
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN QUEENSLAND

**What encourages student participation in online
discussions?**

A Dissertation submitted by

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Abstract

Distance learning began as a means of catering to students who needed to learn in isolated, individual learning environments but, more recently, has been evolving to offer an interactive and collaborative learning environment supported by Computer Mediated Communication (CMC). However, research has found that not all online discussions are productive for learning and that simply making discussions boards accessible to students does not achieve the interactive and collaborative experience for which they are promoted. One of the first requirements needed for successful online discussions is student participation. This study sought to identify what encourages student participation in online discussions.

Motivation and social presence were investigated in this study because they have been identified as two concepts that assist in the encouragement of student participation. Motivation assists participation because it is the process whereby goal-directed activity is both instigated and sustained, and social presence because it has been found to increase interaction.

This study sought information regarding what motivated or demotivated student participation in online discussions and what Social Presence behaviours students found most important for maintaining their desire to participate in online discussions. It also investigated relationships among, and changes in, student state motivation, student sense of social presence and student perceived sources of motivation and demotivation across the course of a semester. Finally, students' opinion about their motivation, sense of

social presence and reasons for participation were investigated through open-ended questions.

A Sequential Exploratory design was used to first obtain breadth of data (quantitative) through online surveys (n = 60 participants). This included a test/retest design. Depth of the data (qualitative) was then explored through interviews that were based on the results of the quantitative data analysis (n= 14 participants).

The main findings of this study were that students' sense of social presence changed significantly across the course of the semester and this change was a decrease in sense of social presence for 50% of the students. Context and Social factors were mentioned more frequently as both motivators and demotivators for participation than Structure/format factors. Correlations revealed a significant relationship between state motivation and social presence. Finally, open-ended questions generated a number of major themes that help to promote participation.

All of these findings have implications for teachers and designers of online courses. They show that many factors influence student participation and that some of these factors may change over the course of a semester. Teachers and designers should use this information when designing and implementing courses to not only initiate student participation, but also to maintain participation throughout the course.

Certification of Dissertation

I certify that the ideas, experimental work, results, analyses and conclusions reported in this dissertation are entirely my own effort, except where otherwise acknowledged. I also certify that the work is original and has not been previously submitted for any other award.

Signature of Candidate

Date

Endorsement

Signature of Supervisors

Date

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