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Chapter 13- Asynchronous Discussions for First-Year Writers and Beyond: Thinking Outside the PPR (Prompt, Post, Reply) Box

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13.

ASYNCHRONOUS DISCUSSIONS FOR FIRST-YEAR WRITERS AND BEYOND: THINKING OUTSIDE THE PPR (PROMPT, POST, REPLY) BOX

Miriam Moore

Author Note

Student posts included in this chapter were collected during an IRB-approved study in spring 2020 (University of North Georgia Study #2020-022).

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Asynchronous discussions can challenge even experienced online learners and teachers: forums can become perfunctory hoops for students to jump through, particularly in the common PPR (prompt, post, reply) format, in which students answer a prompt and then reply to one or more other students. As a peer reviewer for online courses, I have seen rich and insightful discussions that engage students and promote learning, as well as forums that scarcely resemble discussions at all. Research on cultivating dialogue in online discussions has targeted primarily upper-division or graduate courses (see Andreson, 2009; Delahunty, 2018; Delahunty et al., 2014; Garrison et al., 1999); few publications address discussions with first-year college students (see Peterson & Caverly, 2006, for a notable exception). Much of this research is written for instructors who regularly teach online; it may be neither familiar nor accessible to faculty who must shift to hybrid or online instruction in response to unforeseen circumstances, such as the pandemic of 2020–2021.

In this chapter, I invite faculty, especially those new to online instruction, to imagine with me what successful asynchronous discussions could look like and what pedagogical architecture would make that vision a reality. Then, we will investigate strategies to make this learning tool accessible to those most flummoxed by it: first-year composition students coenrolled in support or developmental literacy classes.

Possibilities and Limitations of Asynchronous Discussions

Imagining successful discussion requires that we consider both the possibilities and inherent limitations of asynchronous forums, as these are fundamentally different from in-person class discussions. In designing an online class, instructors cannot assume that online forums will simply take the place of classroom discussions: In-person interactions allow for gesture, interruptions, overlapping conversational turns, facial expressions, and opportunities for immediate clarification. They are also clearly time-bound; instructors watch a clock and stop discussion when the class session ends. In-class discussions may favor certain personality types, and despite our best intentions, they may privilege some students over others. Yet as the review in Andresen (2009) suggests, in-person discussions are particularly suited for problem-solving and producing deliverables.

What, then, are the advantages of asynchronous discussions? They invite students to think through contributions carefully—to explore concepts deeply, particularly in critical thinking tasks associated with the higher levels of Bloom’s taxonomy (see Milman, 2014). Shy students who struggle to speak up in class—and those who have encountered ridicule because of dialect or stigmatized accent features—may find it easier to participate in online discussions. Also, instructors can easily minimize their own presence in online discussions, allowing students to investigate course content without seeking immediate affirmation from faculty, whose physical presence can dominate conversation in traditional classrooms. Moreover, as students rely on each other in asynchronous conversations, they may build communities of inquiry where they share responsibility for knowledge construction (Garrison et al., 1999). But the instructor must facilitate this community by thoughtfully initiating and monitoring the discussions (Delahunty, 2018).

Without such thoughtful preparation and monitoring, discussions may leave participants frustrated, with little evidence of learning once the discussion has ended. I have experienced this frustration first-hand: As a novice online instructor years ago, I assigned discussions because I was told to do so. I received training to set up and grade discussions, and I dutifully posted one discussion prompt per week in my first-year writing courses. The results were discouraging, as I saw students answer prompts with lists containing decontextualized sentence fragments. When responding to assigned texts, they produced semi-plagiarized summaries or quoted snippets from the introductory paragraphs of readings (but rarely from latter sections). They offered opinions with confidence, but without support or textual evidence, despite my regular emails with suggestions for improving the posts. Their replies to each other contained cheerleading and enthusiastic affirmations of agreement, even when their initial comments took opposite stances. They added length to response posts by highlighting surface mistakes such as misspelled words or missing periods—again, despite reminders that discussions were not the place to point out grammar mistakes.

Obviously, these discussions generated a lot of words, but they also generated consternation and headaches for me and for the students. These students, primarily developmental and multilingual writers, faced dual uncertainties—a new type of writing and an unfamiliar online platform—and they demonstrated both

disengagement and resistance in response. Previous schooling had taught them to meet countable rubric requirements while looking for “the right answer,” defined as whatever the teacher says. Thus, they took what Smith (2012) calls a “deferent stance” to assigned readings and discussions. When I prodded for something more, I was met with comments such as “But I met the word count,” or “It’s boring,” or “I don’t understand what you want me to do.”

In truth, I could not articulate what I wanted them to do because I didn’t know: I had no vision of what a successful discussion would look like. Circumstances at the time (long before the pandemic) drove me to teach online, and I assumed that what I did in person would translate to the online space. Obviously, it did not.

The question I have learned to ask since then is this: What do I want to see happening in that online space? And my answer has been consistent: dialogue. I have learned much through conversation with others, and I want my students to be talking about language and writing (not parroting me or a text) in our online spaces. As Myhill and Newman (2016) argue, “Learners’ capacity to think metalinguistically about writing and to enact that thinking in the composing of text is enabled through high-quality classroom talk” (p. 178). At the same time, I want to provide a safe space that cultivates light bulb moments and allows students to work through the confusion that inevitably arises as they grapple with new concepts and expectations.

According to threshold concept theory (Meyer & Land, 2005), students’ initial encounters with disciplinary frameworks of knowledge push them into liminal states in which they must deploy and apply concepts they do not yet fully understand. At disciplinary thresholds, in these liminal states, students face fear and a desire to “get it right,” without knowing exactly what “it” is. In her introduction to threshold concepts for instructors, Cousin (2006) explains, “Teachers must demonstrate that they can tolerate learner confusion and can ‘hold’ their students through liminal states” (p. 5). I know all my students, but particularly first-year writers, can be bewildered by expectations and concepts they have never encountered before; I want discussion forums in online spaces to be a means of walking with my students through confusion (and the self-doubt it engenders) toward light bulb moments and knowledge-construction via dialogue.

My early discussions failed because I did not structure them to foster real dialogue. Prompts such as “What does term X mean to you?” invited students to find and copy answers from the text. My rubric focused on mechanical aspects of the posts (sentence-level grammar, word counts, and deadlines), and I posted new discussions every week, giving students little time to think carefully before churning out the next post. And the forum did not feel safe: Students had no idea how to challenge each other without being rude. Far from inviting students to enter safe spaces of discovery, my forums told students to “get it done.”

Redesigning for Success: Upper-Division Courses

To resuscitate flat discussions and implement a vision for dialogue, I have been experimenting with changes to four aspects of online forums: prompts, parameters, feedback, and rubrics. I tested redesigned forums in upper-division courses first, with plans to apply my findings to first-year courses later.

Prompt Design

My initial prompts led students to find and repeat answers, primarily because I asked “known-answer” questions (see Rusk et al., 2017; Willemsen et al., 2018). Dialogue, however, occurs when instructors pose questions or problems for which there isn’t a single right answer. Without predetermined answers, students can participate as legitimate voices in the dialogue (see Nystrand et al., 2003). To elicit voices in dialogue, I have shifted to multilevel prompts (Roepnack, 2019); a multilevel prompt requires both lower- and higher-level thinking skills to address open-ended questions (Muilenburg & Berge, 2000; Milman, 2014). Figure 1 is a multilevel prompt from a 3000-level course in ESL (English as a second language) pedagogy: Students first identify and explain principles (lower-level but still open-ended tasks) before they apply those principles to construct, review, and adapt short lessons (higher-level tasks). Lower-level tasks are italicized in the prompt, while higher-level tasks are in bold.

Figure 1

Multilevel Prompt from 3000-Level Course

In this discussion, we are going to pull together all that we’ve learned about how we acquire vocabulary and how we can teach it more effectively.

First, spend some time reviewing the readings from the past two weeks, along with the six principles for effective language teaching (from week one).

Then, *identify* two concepts, research findings, or learning principles that you think are most important for you as you consider teaching vocabulary going forward. (Here, we are building on that personal philosophy of language and teaching that we began to construct in week 1).

Explain your two points briefly, referring to assigned readings as needed.

Finally, **apply** what you’ve learned to **construct** a short vocabulary lesson, following the instructions below. Be sure to review the instructions for the short lessons (link).

Post the following in this forum:

1. Your two vocabulary teaching points (with explanation and citations as needed).
2. Your lesson, including the statement of purpose, the one-paragraph description, links (if needed), and any materials you develop.

After posting (by 2/14), review all posted lessons. **Evaluate** these posts, asking questions about the lessons, discussing possible revisions, alternatives, or expansions. Also, **ask** for clarification if there are any points of confusion.

In designing this multilevel prompt, I wanted to contextualize the discussion for students. Thus, the prompt includes an introductory statement that locates the discussion within the structure of the course (“we are going to pull together all that we’ve learned about how we acquire vocabulary”). This statement uses first-person plural (*we*) to emphasize the relationship among class members (Delahunty, 2018). As rising professionals, students have joined a community of practice; the prompt concludes with a reminder that classmates are collaborators and colleagues.

Discussion Parameters

My original one-week post-and-reply format did not fit my revised prompts, so I adjusted the length and structure of discussions as well. I extended most discussions to two, three, or four weeks, inviting students to spend more time digesting material and reflecting before responding. With extended length, I asked students to make a minimum of six contributions according to three deadlines (initial, mid-point, and final). The three-deadline format requires students to connect to the discussion over several days, not all at the last minute.

With extended time, I implemented two alternatives to the prompt-post-reply discussion structure. One format, a *gallery forum*, requires students to post a product, which other students will review. The short lesson forum in Figure 1 illustrates this structure: Students post lesson plans, offer peer review, connect theory to practice, and find ways to revise their initial drafts. Gallery forums can also serve as a modified jigsaw exercise (see Aronson, 1978): Students (individually, in pairs, or in small groups) research a topic, which they teach to the rest of the class through posted presentations; the group as a whole must then draw from all presentations to solve a problem, answer questions, or integrate knowledge to complete a task.

A second type of forum is the *chain discussion*. In this structure, I post three to five initial threads, rather than a single prompt. Only one student replies to each initial thread, while others reply to the most recent post in the discussion, not the initial post. According to Roepnack (2019), these threaded chain discussions promote

deeper engagement and participation; responses flow from student to student, not from each student back to the instructor. The student-to-student response pattern encourages participants to “talk and think together” (Willemsen et al., 2018, p. 40) without triangulating back to the instructor. Figure 2 provides an example of instructions for a chain discussion in an introductory linguistics course.

Figure 2

Instructions for Chain Discussion

In this forum, I will be posting five topics related to phonetics and phonology. Rather than having each of you respond to each prompt, I am going to ask that one person begin each thread by responding directly to my post. Then, each subsequent post should respond to the previous post, not to my original post. Please address each other by name.

Some notes:

1. As in a typical conversation, shifts in topic are acceptable, as are questions. If you are going to shift the topic, please acknowledge the previous post first, and clarify your intention to move in a new direction.
2. If you feel a conversation is getting stuck, jump in with summary: “So, we’re saying that . . .” Then, perhaps suggest a new question.
3. Feel free to circle backwards to previous comments but do so politely and clearly.
4. Feel free to cite the text, link to additional sources, or use your own experiences/examples to enrich the discussion.
5. If you want to address something that is not covered in my five threads, feel free to start an entirely new thread.
6. Try to participate in at least two different topics (although you are welcome to join even more).

In the fall 2020 iteration of this chain discussion, there were as many as eight levels of nested response (in contrast to the two levels typical in prompt-post-reply discussions), with multiple branches embedded in responses to each initial post. Students posted five times or more on average, with individual students contributing 600 to over 1,000 words to the forum as a whole. Students provided links as evidence, challenged each other on occasion, and reported a growing appreciation and understanding of phonological concepts and their application within and beyond linguistics. In short, I was watching students in dialogue, both with each other and with course concepts.

Feedback and Follow-Up

Adjustments to prompts and discussion structure entailed preparation *before* discussions; I next considered what was happening *during* and *after* discussions. Initially, I had remained aloof during forums, providing feedback to individual students after discussions were complete. But it was clear the students needed more direction, especially early in the semester. Delahunty et al. (2014) suggest that instructors can guide discussions with “steering and instructing moves,” which are critical to shaping “interactions for learning purposes” (p. 64). Similarly, Roepnack (2019), drawing on research from Choi et al. (2005), recommends that instructors insert “scaffolding questions” (similar to the “steering moves” described by Delahunty, et al., 2014) to deepen students’ conceptual knowledge and engagement. Scaffolding questions, as the name implies, are questions that support learners who are in the process of knowledge-building: scaffolding enables them to continue or complete a task that would otherwise be beyond them, given their current skills or knowledge (Hammond, 2001). Targeted questions from instructors can restart stalled discussions by helping students challenge assumptions, make connections, offer evidence, or consider the implications of their assertions. Scaffolding questions also help students avoid groupthink by introducing counterexamples, scholars, or texts to challenge hastily drawn conclusions.

Figure 3 illustrates scaffolding questions adapted from a multi-thread discussion in an advanced grammar course. In this case, I intervened in a thread where students were analyzing the word “rememory” from Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*. Students had posted examples of Morrison’s use of the word, and most had agreed that the word was most likely a verb. With that consensus, students began to abandon the discussion.

Figure 3

Response With Scaffolding Questions

The linguist in me MUST remind you that we cannot “feel” that something is verb-like: we need some evidence. The sample sentences you quote all point clearly to a nominal use of the word: it follows both a possessive pronoun (*my*) and an indefinite article (*a*), clearly indications of noun-iness (which is 100% a word!).

BUT – she will use the word again, so be ready. What syntactic evidence is needed to show the word is a verb? What should you look for when you find the word again?

Effective scaffolding questions—posted before forum deadlines—offer students an opportunity to continue and to broaden the discussion. But discussions must eventually close. What happens to learning at that point? Could ongoing feedback and reflection create opportunities for students to integrate insights and conceptual

knowledge from the course as a whole? Composition research has highlighted the value of systematic and intentional reflection in supporting transfer of knowledge and skills to new contexts (see Yancey et al., 2014). As Adler-Kassner et al. (2016) note, “Reflection as a mode of inquiry encourages both self-monitoring and arousing mindfulness because writers are routinely theorizing about what and how they are learning” (p. 30). To help students consider what and how they are learning, I explored avenues for post-discussion reflection and application. For example, as part of a course review or even a final exam, I may ask students to select a point of confusion or an “aha!” moment from the course discussions and explain how those moments contributed to their learning in the course.

Asking students to summarize the highlights of a discussion is another post-discussion assignment option; if students have missed participation for some reason, a summary can serve as a make-up assignment. I have also required students to integrate and cite discussion insights from classmates in course projects and research assignments; doing so positions their work as legitimate contributions to scholarship. And, while I generally map out all discussions prior to the start of a semester, it is helpful to leave room for flexibility in later discussions: Students may need to revisit comments or conclusions from early discussions in light of new readings or experiences. In some classes, students can take responsibility for the direction of discussions by reviewing previous forums, assessing what was most helpful for their own learning, and drafting the initial threads for one or more forums toward the end of the term.

Redesigned Rubrics

Thoughtfully constructed rubrics alert students to what is valued by an instructor or a program, and they promote conversations about learning (see Turley & Gallagher, 2008). My early discussion rubrics, which focused on countable elements such as number of posts and grammatical accuracy, did neither of these things. In my redesigned rubrics, I still refer to minimal benchmarks such as word counts, but I have embedded them in a framework aligned with the purpose of the discussion. In order to learn via dialogue, students must participate (usually a minimum of five or six posts). To demonstrate substantive participation, students must contribute a minimum number of words across the whole discussion, and their participation must extend across several days. Students are encouraged to bring in links, references, and personal experiences, and while I do recommend editing posts for clarity, grammar issues no longer factor into the grade. Finally, I have renamed the discussion component of the course grade; it’s no longer “participation” or even “discussion.” Rather, I call it “engaging with content” or “joining the conversation,” names that highlight the purpose of the discussions.

Redesigning for Success: First-Year and Corequisite Courses

Redesigned structure, management, and grading have improved the quality of discussions in my upper-division online and hybrid courses, even in those I would ordinarily teach in person. But for first-year writers enrolled in corequisite courses, the redesigned structure is not enough to bridge them into successful discussions; lack of technical knowledge, lack of familiarity with college expectations, and lack of background in the discipline all factor into the challenges of asynchronous discussions with first-year, developmental, and corequisite students.

The in-person version of the first-year composition course I teach is difficult enough without additional online challenges: I follow a modified writing-about-writing approach (Downs & Wardle, 2007), which introduces students to writing (rhetoric) and language (linguistics) as both skills and objects for study. In this course, students read scholarly texts from composition studies and applied linguistics; they then write about the concepts they are learning in light of their own experiences, building metarhetorical awareness (of genres, conventions, contexts, and processes) and metalinguistic awareness in the process of doing so. In our in-person sessions, we have many opportunities to “talk about writing,” and I designed discussions to continue that talk when we shifted to online and hybrid formats.

Consider, for example, a gallery discussion meant to help students practice paraphrasing as a reading strategy. The multilevel prompt included both lower- and higher-order tasks: students were asked to *identify* a quote that most helped them understand a difficult concept (the notion of Discourse as defined by Gee, 1989), and then paraphrase it. After posting their quotes and paraphrases, they would *review* and *evaluate* the effectiveness of the posted paraphrase, suggesting areas of potential misunderstanding and possible improvement. Finally, they would revise their paraphrases. Unfortunately, without targeted scaffolding, the discussions did not move students past the initial post, as in this typical (but hypothetical) exchange:

Post 1: “Discourses are ways of being in the world, they are forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes.” A Discourse is our personality and the way we interact with other people.

Post 2: Great job, P. I agree with you all the way.

Had we done the exercise in a face-to-face classroom, I would have provided in-the-moment scaffolding to help students expand both the initial contribution and the response. In the classroom, I approach this sort of scaffolding through the lens of genre-based pedagogy, or the teaching-learning cycle, an application of systemic functional linguistics (SFL) developed initially for elementary literacy education in Australia (see Schleppegrel, 2004). Prior to the pandemic, however, I had not considered if or how that framework could be translated into scaffolding to support novice writers in online discussions.

A thorough overview of genre-based pedagogy is beyond the scope of this chapter (see Humphrey & Macnaught, 2011), but in brief, the approach offers literacy instruction through a sequenced introduction to academic genres—genres that students must both recognize and successfully produce in academic contexts. According to the theory, a genre is a “staged, goal-oriented social process” in which writers or speakers draw on recognizable linguistic resources to accomplish various discourse purposes (Martin, 2009, p. 10). Further, genre pedagogy aims to make the linguistic features and discourse purposes of genres explicit so that students can know what to expect when working within those genres. While learning to identify and produce academic genres, students build awareness of the role genres play in structuring academic and social relationships.

In my first-year writing courses, not only do students encounter genres such as the literacy narrative, expository profile, or argument analysis—each of which they write as part of a portfolio—but they also learn about less formal but nonetheless recognizable academic genres such as peer review, debate, and exploratory discussions. Thus, to build scaffolding for successful participation in online discussions, I needed to treat those discussions not merely as a tool for accomplishing course goals, but as a genre with recognizable—and learnable—features. These features can then be taught through the four phases of the teaching-learning cycle: context creation, deconstruction, joint construction, and independent construction. The extended time I have with first-year writers in corequisite courses gives me the space to work through all four phases and repeat them as needed.

Context Creation

To create context, instructors articulate the role of a target genre within a discipline: who uses it, when, and why. As a genre, asynchronous discussions have a purpose: scholars engage in them to share ideas, analyze experience, make connections, challenge assumptions or hierarchies, and build theories. Upper-division and graduate students participate in them to practice and develop disciplinary knowledge. Both scholars and students engage in asynchronous discussion as exploration, not performance. Thus, to create context, I must introduce asynchronous discussion as exploration, not performance or “knowledge-telling” (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987/2013), and I must assure students that I will show them how to participate, step by step, setting up the second phase of the cycle.

Deconstruction

In the second phase, deconstruction, instructors break down or deconstruct genre samples to identify and illustrate expected discourse moves, along with the linguistic resources needed to accomplish those moves. Deconstruction stems from the SFL notion that language accomplishes three overarching purposes, called “metafunctions”: the ideational, to represent information; the interpersonal, to negotiate relationships between participants; and the textual, to manage the structure of texts or discourse (Halliday & Matthiesen,

2013). Writers use linguistic resources to realize these metafunctions within genres, and during deconstruction, teachers demonstrate how the genre works: how ideas are represented, how relationships are negotiated, and how the texts are structured.

Consider the following examples of asynchronous discussion responses from a recent upper-division course I taught:

Student A: P! I also said that dialects are a “sub-category” of a language. This was the first thing that came to mind for me. I think your understanding of Discourse differs from mine, but I think your reasoning is interesting. Would you say that dialect can fit into a Discourse, but Discourse cannot fit into someone’s dialect?

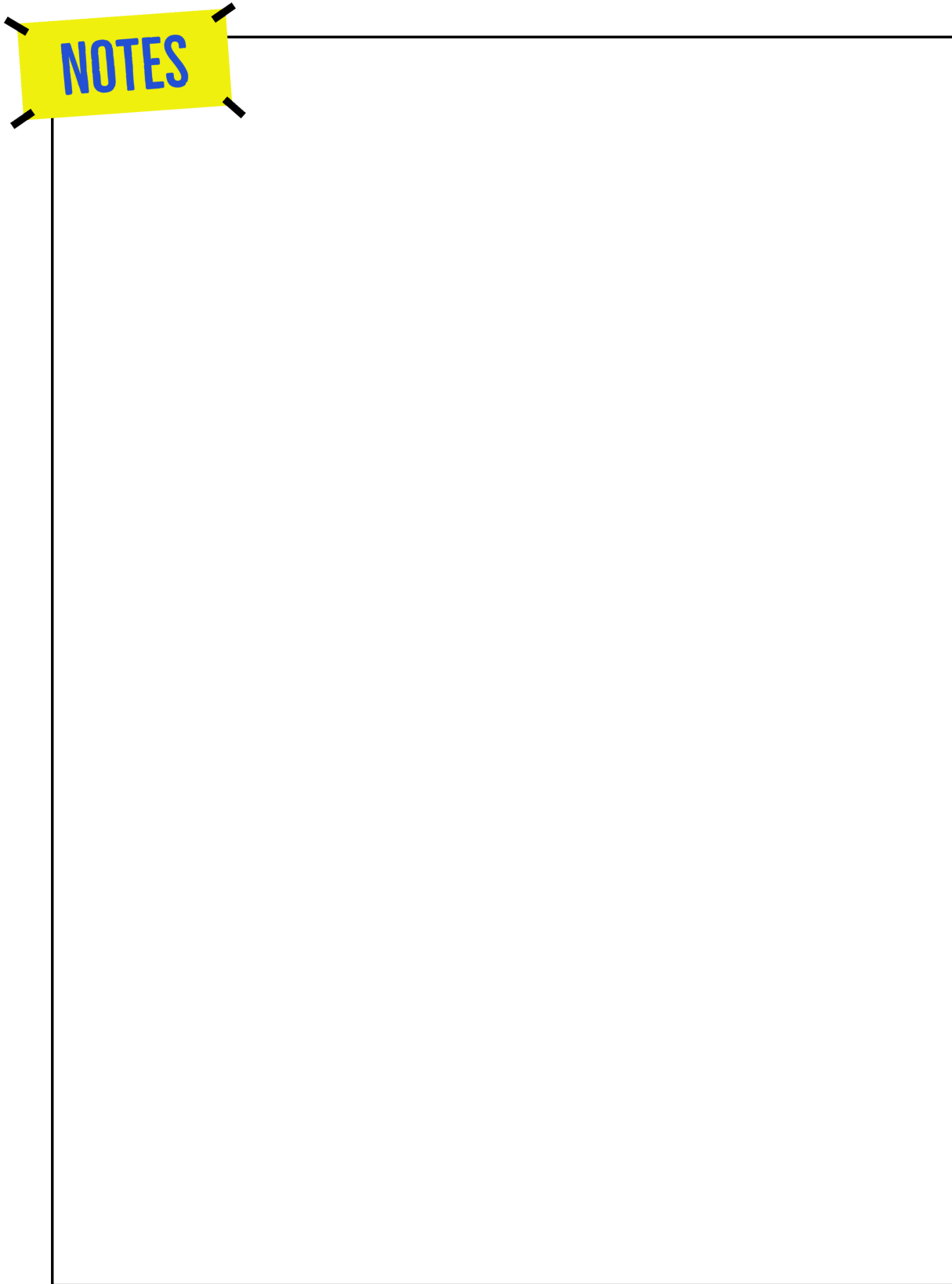
Student B: I had not yet thought about correcting someone’s speech/grammar/spelling as “gatekeeping,” that is a very interesting way to approach this situation. Would it only be considered gatekeeping if the correction is made in a derogatory manner? Or could it be a blanket concept, covering even innocuous corrections to someone who accidentally misspoke or miss-typed?

These examples illustrate expected conversational moves in a discussion:

1. The responder first **sums up or repeats** a concept from the previous post and **affirms** the contribution. Student A uses an embedded noun clause to repeat the concept: (“that dialects are a ‘sub-category’ of a language.”), and the **adverb** “also” to affirm it (“I also thought that . . .”). Student B uses **a gerund** (“correcting . . .”) to restate the initial comment, and then affirms the value of that comment (“that is a very interesting way . . .”)
2. The responder may **signal a disagreement or contradiction**. Student A deploys a verb (“differ”) to accomplish this.
3. The responder attempts to **extend the conversation by asking a question**. Both students pose questions with the modal “would,” suggesting an exploratory stance in relation to the concept. The questions are designed to clarify **definitions**: Student A asks, “would you say . . . ?” while Student B **offers options** connected by “or.”

To initiate deconstruction, teachers take actual samples to analyze (with student permission), or construct exemplars relevant to course content. Here, for example, is a sample I created to deconstruct with first-year writers:

Post 2: Hey J, I thought the same thing when I first read this. I thought he was talking about personality. But two paragraphs later, Gee starts talking about how we acquire a Discourse, and he uses words like “enculturation,” and “interaction with people who have mastered the discourse.” That doesn’t sound like personality to me. Would you say, for example, that you get your personality from the people you are around, or that you hang around them because of your personality? So, I don’t think it means personality. What do you think?



As I break this sample down (either via video or during a synchronous class session), I construct a simple chart listing rhetorical moves on one side and possible language structures on the other, as in Figure 4.

Figure 4
Genre Moves and Structures Chart

| Moves | Structures/Frames |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Affirm and Repeat | I think/thought the same thing about _____ I agree that _____ I also thought that _____ I see your point that _____ |
| Repeat to clarify | Are you saying that _____? When you say “_____,” do you mean _____? |
| Contradict or challenge | But . . . However, . . . I read this differently. I thought _____. Can you show us where the author says that _____? What about when the writer says _____? |
| Give examples | Like . . . Such as . . . |
| State an opinion | For me, To me, I think . . . |
| Question | Would you say . . . ? Do you think . . . ? |
| Conclude | So . . . |
| Invite | What do you think? Do you think that makes sense? You mentioned _____; could you tell us more about that? |

| | |
|-----------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Connect | <p>Your answer reminds me of _____.</p> <p>This sounds like _____.</p> <p>Do you think _____ and _____ are talking about the same thing?</p> |
| Summarize | <p>We seem to agree that _____, but we aren't sure about _____.</p> |

Students continue to build the chart as more texts are deconstructed, and then they use the chart to help them identify and annotate discourse moves in other sample posts and responses.

Joint Construction

In the next phase, joint construction, students collaborate with other students or the instructor to practice the genre features they are learning. For example, I might post the following sample for students to consider:

Gee says we “take on a particular role that others will recognize.” I think he’s talking about jobs—like the leader, the class clown, the brown-noser and stuff like that. It’s just the part you play.

Students then receive these instructions:

Imagine you saw this post in a class discussion. Talk about the post with your partner (by phone, email, or Zoom chat). Then, using your chart as a guide, write a response that **repeats**, **affirms**, **challenges**, and **invites** another response.

For additional joint construction practice, I might post a sample dialogue like this (which includes a reference to Swales, 2016):

Initial Post: In the article we read by John Swales, he defines a discourse community. He says his original definition needs to be updated: “Fine, but we now need to emphasize the roles of new digital channels, such as emails, blogs, tweets, etc., and we also need to stress that without any means of intercommunication of any kind, there is no real community. Subscribers to *Le Monde* may share certain characteristics, but they do not form a discourse community” (23). So, Swales is basically saying most of our communication today is online, and that pretty much makes the whole world a community. We are even communicating online for this class, so we are a community, too.

Response 1: I agree with you! It’s cool how you brought in our class and how we are a community.

Response 2: I think you are right that most of us communicate online a lot these days. But I am wondering why he says subscribers to *Le Monde* aren’t a discourse community. Is he saying that you have to talk back and forth, not just read the same thing, to be a discourse community? If that’s right, then is it true that the whole world is a community? That doesn’t seem to fit with the other descriptions of discourse communities, at least not to me. Help!

Response 3: I like this quote, too, and I am glad you reminded us that Swales is updating a definition. But I wonder if adding in digital communication really means that we are all one big discourse community? Or is that actually what you are saying? Do you have to use digital communications a certain way to be a community? But I think you are right about our class. So, maybe the question is what's the difference between our class (a community) and subscribers of *Le Monde* (not a community)?

Students would then receive the following instructions:

In this exchange, identify at least one affirmation, clarification, challenge, and invitation. Which response do you think will help the group understand Swales better? Which response is most likely to end the conversation? How would you improve that response?

Independent Construction

The final stage of the process is independent construction, in which students are composing in the genre for themselves. Independent construction, of course, does not mean that scaffolding disappears; rather, instructors shift to the sort of scaffolding questions that characterize the upper-division discussions. Also, if needed, the various phases of deconstruction and joint construction may be revisited; students can be reminded to include specific rhetorical moves in their responses or to analyze and annotate their own posts and set goals for improvement.

Critical Thinking and Sentence Frames

My application of genre-based pedagogy, particularly deconstruction and joint construction activities, may remind some readers of the templates in Graff and Birkenstein's 2008 composition text, *They Say, I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing*. That text has faced skepticism over the years: Templates may encourage a perfunctory, "fill-in-the-blank" approach to discussions. Benay (2008) summarizes these concerns: Templates are formulaic and could conceivably circumvent the thinking process. Within the context of genre-based pedagogy, however, attention to the language of rhetorical moves can serve as gateways to effective participation in discussions, provided that instructors also press students toward independent construction and reflection. When thoughtless or perfunctory comments arise in early discussions—as they surely will—instructors can interject scaffolding questions. As with discussions in upper-division courses, instructors must manage discussions strategically for success (Delahunty, 2018). Ultimately, if the discussion forums feed into other course projects, including application and reflection activities, students will find incentives for more thoughtful contributions.

Genre-Based Pedagogy Outside the English Department

Instructors need not be applied linguists to help students deconstruct target texts, although some familiarity with terminology is helpful. To apply the process across disciplines, faculty can begin by collecting examples of effective posts and highlighting the rhetorical moves in them: making a claim, identifying problems, proposing solutions, introducing evidence, suggesting alternatives, etc. Using this list, faculty can note preferred linguistic structures (i.e., use present tense to summarize published research; use third person to make generalizations about data). Once instructors have walked through deconstruction for themselves, they can select the most critical features to introduce in class.

Of course, cross-disciplinary collaborations can also support the teaching-learning cycle in first-year gateway courses. Existing writing in the disciplines (WID) or writing across the curriculum (WAC) programs may offer opportunities for collaborative teaching, and some institutions allow upper-division students to serve as writing fellows or embedded tutors in first-year courses with extensive writing requirements, including asynchronous discussions. Faculty can leverage these partnerships to develop deconstruction, joint construction, and independent construction activities for students in online courses. Cross-disciplinary groups might also consider reading and discussing an applied linguistic analysis of disciplinary genres; Biber (2006), Hyland (2005), and Feak and Swales (2011) are accessible choices.

Resilient Pedagogy: Practical Concerns

Implementing redesigned asynchronous discussions, whether in first-year writing courses or upper-division courses, can be daunting, particularly during times of uncertainty such as a worldwide pandemic. If you are new to online teaching—or implementing a significant redesign—start slowly: target just two or three rhetorical moves to teach first-year writers, and assign just two or three discussions across the course.

I also recommend assigning an ungraded discussion during the first two weeks of class. As students introduce themselves, ask them to discuss how they interact online outside of class—via TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Discord, or any other platform. This introductory forum allows students to familiarize themselves with the logistics of posting and responding, and more importantly, it initiates phase one of the teaching-learning cycle: Students begin to view online conversations as genres, creating a context for discussions that follow.

Finally, schedule time to monitor assigned discussions. While I have encountered instructors who check discussions daily, that level of oversight does not fit my schedule. Instead, I check participation, answer questions, and pose scaffolding questions at regular intervals during discussions, usually once or twice a week. If I find students have not logged in to the discussion, I post an announcement or send a quick reminder. By blocking time on the calendar to manage discussion work, I can stay on top of grading, incorporate discussion

insights and concerns into ongoing instruction, and model strategies for success, particularly for first-year students.

Conclusion

Carefully designed and scaffolded discussions can support critical thinking and the development of disciplinary knowledge, both in upper-level and first-year courses. The challenge for instructors teaching in uncertain times is how to structure the design (in advance) and the scaffolding (in process) to support learners. Delahunty (2018) describes the challenge this way:

There is much potential in a well-designed task for new understandings to be collaboratively explored, and even more so when a skilled lecturer is mediating. However, if discussion around the task is not mediated, students tend to revert to the safety of what they already know, and the opportunity to co-construct knowledge may be lost. (p. 20)

We “mediate” discussions, as Delahunty suggests, when we redesign asynchronous forums for our students—and when we work alongside them in those discussions. Thus, even in uncertain times and novel contexts, we support them in crossing disciplinary thresholds and joining disciplinary dialogue.

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