning from asynchronous online discussions. *Online Learning*, *8*(2) https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v8i2.1832

Zawacki-Richter, O., Marín, V. I., Bond, M., & Gouverneur, F. (2019). Systematic review of research on artificial intelligence applications in higher education. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education, 16*(1), 39. https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-019-0171-0

Appendix A

Collaborative Discussions Instructions

For this class, we will handle online discussion boards a bit differently. Research is showing that the "post once then comment two to three times" format is not actively engaging students nor is it building collaborative practices. It does not mean discussion boards are not effective; it means the intention and use of them must be relative to students and built to establish bonding experiences (Blackmon, 2012, p. 15).

Here is how this will work. During Week Four of class, you will pick small groups (the number in the group is up to your specific instructor) by interacting with your classmates in the Student/Faculty Lounge. Once you have a group, your group will decide what platform you will use to conduct your discussions. Acceptable platforms used before include Word Docs with comments via your One Drive, Canva, video recording with transcript or closed captioning, podcast with transcript showing names, Padlet, or a new one your group discovers. Your grade will be based upon the interaction and content of your discussion. We want you to show us all you have learned and how it can be incorporated in the realm of education while epitomizing collaborative practices. Specifics for each discussion and rubrics used are up to the individual instructor, so read each one assigned carefully.

References

Blackmon, S. J. (2012). Outcomes of chat and discussion board use in online learning: A research synthesis. *Journal of Educators Online, 9*(2). 1-19.

Appendix B

Instructions:

Provide a response to all of the following prompts:

Why is the concept of instructional design so important to the field of distance education?
What does the text say about the importance of instructional design?
What are your suggestions for encouraging faculty to collaborate with IDs?

This will be a collaborative live discussion. You will be assigned into small groups (2 or 3). Once you have a group, your group will decide what platform you will use to conduct your discussions. Acceptable platforms used before include MS Word with comments, Canva, video recording with transcript or closed captioning, podcast with transcript showing names, or a new one your group discovers. However, Teams has seemed to be the best tool. If you do use Word, make sure it isn't like Threaded Discussion, the thing we are trying to avoid? Your grade will be based upon the interaction and content of your discussion. You will submit the information using this assignment link. We want you to show us how you can use technology to dive deeper into how it can be incorporated in the realm of education while epitomizing collaborative practices. You will have two weeks to get this completed.