



Threaded Discussions in the Online and Hybrid Learning Format: An Examination of their Effectiveness from the Students' Perspective

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Abstract

With more and more institutions of higher education offering approximately 30% of their courses in the online format, there is an ongoing effort to improve the delivery and quality of course instruction. This study focused on one aspect of online course design in particular – namely, threaded discussions. Nominal and ordinal data were gathered through a researcher-developed, QuestionPro 23-item survey. Efforts were made to draw comparisons between instructional effectiveness and student appreciation of threaded discussions in both the Fully Online and the Hybrid format. Results indicate that students generally enjoy engaging in the required threaded discussions but are somewhat neutral about their effectiveness and usefulness. When given the option between a written assignment or a threaded discussion, students showed a clear preference for threaded discussions. The study results also indicate a greater preference for the use of threaded discussions in the fully online format as opposed to the hybrid format; however, when students are confronted the option of with taking a course in either the traditional, face-to-face format or an online or hybrid format, a definite preference was shown for the traditional course format.

Keywords: Online learning, Blended learning, Hybrid course, Full online course, Synchronous, Asynchronous, Learning Management Systems (LMS).

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INTRODUCTION

Online learning, since its early beginnings, has included two formats for faculty-to-student interaction: Synchronous and Asynchronous. ‘Synchronous learning’ refers to a learning environment where everyone takes part at the same time. Before the advent of online learning, the classroom lecture was an example of synchronous learning in a face-to-face environment, with learners and teachers all participating in the same place at the same time. In the online learning environment, synchronous instruction can be replicated through Chat Rooms and real-time video connections like SKYPE, Wimba and Blackboard’s Collaborate. ‘Asynchronous’ means that, although the inputs are posted in near real time, the distribution of the students’ availability spreads out their interactions over time. The postings cumulatively build on each other even if their inputs are not always sequential. By definition, a threaded discussion is an online, asynchronous, usually faculty-led, student exchange forum. By nature of their construction, interactions in threaded discussions should be as immediate as any verbal discussions in a classroom. Threaded discussions, when done correctly, however, should be more deliberate and insightful than a chat room or real-time video exchange. By contrast, synchronous applications result in exchanges that tend to be fast, shallow and not fully thought-through (Bouchat, 2006).

The threaded discussion platforms that are built into any of the Learning Management Systems (LMS), such as eCollege, BlackBoard Desire2Learn, reinforces the academic discussion and Socratic method by saving all postings for later review, reflection and discussion. These LMS systems are also used to deliver course content in a hybrid format along with the fully online format. Hybrid or Blended are names commonly used to describe courses in which some traditional face-to-face instruction has been replaced by online learning activities. Although the definition of a ‘hybrid course’ differs from institution to institution, it is generally accepted that the amount of online instruction should be in the range of 30-40%. The purpose of a hybrid course is to take advantage of the best features of both face-to-face and online learning. The fundamental difference between a hybrid and a fully online course, aside from the face-to-face instruction, is in the use and applications of the various instructional tools available in the LMS platform. Generally speaking, hybrid courses tend to do less of the synchronous instructional activities, such as live video and chat rooms. They do however, make extensive use of other instructional tools like dropboxes, gradebooks and asynchronous applications like threaded discussions.

This threaded discussion structure should allow students to easily navigate, participate, and reference items during the discussion. A number of studies have been completed in recent years comparing the online learning format to the traditional, face-to-face classroom. Most of these studies reported that the online learning format compared favorably in areas of interest, motivation and student academic success (Shelley et al., 2008; Swartz et al., 2010). Seventy-seven percent of academic leaders rate the learning outcomes in online education as the same as, or superior to, those achieved face-to-face (Sloan Report, 2012). A report on discussion boards and online learning from the University of Oregon (2010) indicates that online educators who use threaded discussion boards estimate that their interaction with students can be three times greater than in traditional face-to-face student discussions.

Threaded discussions will certainly increase in usage for both the connectivity of online cyber students and the learning outcomes and assessment of the individual course content. All of the major LMS systems in use in higher education today offer extensive tools, applications and the functionality to develop high-quality and effective threaded discussions in both fully online and hybrid courses. It is the responsibility of the course instructor to post and design threaded discussion forums that provide provocative questions or scenarios. This should be followed by a student’s initial posting and then ongoing interaction with their classmates. The course instructor, after setting up a logical pre-planned forum that is tailored to each discussion, then becomes the lead facilitator who needs to set up a logical pre-planned forum that is tailored for each discussion. It is ultimately the responsibility of the course instructor to make the necessary discussion summaries and student evaluations and assessments. The students’ contribution to the exchange is also similar to that of a traditional in-classroom lesson, where the students are actively engaged in the

discussion. In other words, students prepare beforehand to discuss the topics intelligently and make an effort to participate by directly addressing the questions as posted. Students should build upon other students' inputs, and further extend the discussion through reasoned debate. Threaded discussions tend to be more productive when they include relevant personal experiences and additional references.

Asynchronous threaded discussions basically alter the typical course-related time factor. A traditional classroom discussion on a given topic among students may require from a few minutes to an hour; yet, that same group of students in an online or hybrid class might take seven days or more to complete the same discussion asynchronously. The positive aspect of the online threaded discussion is that it affords busy students the opportunity to integrate their academic course requirements with their personal and professional lives.

In a study that drew some comparisons between traditional classroom discussions and online threaded discussions (Meyer, 2003), it was found that students liked the expanded time element of the threaded discussion; however, they also occasionally became frustrated by the length of time over which they were required to check and recheck the postings as they accumulated. Students concluded that an online forum allowed them to prepare better responses as well as repost and modify their positions; however, they complained that they sometimes lost interest due to the drawn-out nature of the communication and commitment to the forum. The students also indicated an appreciation for the online threaded discussion in that it allowed them a chance to freely have their say and defend their position(s). The students in this study also appreciated being able to think and reflect before posting in the online format. Students and instructors also appreciated being able to participate in an ongoing discussion online as opposed to the sometimes-frequent scenario of the class ending before the discussion had reached its conclusion (Raleigh, 2000).

When correctly constructed, threaded discussion forums and/or discussion boards should be viewed by students as a community. For the discussion to be effective and meaningful, the entire class must be fully engaged and become major contributors to the discussion. By their very nature, threaded discussions create the community or "virtual gathering" necessary for the construction of knowledge (Kymes, 2005). In a study done by Wosley and Grisham (2006), it was determined that the quality of student responses in threaded discussions build better learning communities than those in the traditional face-to-face classroom discussions. A similar study by Bouchat (2006) reported that threaded discussions can create discourse among students that actually builds knowledge and keeps their learning focused. Other positive factors include the anonymity that it affords to students, which may promote honesty and more personal responses. Also, if the instructor wishes, messages can be composed, posted and revised as needed. Often, as the discussion evolves, students will want to modify or change their previous positions on a topic.

As online learning – in both fully online and hybrid course offerings – has become increasingly commonplace in higher-education academic programs, national projections are showing that they currently comprise approximately 30-35% of university course offerings on average. The 2012 Survey of Online Learning found that the number of students taking at least one online course has now surpassed 6.7 million. Thirty-two percent of higher-education students now take at least one course online (Allen & Seaman, 2012). With this obvious trend toward more academic offerings in the fully online format, there will certainly be more and more research done that examines the effectiveness and the academic integrity of this learning format.

There has been an ongoing debate concerning the effectiveness and overall student learning that results from threaded discussions in both fully online and hybrid course offerings. One of the negative aspects pointed out by researchers is the lack of normal human interaction, i.e., facial expressions and physical gestures associated with regular discussions. In addition, long extended threaded discussions can become overwhelming and hard for some students to follow. These students may begin to feel detached and uninvolved in the discussion, thereby causing low participation (Kreijns et al., 2002). Chen and Zimitat (2004), in addition to finding a greater degree of overall participation in threaded discussions than in traditional classroom discussions, also found that participation was often limited to the instructor's basic requirements. In other words, many of the participants did just the minimum number of requirements to

satisfy the instructor’s assessment of the thread. Vonderwall (2002) found that students frequently chose not to add anything new to the discussion because their ideas were similar to those, which were already posted. It seems that the threaded discussion, by its very nature, may encourage students to agree with each other and not challenge the conventional thinking or popular theme in an online discussion (Kanuka, 2006). It was the intent of this study to ascertain students’ perception of the effectiveness and usefulness of threaded discussions in both the fully online and the hybrid formats.

DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Sample and Population

The 23-question survey was administered to students at the graduate and undergraduate levels in two universities. Participants included students from a Private University with an enrollment of over 6,000 students and one State University with an enrollment of over 7,000 students. Of the 414 students who were given the survey, 385 completed it; thus, a completion rate of 92% was achieved. Ninety percent of the participants completed the survey using a desktop or laptop computer; 4% of the participants completed the survey on a Smartphone and 6% on a selected Tablet.

The first three questions were demographic in nature. Of the 414 students completing the survey, 325 (78.50%) were full-time and 89 (21.50%) part-time; there were 92 (22.28%) male and 322 (77.72%) female. The majority of participants were graduate students (31.31%) with the remainder distributed almost equally from freshmen through seniors. A small percentage (2.67%) of doctoral students also completed the survey. The breakdown of the current academic level of participants is displayed in Figure 1.

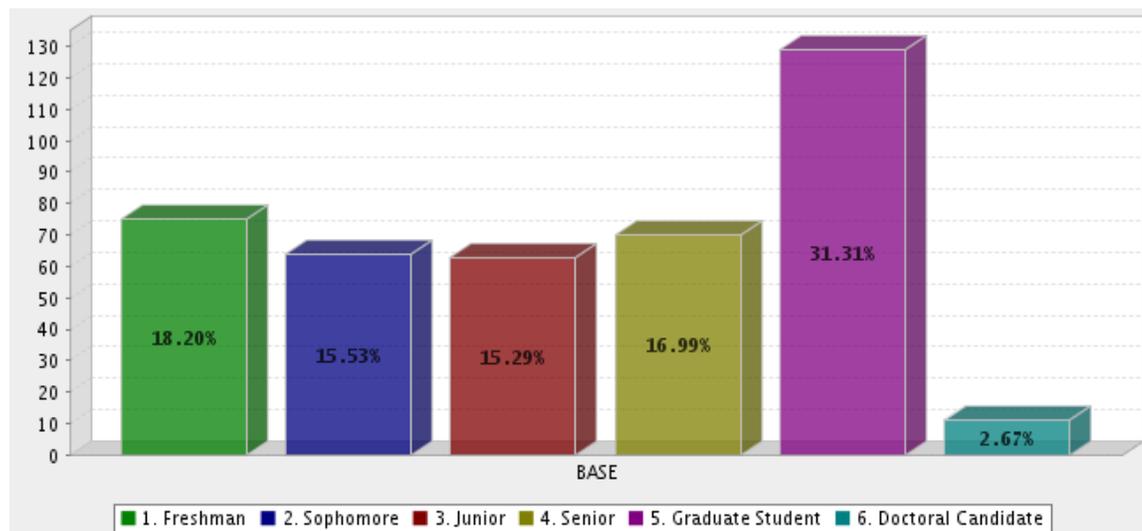


Figure 1: Academic levels of survey participants

The data for this research study was gathered from a 23-question structured survey designed by the researchers. The survey was developed using QuestionPro, which also provides data analysis and interpretation (see Appendix A). The survey was used in a pilot project in the summer of 2013 and refined for this study. In addition, it was reviewed and validated by the Internal Review Board (IRB) experts at both participating institutions. Further analyses were performed using SPSS and Excel. Participants were invited to participate through instructor solicitation and via emails. The students’ involvement in the study was completely voluntary and autonomous.

Only those participants who had participated in one or more Fully Online course(s) and one or more Hybrid course(s) were targeted for this study. Questions 5 and 6 asked participants how many Fully Online and Hybrid courses they had taken, respectively. If the participant answered “0” to either or both of these questions, then the survey ended and took them to a “Thank You” message. The remainder of the survey dealt directly with aspects of threaded discussions in course applications and student learning. There was a final, open-ended, qualitative question that allowed participants to provide written comments on their personal experiences with threaded discussions in online or hybrid courses.

This study focused on eight major research questions (RQ):

RQ#1: Do university-level students have a preference in regard to the content and design of threaded discussions in a Fully Online or Hybrid course format?

RQ#2: Do university-level students feel that threaded discussions add to or enhance their learning of the subject matter in Fully Online and Hybrid courses?

RQ#3: How much time (in minutes) do university level-students spend on the preparation and completion of threaded-discussion-related assignments in Fully Online and Hybrid courses?

RQ#4: When given a choice between written assignments or threaded-discussion-related assignments in a Fully Online or a Hybrid course, which do university-level students prefer?

RQ#5: Do university-level students enjoy the use of threaded discussions in Fully Online or Hybrid courses?

RQ#6: How useful do university-level students find threaded discussions in Fully Online and Hybrid courses?

RQ#7: How willing are university-level students to schedule a Fully Online or a Hybrid course when the instructor is known to use a relatively high percentage of threaded discussion assignments?

RQ#8: If university-level students are given the option of taking the same course in a Fully Online or Hybrid format, as opposed to the traditional face-to-face format, which will they choose?

All of the quantitative data and analysis in this study is displayed in Tables and Figures. The written responses in the final, open-ended question were examined, and the participants’ responses were grouped and discussed based on consistency and theme.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Survey questions 1 through 4 were demographic in nature. Questions 5 and 6 determined which participants would complete the entire questionnaire. Question 5 asked, “How many fully online courses have you taken to date in your academic program?” One hundred nineteen students (28.67%) responded 0, 152 (36.63%) had taken 1-3, 88 (21.20%) had taken 4-7, 25 (6.02%) had taken 8-10, and 31 (7.47%) had taken more than 10 fully online courses.

Question number 6 asked, “How many Hybrid (partially online) courses have you taken to date in your academic program?” One hundred forty three (48.64%) responded 0, 107 (36.39%) had taken 1-3, 28 (9.86%) had taken 4-7, 7 (2.38%) had taken 8-10 and 8 (2.72%) had taken more than 10 fully online courses. Even with a clearly higher number of students taking Fully Online as opposed to Hybrid courses, for the

purpose of this study, they needed to have experience with both course formats. Based on responses to questions 5 and 6, the sample of participants was reduced to 125 who qualified to complete all 22 survey questions (n=125).

Survey questions 7 and 8 sought to identify a preference in threaded discussion content and design (RQ#1). The students were given six possible options:

1. Threaded discussions looking for a specific answer
2. Your opinion based on an instructor’s example or scenario
3. Your response to a controversial issue
4. A role-playing scenario that puts you in a decision-making position
5. I like all of them about the same.
6. I really don’t like any of these formats.

Question 7 focused on Fully Online courses. Of the 125 responses, options 1, 2 and 3 were very close selections; Option #1 was selected by 27 (21.43%), Option #2 was selected by 25 (19.84%), and Option #3 was selected by 25 (19.84%). Option #4, *role-playing*, was selected by 12 (9.52%) participants. The option most commonly selected was #5, *I like them all about the same*, with 33 (26.19%) participants. The option selected least was #6, *I really don’t like any*, with 4 (3.17%) participants.

Question 8 focused on Hybrid courses. Of the 124 responses, the breakdown varied widely; Option #1 was selected by 30 (23.62%), Option #2 was selected by 26 (20.47%) and Option #3 was selected by 18 (14.17%). Option #4, *role-playing*, was selected by 15 (11.81%) participants. The option selected most was #5, *I like them all about the same*, with 34 (26.77%) participants, while the option selected least was #6, *I really don’t like any*, with 4 (3.15%) participants.

In both formats – Fully Online and Hybrid – students showed a clear tendency to like all potential threaded discussion options about the same; (Fully Online=26.19%) (Hybrid=26.77%). It was also evident that most students like one or all of the 1-5 options with only slightly more than 3% selecting Option #6, indicating that they did not like any (See Figure 2)

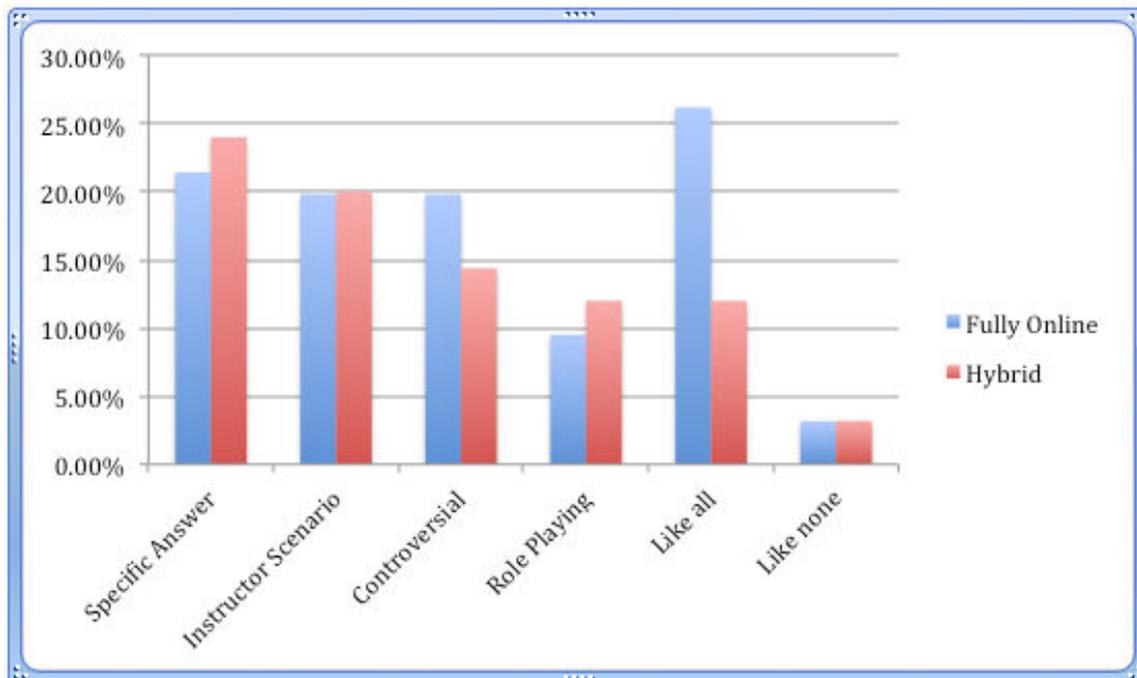


Figure 2: Given the choice of Threaded Discussions in a Fully Online or Hybrid course, as a student, which format would you prefer?

Survey questions 9 and 10 asked, “In your opinion, based on your prior coursework, do threaded discussions add to or enhance your learning of the subject matter (RQ#2)?” Question 9 applied to Fully Online courses, and there was a clear preference with 53 (42.52%) selecting option number 4 –*To some degree, somewhat helpful*. (See Figure 3.1)

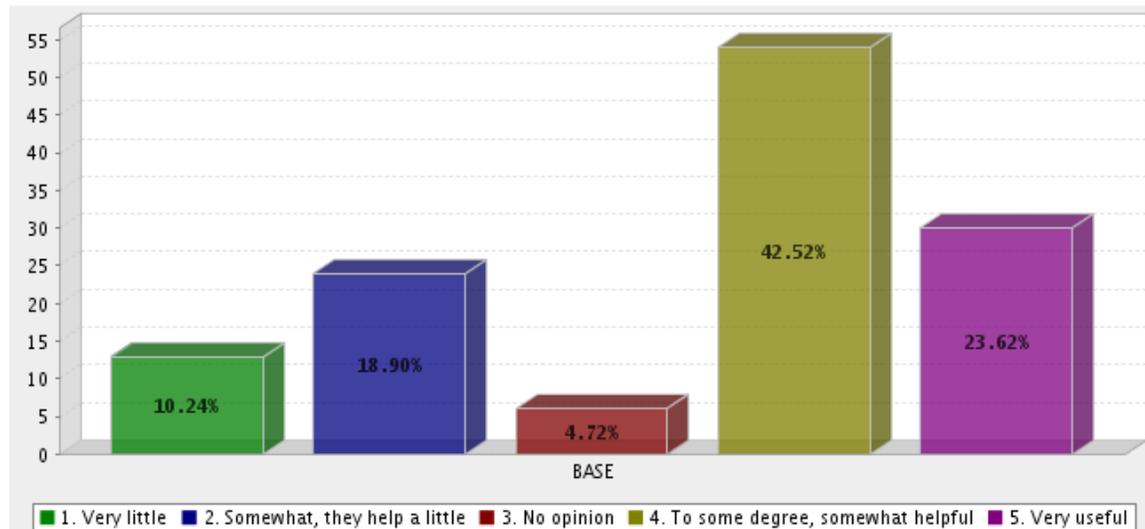


Figure 3.1: Do Threaded Discussions add to or enhance your learning of the subject matter in a Fully Online course?

Question ten applied to Hybrid courses, again a preference was evident with 39 (31.50%) selecting option number 4 –*To some degree, somewhat helpful*. However, there was also a strong response to *Very Useful* (option #5) in Hybrid courses (23, 18.90%) and Fully Online courses (29, 23.62%). Students in both formats – Fully Online (66.14%) and Hybrid (50.40%) – either thought that the threaded discussions were somewhat helpful or very useful (See Figure 3.2).

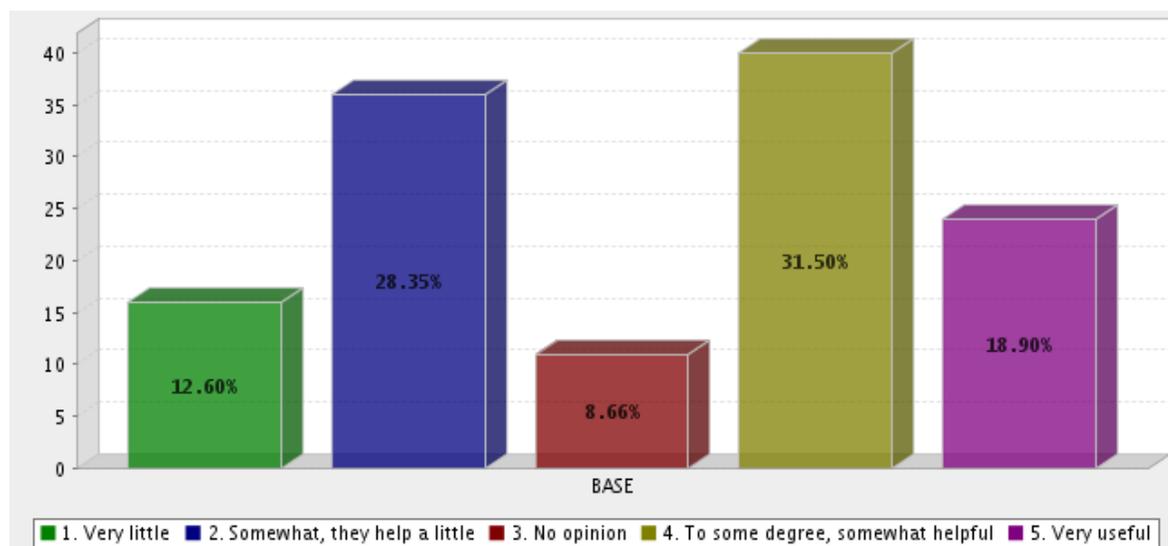


Figure 3.2: Do Threaded Discussions add to or enhance your learning of the subject matter in a Hybrid course?

Survey questions 11 and 12 asked: “In your opinion, based on your prior coursework, how much time do you spend preparing and completing assignments for each threaded discussion (RQ#3)?” The continuum ranged from 0 to 61 minutes and longer. The amount of time most frequently selected in both formats was 31-45 minutes. In question #11, 35 (28%) participants selected this option. In question #12, 37 (29.60%) participants selected this option in the Hybrid format. Apparently, the majority of students spend more time on preparing their responses to Threaded Discussion assignments in the Fully Online format. In Fully Online courses, 62.4% of the students indicated that they spend from 31 to 61 minutes in preparation. In Hybrid courses, 53.6% of the students indicated that they spend between 31 minutes and 61 minutes in preparation (See Table 2).

Table 2: Time spent on Threaded Discussion assignments

Time Spent on Threaded Discussion Assignments	Fully Online Course		Hybrid Course	
	Number	%	Number	%
0-15 minutes	14	11.20%	21	16.80%
16-30 minutes	32	25.60%	33	26.40%
31-45 minutes	35	28%	37	29.60%
46-60 minutes	23	18.40%	15	12%
61 minutes or longer	20	16%	15	12%

Question 13 ask, “Given the choice between a regular written assignment and a threaded discussion in a Fully Online course, as a student, which form of assessment would you prefer? (RQ#4)” There was a strong preference for the threaded discussion with 51 (41.13%) selecting that option. Forty-three students (34.68%) indicated that they would prefer the written assignment. Twenty-seven (21.77%) indicated that they liked both forms of assignment about the same.

Question 14 asked, “Given the choice between a regular written assignment and a threaded discussion in a Hybrid course, as a student, which form of assessment would you prefer?” Again, there was a strong preference for the threaded discussion over the written assignment; however, the preference was somewhat less than that which was indicated in the Fully Online course, with 49 (39.20%) selecting that option. Forty-two (33.60%) indicated that they would prefer the written assignment. Twenty-three (18.40%) indicated that they liked both forms of assignment about the same (See Table 3).

Questions 15 and 16 examined the level of student satisfaction with the use of threaded discussions in a Fully Online or a Hybrid course (RQ#5). Students responded to the

Table 3: Given the choice between a regular Written Assignment and a Threaded Discussion, as a student, which form would you prefer?

Questions #13 & 14 Options	Fully Online Number (n=124)	Fully Online Percentage	Hybrid Number (n=125)	Hybrid Percentage	Combined Number (n=249)	Combined Percentage
1. I really don't like either form of assessment	3	2.42%	3	2.40%	6	2.41%
2. I think they are about the same, I really don't have a preference	27	21.77%	23	18.40%	50	20%
3. No opinion	0	0%	8	6.40%	8	.032%
4. I would prefer the Written Assignment	43	34.68%	42	33.60%	85	34.12%
5. I would prefer the Threaded Discussion	51	41.13%	49	39.20%	100	40.16%

Question concerning Fully Online courses, indicating that the majority (38, 30.65%) enjoyed them somewhat at times. Thirty-three (26.61%) indicated that they enjoyed them to some degree. Twenty-one (16.94%) of the participants indicated that they enjoyed them very little, or really did not like them. Twenty-five (20.16%) of the students indicated that they always enjoyed the threaded discussions in the Fully Online course. Only 21 (16.94%) responded by saying that they really did not like threaded discussions. (See Figure 4.1)

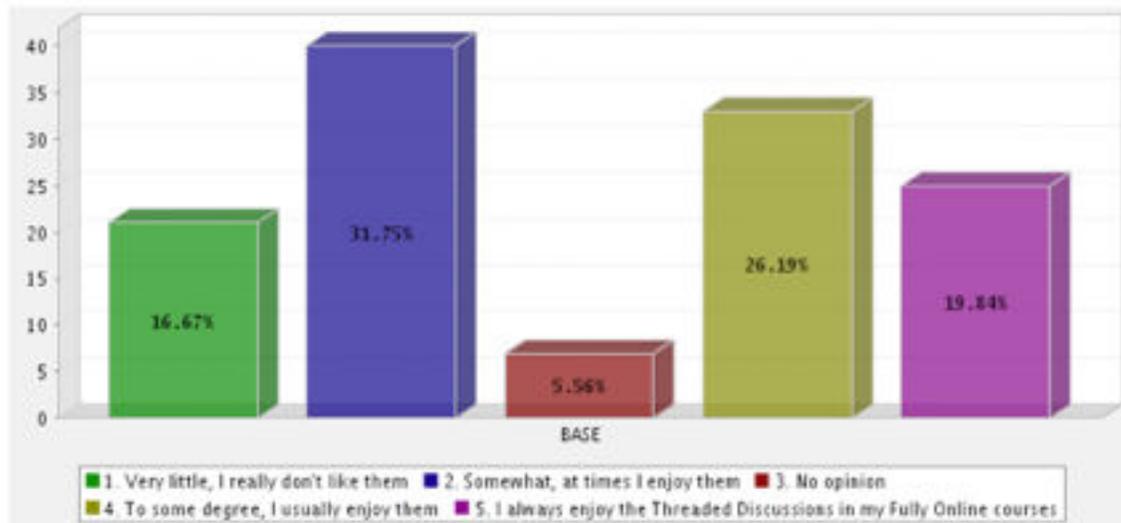


Figure 4.1: In your opinion, based on your prior coursework, do you enjoy the use of Threaded Discussions in a Fully Online course?

Based on students' responses to the question concerning the Hybrid courses, the majority, (33, 25.61%) responded that they usually enjoyed them. Thirty-two (25.81%) indicated that they enjoyed them somewhat at times. Twenty-four (19.35%) indicated that they enjoyed them very little, or really did not like them. Nineteen (15.32%) indicated that they always enjoyed the threaded discussions in Hybrid courses. Sixteen (12.90%) had no opinion on the question (See Figure. 4.2).

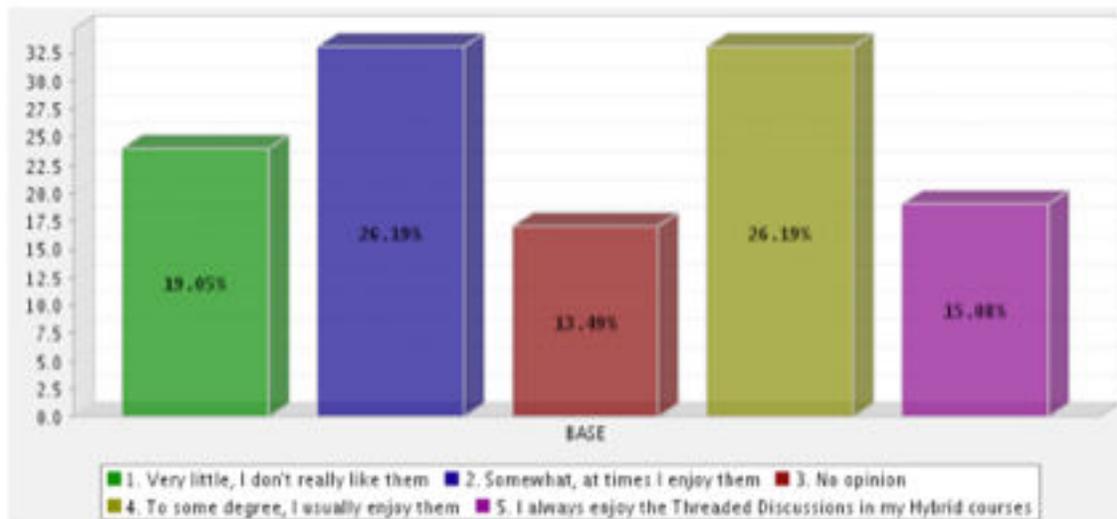


Figure 4.2: In your opinion, based on your prior coursework, do you enjoy the use of Threaded Discussions in a Hybrid course?

Questions 17 and 18 examined students' attitudes toward the use of threaded discussions in Fully Online and Hybrid courses (RQ#6). Students could select from the following responses: 1) A waste of time, 2) Somewhat useful, 3) No opinion, 4) Usually an important part of the course, and 5) A critical and important learning activity in the course.

Question 17 focused on the Fully Online format. Fifteen students (12.10%) responded that threaded discussions are a waste of time. Thirty-three (26.61%) responded that they are somewhat useful. Seven (5.65%) students had no opinion. The majority (48, 38.71%) felt that threaded discussions were usually an important part of the course. There were 21 (16.94%) who felt threaded discussions were a critical and important learning activity.

Question 18 focused on the Hybrid format. Fifteen students (12.10%) responded that threaded discussions were a waste of time. This was exactly the same proportion as in the Fully Online responses. The highest option was number two with 43 (34.40%) responding that they were somewhat useful. Eighteen (14.40%) students had no opinion. Thirty-seven (29.60%) felt that threaded discussions were usually an important part of the course. The least selected option was Option 5 with only 12 students (9.60%) feeling threaded discussions were a critical and important learning activity in a course (See Table 4).

Table 4: Based on your past experiences with Fully Online and/or Hybrid courses, do you find Threaded Discussions

Questions #17 & 18 Options	Fully Online Number (n=124)	Fully Online Percentage	Hybrid Number (n=125)	Hybrid Percentage	Combined Number (n=249)	Combined Percentage
1. A waste of time	15	12.10%	15	12%	30	12%
2. Somewhat useful	33	26.61%	43	34.40%	76	30.52%
3. No Opinion	7	5.65%	18	14.40%	25	10.04%
4. Usually an important part of the course	48	38.71%	37	29.60%	85	34.14%
5. A critical and important learning activity in the course	21	16.94%	12	9.60%	33	13.25%

When the Fully Online and Hybrid responses are examined together, it is evident that 65% of students feel that threaded discussions are a somewhat useful or important part of the course. Only 13.25% of the total respondents felt that threaded discussions were a critical and important learning activity. This was just slightly more than the 12% that felt threaded discussions were a waste of time.

Questions 19 and 20 examined the likelihood of a student enrolling in a Fully Online or Hybrid course where the instructor is known for using threaded discussions as a high percentage (25-40%) of the course requirements (RQ#7).

Question 19 examined this issue for Fully Online courses. Five (4%) students indicated that they would “Never” enroll in this course. Thirty-seven (29.60%) indicated that they might because of scheduling times. Seven participants (5.60%) had no opinion. The largest response was from 48 (36%) students who said they would probably schedule the course, it makes little difference. Thirty-one (24.80%) indicated that they would prefer this type of course.

Question 20 examined this issue for Hybrid courses. Eight (6.45%) students indicated that they would “Never” schedule this course. Thirty-seven (29.84%) indicated that they might because of scheduling times. Fourteen (11.29%) had no opinion. The largest response was from 41 (33.06%) students who said they would probably schedule the course, it makes little difference. Twenty-four (19.35%) indicated that they would prefer this type of course (See Table 5).

Table 5: Would you schedule a Fully Online or Hybrid course if you knew that the instructor used Threaded Discussions as a relatively high percentage (25-40%) of the course requirements?

Questions #19 & 20 Options	Fully Online Number (n=125)	Fully Online Percentage	Hybrid Number (n=124)	Hybrid Percentage	Combined Number (n=249)	Combined Percentage
1. Never	5	4%	8	6.45%	13	5.22%
2. I might, if I had to because of scheduling	37	29.60%	37	29.84%	74	29.71%
3. No opinion	7	5.60%	14	11.29%	21	8.43%
4. Probably, it makes little difference to me	45	36%	41	33.06%	86	34.54%
5. Yes, I would want this type of course	31	24.80%	24	19.35%	55	22.09%

When the combined responses are examined, it is evident that a strong emphasis on threaded discussions would probably make little difference for most participants (34.54%) when scheduling a Fully Online or Hybrid course. This percentage was followed closely (29.71%) by respondents who indicated that they would register for one of these courses if they had to because of their scheduling limitations. Almost a fourth (22.09%) of the students indicated that they would actually want this type of course. Very few (5.22%) indicated that they would never schedule one of these courses.

The next two questions, 21 and 22, examined student's preferences when scheduling Fully Online and Hybrid courses as opposed to traditional face-to-face courses (RQ#8).

Question 21 examined student attitudes toward choosing between the same course in a Fully Online or traditional face-to-face format. A large majority (62, 52.10%) of the students indicated that they would take the traditional face-to-face course. Twenty-three (19.33%) students indicated that either format would be fine. Only one student (.84%) had no opinion. Thirty-three (27.73%) of the respondents said that they would prefer the Fully Online course.

Question 22 examined student attitudes toward choosing between a Hybrid course and the same course in a traditional face-to-face format. Again, a majority (47, 37.60%) – although somewhat less than Fully Online – of students indicated that they would take the traditional face-to-face course. Thirty-nine (31.20%) of the students indicated that either format would be fine. Six (4.80%) had no opinion. Thirty-three (26.40%) said that they would prefer to take the Hybrid course (See Table 6).

Table 6: Given the option of taking the same course in the traditional face-to-face format or in the Fully Online/Hybrid format, which would you prefer?

Questions #21 & 22 Options	Fully Online Number (n=119)	Fully Online Percentage	Hybrid Number (n=125)	Hybrid Percentage	Combined Number (n=244)	Combined Percentage
1. Traditional, Face-to-Face	62	52.10%	47	37.60%	109	44.67%
2. Either one is fine with me	23	19.33%	39	31.20%	62	25.41%
3. No Opinion	1	.84%	6	4.80%	7	2.87%
4. I would prefer to take the Fully Online or Hybrid course	33	27.73%	33	26.40%	66	27.05%

When the combined percentages are examined, it becomes clear that participants preferred the traditional face-to-face course format. There is a smaller preference when the traditional course is compared to the Hybrid course selection; Hybrid=31.20% vs. the Traditional=37.60%. About one-fourth (25.41%) of students indicated that they had no preference.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The intent of this study was to answer some basic questions concerning university-level students' perceptions of threaded discussions in Fully Online and Hybrid courses. The researchers were surprised to find that, out of the original 414 participants in the sample, only 125 had ever taken a Fully Online or a Hybrid course.

One of the areas examined was students' preferences in the design of threaded discussions (RQ#1). In both Fully Online and Hybrid formats, the largest proportion of responses indicated that they liked all options about the same; however, three of the other options – 1) Specific Answer, 2) Instructor's Scenario, 3) and Controversial – had about the same level of student preference. Role-playing was the option least selected.

When students were asked if the use of threaded discussions added to or enhanced their level of learning (RQ#2), the majority of students indicated that it was somewhat helpful. Approximately one-fourth of the participants felt that threaded discussions were very useful. The smallest proportion of responses indicated that threaded discussions were of little use.

Over 50% of the students indicated that they spend, on average, between 31 and 61 minutes in preparing and completing their threaded discussion assignments (RQ#3). When given a choice between a written assignment and a threaded discussion assignment in a Fully Online or Hybrid course, students indicated a strong preference for the threaded discussion (RQ#4). However, about one-fifth (slightly less than 20%) of the students indicated that they liked both forms of assignment about the same.

When asked to rate their level of enjoyment of threaded discussion assignments, the majority of students indicated that they enjoyed them somewhat at times (RQ#5). The students had a less favorable response toward the use of threaded discussions in the Hybrid format. This may possibly be explained by the amount of face-to-face time required in a Hybrid course, which is usually 50% or more. It seems in the Hybrid course that students may have preferred the live in-class discussions over the asynchronous discussion format.

When the students were questioned as to the usefulness of threaded discussions (RQ#6) in both the Fully Online and Hybrid formats, the majority of responses indicated that they were usually an important part of the course. About 12% of the students felt that threaded discussions were a waste of time. About an

equal number of students indicated that the threaded discussions were a critical and important learning activity in both Fully Online and Hybrid courses.

The next aspect of the survey examined students' willingness to enroll in a Fully Online or Hybrid course when the instructor was known to have a strong emphasis on threaded discussions (RQ#7). More specifically, such a course would have about 25-40% of the course requirements based on threaded discussions. Over one-third of the participants indicated that this would make little difference when deciding their term schedules. Another one-third said they would register for such a course if their schedule required it. Almost one-fourth of participants said that they would actually prefer to schedule this type of course. Very few (i.e., less than 6%) of the students indicated that they would never schedule this type of course.

The survey's final question asked participants which format they would they choose if given a choice between the same course in a Fully Online and/or Hybrid or the traditional (face-to-face) format (RQ#8)? The majority (i.e., slightly over 50%) of the students indicated that they would prefer the traditional course format. About one-third indicated that either format would be fine. Slightly over one-fourth indicated that they would prefer the Fully Online or Hybrid course format. This data was somewhat of a surprise as it indicated that – even with all of the recent emphasis on online and mobile learning – students still favor the traditional face-to-face course option almost two to one.

Very few students took the opportunity to make a written statement at the end of the survey; however, of the six that did, three indicated that they enjoy the threaded discussion format but, at times, are frustrated by the lack of interaction among their peers and classmates and the lack of a high level of engagement from the instructor. Three other participants expressed the feeling that threaded discussions are often just “filler” in a course and really serve no purpose. Unfortunately, with only 6 out of the 125 participants leaving comments, it was difficult to observe any trends or draw any conclusions from this subset of data.

Finally, this study found that students basically still like the threaded discussion format; however, their attitudes are somewhat neutral when it comes to their personal enjoyment and preference for threaded discussions in both the Online and Hybrid course formats. Participants also indicated that they thought threaded discussions enhanced the learning of the subject matter but only to a limited extent. Overall, the participants were more positive towards the use of threaded discussions in the Fully Online course as opposed to the Hybrid course format. If given the option to choose between a traditional written assignment and a threaded discussion assignment, the majority of the students in both formats indicated a preference for the threaded discussion. The majority of students indicated a preference for the written assignment. In addition, given a choice, the majority of students would still prefer to take a course in the traditional face-to-face format. When scheduling university-level courses, the students in this study were not greatly influenced by the amount of threaded discussion requirements in a particular course.

Recommendations for Future Study

Future studies would benefit from focusing on the design and application of threaded discussions. This study provides evidence that students basically enjoy and consider threaded discussions useful and important course components; however, the implementation and ongoing monitoring and assessment of threaded discussions should still be examined in greater detail. Perhaps with all of the new video applications that are available now in Learning Management Systems, such as Wimba and Collaborate, the threaded discussion has lost some of its original energy and interest appeal?

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Appendix A

Hello Participant:

You are invited to participate in our research survey. In this survey, approximately 400-500 students will be asked to complete a survey that asks questions about their experiences with Threaded Discussions in their Fully Online and Hybrid classes. For the purpose of this research a Hybrid course will be defined as those courses that have 30-50% or more in the online format. A Fully Online course is defined as a course that is taken completely in the online format. It will take approximately 10 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. There are no foreseeable risks associated with this project. However, if you feel uncomfortable answering any questions, you can withdraw from the survey at any point. It is very important for us to learn your opinions. Your survey responses will be strictly confidential and data from this research will be reported only in the aggregate. Your information will be coded and will remain confidential. The survey will not identify you by name but only as a participant. If you have questions at any time about the survey or the procedures, you may contact Dr. Linda Best (lbest@edinboro.edu) or Dr. Daniel J Shelley (shelleyd@rmu.edu). Thank you very much for your time and support. Please start with the survey now by clicking on the Continue button below.

Are you a full time or part time student?

1. Full time
2. Part Time

Are you male or female?

1. Male
2. Female

What is your present academic level?

1. Freshman
2. Sophomore
3. Junior
4. Senior
5. Graduate Student
6. Doctoral Candidate

How many Fully Online course(s) have you taken to date in your academic program?

1. 0
2. 1-3
3. 4-7

-
4. 8-10
 5. More than 10

How many Hybrid course(s) (partially online) have you taken to date in your academic program?

1. 0
2. 1-3
3. 4-7
4. 8-10
5. More than 10

For the next two questions we will assume that the typical Threaded Discussions in both Hybrid and Fully Online courses follow one of the following four types: 1. Requires a specific answer or answer 2. Requires your opinion based on information given by the instructor 3. Controversial issue(s) that requires you to post and defend your position, 4. Role-playing, this puts you in the situation of a decision maker. For example, you are an advisor to Thomas Jefferson as he writes the first draft of the Declaration of Independence

If given the choice of Threaded Discussions in a Fully Online course, which format do you prefer as a student?

1. Specific Answer
2. Your opinion on an instructor's example or scenario
3. Your response to controversial issues
4. Role playing scenario, puts you in a decision making position
5. I like all of them about the same
6. I really don't like any of these formats

If given the choice of Threaded Discussions in a Hybrid course, which format do you prefer as a student?

1. Specific Answer
2. Your opinion on an instructor's example or scenario
3. Your response to controversial issues
4. Role playing scenario, puts you in a decision making position
5. I like all of them about the same
6. I really don't like any of these formats

In your opinion, based on your prior coursework, do Threaded Discussions add to or enhance your learning of the subject matter in a Fully Online course?

1. Very little
2. Somewhat, they help a little
3. No opinion
4. To some degree, somewhat helpful
5. Very useful

In your opinion, based on your prior coursework, do Threaded Discussions add to or enhance your learning of the subject matter in a Hybrid course?

1. Very little
2. Somewhat, they help a little
3. No opinion

-
4. To some degree, somewhat helpful
 5. Very useful

In your opinion, based on your prior coursework, how much time do you spend preparing/completing assignments for each Threaded Discussion in a Fully Online course?

1. 0-15 minutes
2. 16-30 minutes
3. 31-45 minutes
4. 46-60 minutes
5. 61 minutes and longer
6. I have never taken a Fully Online course

In your opinion, based on your prior coursework, how much time do you spend preparing/completing assignments for each Threaded Discussion in a Hybrid course?

1. 0-15 minutes
2. 16-30 minutes
3. 31-45 minutes
4. 46-60 minutes
5. 61 minutes and longer
6. I have never taken a Hybrid course

Given the choice between a regular Written Assignment and a Threaded Discussion Assignment in a Fully Online course, as a student, which form of assessment do you prefer?

1. I really don't like either form of assessment
2. I think they are about the same, I really don't have a preference
3. No opinion
4. I would prefer the Written Assignment
5. I would prefer the Threaded Discussion

Given the choice between a regular Written Assignment and a Threaded Discussion Assignment in a Hybrid course, as a student, which form of assessment do you prefer?

1. I really don't like either form of assessment
2. I think they are about the same, I don't really have a preference
3. No opinion
4. I would prefer the Written Assignment
5. I would prefer the Threaded Discussion

In your opinion, based on your prior coursework, do you enjoy the use of Threaded Discussions in a Fully Online course?

1. Very little, I really don't like them
2. Somewhat, at times I enjoy them
3. No opinion
4. To some degree, I usually enjoy them
5. I always enjoy the Threaded Discussions in my Fully Online courses

In your opinion, based on your prior coursework, do you enjoy the use of Threaded Discussions in a Hybrid course?

1. Very little, I don't really like them
2. Somewhat, at times I enjoy them
3. No opinion
4. To some degree, I usually enjoy them
5. I always enjoy the Threaded Discussions in my Hybrid courses

Based on your past experiences with Fully Online courses, do you find Threaded Discussions

1. A waste of time
2. Somewhat useful
3. No opinion
4. Usually an important part of the course
5. A critical and important learning activity in the course

Based on your past experiences with Hybrid courses, do you find Threaded Discussions

1. A waste of time
2. Somewhat useful
3. No opinion
4. Usually an important part of the course
5. A critical and important learning activity in the course

Would you schedule a Fully Online course if you knew that the instructor had a relatively high percentage (25-40%) of the course requirements based on Threaded Discussions?

1. Never
2. I might, if I had to because of scheduling
3. No opinion
4. Probably, it makes little difference to me
5. Yes, I would want this type of course

Would you schedule a Hybrid course if you knew that the instructor had a relatively high percentage (25-40%) of the course requirements based on Threaded Discussions?

1. Never
2. I might, if I had to because of scheduling
3. No opinion
4. Probably, it makes little difference to me
5. Yes, I would want this type of course

If given the option of taking the same course in the traditional face-to-face format or in the Fully Online format, which would you prefer?

1. Traditional, Face-to-Face
2. Either one is fine with me
3. No opinion
4. I would prefer to take the Fully Online course

If given the option of taking the same course in the traditional face-to-face format or in the Hybrid format, which would you prefer?

1. Traditional, Face-to-Face
2. Either one is fine with me
3. No opinion
4. I would prefer to take the Hybrid course

Optional:

Use this space to make any additional comments on your experiences with Threaded Discussions in the Fully Online or Hybrid formats!

1. Academia, Online Learning and Threaded Discussions