

## **Does an Open Forum Promote Learning Among Students? A Collaborative-Learning Approach**

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### **Biography:**

Dr. Anson Yang is Head of the Department of English and Chair of Language Development Committee at Pui Ching Middle School, Hong Kong. He has taught literature and TESL courses at universities in Hong Kong, Taiwan and the United States. His research interests also lie in classroom cultures and student learning profiles. Alex Chan, Nick Ho, and Bonnie Tam are teaching in the newly-established Department of Integrated Humanities. They are qualified teachers in Business Writing, Mass Communication, and English in Hong Kong.

### **Abstract**

*This paper investigates how students responded to each other in an e-Community learning situation. Forty students, at two levels, were invited to respond to five questions regarding the Legislative Council election 2004 posted on the school forum. Questionnaires and interviews were conducted to see if students enjoyed the discussion with peers and casual browsers. It has been concluded that students find the forum discussion useful toward their formal curriculum. However, there have been concerns regarding the objectivity of casual browsers. Students need to be on the alert when receiving information through the Internet and other media, and understand that not everything printed or broadcast is official, factual, and accurate.*

### **1. Introduction**

The education reforms in Hong Kong in the last decade have seen drastic changes. The government has been promoting a greater use of information technologies. The general public is now taught to use E-mail; computer stations are seen in all public and government facilities to encourage electronic communications and transactions. All these are done in addition to the formal education teenagers receive at school. Another major curriculum is the talk of perhaps reducing the secondary education to six years. This means classes will have to be re-grouped. A new subject is in preparation: integrated humanities, a course which in some ways resembles liberal studies, includes lessons of Hong Kong society, development of modern China, and personal development. All these modules aim at training students to be more aware of their immediate environment and get to understand themselves more. The course is being piloted in a handful of schools; it will become a major required component in secondary curriculum in a few years' time.

The new Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examinations (HKCEE, a public examination at Grade 11) course was implemented in September 2003; ten secondary schools in Hong Kong opted for this course, nine of which conduct the course in Chinese, one in English. Because of the critical thinking/world knowledge-based nature of the course, some schools allow only the more able students to take the course. In addition to reading and discussion for classes, students are expected to show interest in major world and local issues. Students are also encouraged to do research on their own. The research includes reading extensively, writing to the newspaper, and discussing curriculum-related issues in an e-Community.

This paper investigates how students responded to each other in the e-Community. It aims at finding how useful students consider discussing and communicating subject-related issues with classmates and other occasional browsers electronically. Thirty-nine students, at two levels, were invited to respond to five questions in English regarding the Legislative Council (Legco) election 2004 posted on the school forum. Questionnaires and interviews were conducted to see if students enjoyed the discussion with peers and casual browsers. It is expected that students find the forum discussion useful toward their formal curriculum. However, there have been concerns regarding the objectivity of casual browsers. Students need to be on the alert when receiving information through the Internet and other media, and understand that not everything printed or broadcast is official, factual, and accurate.

## **2. Literature review**

Students learn more effectively when they learn through their own initiatives. When their learning styles are matched with appropriate approaches in teaching, then their motivation, performances, and achievements will increase and be enhanced (Brown, 1994). In various situations, teachers employ different strategies and instruments in class. Although these instruments differ, they share the goal of identifying the nature of human differences in learning and improving the effectiveness of teaching/learning by providing criteria for individualizing instruction (Ketchum, 1987).

Kinsella (1996) argued that students who have stronger verbal/analytical faculties may only have access to the traditional teaching model - listening to lectures, reading textbooks, and completing writing assignments. But they are not necessarily developing the right-brain strengths that are crucial for problem solving and creativity. Therefore, it has been pointed out that lessons may be presented both visually and verbally, and reinforced through various motivating language activities such as reflective reading and writing. In this way, students can learn in ways that best suit their styles and develop their modality strengths (Kroonenberg, 1995).

Research has also shown that matching learning styles have a positive impact on students' achievements, interests, and motivation (Smith and Renzulli, 1984). Dunn et al. (1979), Wesche (1981), and Sein and Robey (1991) found that the potential interaction between learning styles and teaching approaches indicate that students' performances can be enhanced by adapting the instructional methods to individual differences in learning styles.

It is evident that people learn differently and at different paces because of their biological and psychological differences (Reiff, 1992). Clearly, learning styles include not only the cognitive domain, but also the affective and physiological domains (Oxford et al, 1992). But even one learning style is multidimensional (Kinsella, 1996), and a particular learning style may be founded on assumption. Assumption research on learning styles is based on the assumption that learners receive information through their senses, and prefer some senses to others in specific situations (O'Brien, 1989; Oxford and Ehrman, 1993; Kroonenberg, 1995).

Oxford (1990) posited that while presenting materials, teachers should provide colorful and motivating activities, personalized self-reflection tasks, some form of cooperative learning, and powerful learning strategies to encourage self-direction in learning. However, it is generally agreed that it is difficult for teachers to keep all the learners actively engaged in the learning process and learning at the same pace (Wrigley and Guth, 1992). With these findings in mind, this project aims at finding how useful students consider discussing and communicating subject-related issues with classmates and occasional browsers electronically.

### **3. Procedures**

The research was conducted in September and October 2004 among 39 Form 4 and 5 (Grades 10-11) English elite students whose mother tongue is Cantonese, a Chinese dialect commonly used in Hong Kong. The school is considered one of the best Chinese-medium-of-instruction middle schools, that is, all subjects are taught in students' mother tongue, except the English lessons, and the newly implemented integrated humanities course. Students receive seven 40-minute English lessons per cycle, translated as approximately 250 minutes of classroom contact time every week. The integrated humanities class meets for three 40-minute lessons per cycle. Both courses at the same level are conducted by the same teachers through the team-teaching mode. These teachers have a diverse education background; they received their first degree in Hong Kong, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Taiwan, in fields such as Journalism, Economics, Speech and Communication, and English. Students have been assigned to the elite class because their English grades were at the top rung in the final examination in the previous academic year.

One topic in the core module is on the legislative system in Hong Kong. In mid-September 2004, a large scale Legislative Council election for office for the years 2004-2008 was conducted. Naturally, the election campaigns and the election-related issues became lecture and discussion materials. In particular, students were lectured on (a) channels of political participation in Hong Kong, (b) equal opportunities in political participation, (c) one country, two systems, and (d) effectiveness of the government (CDI, 2004).

Students did extensive reading and discussion in every lesson; they wrote a 400-word essay every other cycle. In addition, the teachers posted five course-related discussion topics on the school forum for members of the e-Community to respond to. Students in the course were asked to post and respond to messages there. Class discussion sessions were

mostly done in small groups after the teacher's initial instructions and lectures. Sessions for each module were well spread out over two months in order to accommodate other areas of the regular curriculum, and to allow time for student writing.

Evaluations were done through four instruments. Upon completion, students were asked to fill out a questionnaire (Appendix 1) with 20 items on a modified Likert-scale (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=agree, 4=strongly agree) on the activity, what they had learnt, their learning attitudes, and how the activity promoted collaborative learning. Students were also asked to respond freely to other aspects not addressed in the questionnaire. They were invited randomly to attend comment sessions where open-ended questions were asked regarding the activity and their language attitudes. Teachers' observation contributed to the qualitative input of the writing up of this paper.

#### 4. Analysis and discussion

The five questions posted on the forum received very enthusiastic responses from Integrated Humanities students, schoolmates, and casual browsers. The last entry was made on 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2004:

No.	Question	Responses	Hits
1	How can election campaigns be more environmentally friendly?	85	1090
2	Why should voters dutifully participate in the Legco election?	78	867
3	Does personal conduct of a Legco member reflect his/her quality of work and integrity?	68	788
4	Should there be universal suffrage for the Legco election?	72	783
5	How can understanding political issues help teenagers become responsible citizens?	72	796

Table 1: Numeric data of questions and responses

Table 1 shows the questions posted on the forum, the total number of responses as of 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2004, and the number of hits. The number of responses includes the actual questions, and two to five encouraging statements from the teachers, inviting more students to present their opinions. The number of hits indicates the number that the questions have been browsed.

Thirty-six students completed the questionnaires:

Item	Mean	R
20. I will try my best to offer objective comments to forum responses.	3.25	1
13. The activities allowed more time for critical thinking.	3.22	2
17. Teachers allowed us more freedom in voicing our opinions online.	3.03	3
1. I have learnt more about our government in this activity.	3.00	4.5
11. I have learnt some new language items in this series of activities.	3.00	4.5
8. I will continue to read English newspapers on a regular basis.	2.94	6.5

9. In these activities, I learnt to provide comments objectively.	2.94	6.5
6. In these activities, I found that reading forum messages is educational.	2.92	8
12. I hope there will be more activities of this kind in English lessons.	2.89	9
4. The series of online activities is an authentic learning experience.	2.81	10
5. I like this series of activities better than the textbook lessons.	2.78	11
18. I value others' comments in these activities.	2.75	12.5
19. I am ready to discuss political issues openly with my peers in future.	2.75	12.5
7. I will continue to write on the forum for issues I care about.	2.72	14
15. This series of online activities improves my language proficiency.	2.64	15
2. I am happy to comment on the responses posted.	2.61	16
3. The responses really concern most members in the society.	2.58	17
10. I feel that writers of messages really care about the issues posted.	2.56	18
14. I have always enjoyed reading social issue articles.	2.50	19
16. Classmates' messages are more useful than strangers'.	2.06	20

Table 2: Questionnaire responses ranked (R)

Table 2 shows the means of the 20-statement questionnaires and the ranking. The first five items show that students supported the idea of sharing opinions electronically. All 36 students agreed that they would continue to try their best to offer objective comments to forum responses (item 20, ranked 1). Although the questions posted were open-ended, they were related to the course materials; thus, they required students to do some researching, reading and thinking before responding. In many cases, classroom discussion fails to allow time, and room, for students to consider proper responses. Browsing on the forum, students were allowed time needed to provide a response most representative (item 13, ranked 2). In addition, students not only provide a response, but also read others' before they comment. These comments were the basis of collaborative learning in and outside of the classroom.

Since most students responded on their own time, that is, outside of the classroom setting, teachers' supervision was minimal. In a way, students understood they could reply in any fashion they wanted responsibly. In some cases, even if their responses deviated from the main discussion, they would not be sneered at because of the nature of the forum (item 17, ranked 3). Thus, a more critical thinking faculty was promoted, and more sub-discussions were allowed to provide for further use. These kinds of replies would not be possible in a day-to-day classroom environment. Not only were students exposed to this new mode of learning, but they also learned more about course-related government issues (item 1, ranked 4.5). Although students could have learnt most issues from class materials, the responses they obtained from senior form students or casual browsers were invaluable. The latter ones provide insights absent from the textbooks; these insights could very well be first time experience with government policies. This also explains why students thought that classmates' messages are not necessarily more useful than strangers' (item 16, ranked 20). This could be an example of collaborative learning.

Subjects in this school are among the very few who received the integrated humanities class in English, despite its Chinese middle school status. The principal of the school, on

various occasions, had emphasized the importance for students to improve their English. In fact, the two courses, English and integrated humanities, complemented each other. Therefore, it is little surprise that students ranked the language input high (items 11 and 8, ranked 4.5 and 6); they agreed that they learnt new language items. In addition, they realized the importance of reading English newspapers. It seems that they would continue to read it regularly.

The last five items in Table 2 provided equally interesting discussion for this paper. These 36 students “had to” take the course because they were considered the *crème de la crème* of the school. No doubt, they thought they were coerced into studying, going online, or even responding to the questionnaires. In which case, they expressed a certain dissatisfaction of commenting online (item 2, ranked 16). They did not see immediate need in participating in government policies, although they might have to learn the content for HKCEE. In other words, they did not feel that the issues posted concerned most members in society (item 3, ranked 17). In some way, that the very nature of browsing and writing responses on the forum might help students study in the course creates explicit reason for them: they might not really care about the issues, but they had to, for various reasons (items 10, 14, ranked 18, 19). However, it is worth noting that none of the responses falls out of a 2.00 mean. This perhaps indicates favorable comments on the students’ part toward the series of activities.

Despite the compulsory nature of the course, students still found it favorable to do the series of activities. In many ways, Chinese students have been branded as submissive and passive. The compulsory nature of the course may enhance collaborative learning, despite the absence of group project work in this course. Students were asked to pull their knowledge together, pick each other’s brains, provide insights, and form their own opinions. To this end, the forum activities seemed to serve these purposes. The forum allows students to learn from each other and to consider others’ comments. These may be done in a classroom setting, but the e-Community provides a boundary-free environment regarding time and space. Students can learn from peers, even when peers are not immediately available.

Thirty students provided free responses in the questionnaires. In spite of the compulsory nature of the course, 26 of them commented positively while four of them indicated their discontent of the compulsory nature of the course, and a waste of time of reading irrelevant online replies. Among the positive ones, some of them commented on the ownership and the sharing in a public forum. Although writing on the forum resembled submitting homework to teachers, the passages were read by peers who may or may not be students of the same school. Students commented that they were more careful in responding lest they might invite verbal attacks from casual browsers. Others commented that responding on the forum on their own time offered them a “stress-free” experience: first, they could join in a discussion anytime they wanted and there was not a deadline; second, they could revise or delete their opinion for the discussion which would always be online open to public without a time limitation, whereas a face-to-face discussion would inevitably end and revision of comments would not be possible; third, students might use stronger language which they would not normally use or be acceptable in a face-to-face discussion (for

example, *I could not believe people would offer such a crazy idea*), students could also compliment each other for offering sensible and similar opinions (for example, *I think your comments are nicely put, glad to see such creative ideas and support for the government*). The varieties of learning styles and affective needs were seen on online forum. Some of the free responses were listed below:

- *The activity [has been] interesting, but I don't like the course to be compulsory.*
- *Learning issues is good, and reading newspaper is good, too. But I can do it on my own time.*
- *I learn some language items from reading the replies.*
- *I [didn't] realize that I could learn from students other than classmates. The Forum has provided me [with] a new way to study.*
- *There are many replies, not all are useful. I learn to think critically on what has been put online.*

The interviews and teachers' observations confirmed some of the remarks made above. In particular, students considered class discussion quick and personal, while discussion on the e-Community could be more comprehensive. Students agreed that they spent more time reading others' replies; in a way, that was input which would not normally be obtained in a classroom setting. They were glad to see others having their same opinions; that confirmed positively on what they had been studying. In the interviews, three students discussed the differences between critical thinking and having a different opinion. They commented that even though they might have the same ideas as others, as long as they exercised their own judgments and weighed strengths and weaknesses of the worthy replies, their consideration of the issue became more comprehensive. A student commented that this experience was a lot different from the top-down lecture given by teachers in which little thinking was required; he only needed to regurgitate teachers' notes in the exam. However, students also said that they were always lured to browse through other subject forums after working on the one at hand; that also took up a lot of their leisure time.

Teachers' classroom observation and online monitoring corresponded to each other well. Students' in-class discussion showed that they had been participating on the forum activities; some in-class comments were based on the forum discussion. The online monitoring posted a bit of a problem. First of all, teachers had to log on frequently and that would mean tapping up the number of hits. Secondly, it was not possible to comment online frequently because the teachers could not distinguish their students from casual browsers. Factually wrong comments might be pointed out easily, but mere opinions were left alone. However, teachers agreed that the forum discussion prepared students to work together in class; it laid the groundwork for a higher order of intellectual interaction and collaborative learning. Teachers believed that this was important for changing the teachers' role from facilitating to lecturing. Students should learn to work together in a professional and civilized manner both face-to-face or while partners are not immediately available.

However, some of them worried about the credibility of some responses. They believed that although all responses seemed to be sincere, some might be factually wrong or biased.

The teachers also provided similar observations, but they were more optimistic. They believed that even when responses were flawed, replies were just data for students to generate their own opinions. Students should never recite raw data neither online nor in the classroom. To this end, the teachers considered collaborative learning possible online, within a targeted community.

## **5. Conclusions**

There are two limitations in this project. First of all, the small number of the elite class of students may not present the outcome in its most objective fashion. There was also some concern that the training of the integrated humanities class teachers may directly affect the knowledge students might gain. However, the primary aim of this action research is to see if the e-Community could help students learn collaboratively and if it could stir the learning interest of students. The training of the teachers may not be highly relevant in this case, either, because the course is relatively new, and the four teachers with diverse education backgrounds complimented each other in preparation for the course. They were also informed that there was no one right approach in conducting the course.

Questionnaire findings reflect the usefulness of forum discussion. In particular, students found it equally important when it comes to contents (political issues) and language (English). This made it evident that languages are vehicles and tools for different tasks. Students enjoyed sharing each other's comments. Although some might just write on the forum without reading too many responses, the sharing spirit in the collaborative learning approach was clear: some give and some take, some internalize and some regurgitate. They found that it is important that they form their opinions when reading forum messages; they should consider responses objectively. However, a handful of students found it difficult to consume responses posted by casual browsers who might not have proper background knowledge of the lessons and focus of discussion, and did not express points objectively. Teachers should forewarn students that whatever literature students read, they should always question it with an open mind. Reciting raw data is never a proper way to learning, not in this course, not in any course. Collaborative learning, to this end, seems to be successful in this project.

The forum used is a platform for users to exchange ideas. If it is used sincerely, however far-fetched some comments or responses may be, browsers will be able to receive input through reading the threads. However, if the platform is abused, for example, to express radical opinions and use coarse language, and the site monitors fail to nip the problem in the bud, the problem may snowball. Another area which educators should consider is the language used online. Messages of subjects in liberal arts areas are easier to convey than science subjects; some topics can easily yield responses better than others. That means the platform may not be used to the fullest for teaching purposes in all subjects, given the nature of some courses of which discussion may not be necessary at all. It is therefore suggested that schools should plan well on which resources and platforms should be used. For example, when laboratories are exclusive for science students, forum discussion may not be needed to be opened to all subjects.

This project was conducted with 36 students in one school only. However, the implication is rich: textbooks and lectures no longer satisfy students' need for knowledge when electronic information, be it voluntary or involuntary, abounds. It is time the school authority consider the importance of incorporating more external materials in the public platform and advise students on how these materials should be used collaboratively and individually. More important, students should be taught to screen the conventional and unconventional materials for their study, thereby strengthening their critical thinking skills.

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## 7. Appendix 1

### Questionnaire

This questionnaire aims at collecting your opinions on the collaborative learning activity. It intends to find out how you feel about the learning process, particularly how you have responded to comments posted. Please respond to the following items by putting a tick in the appropriate boxes (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=agree, 4=strongly agree) representing your comments. Your comments are very valuable to the future activities conducted by teachers of the Department of Integrated Humanities and the Department of English in this school. Thank you for filling out this questionnaire.

Item	1	2	3	4
1. I have learnt more about our government in this activity.				
2. I am happy to comment on responses posted.				
3. The responses really concern most members in the society.				
4. The series of online activities is an authentic learning experience.				
5. I like this series of activities better than the textbook lessons.				
6. In these activities, I found that reading forum messages is educational.				
7. I will continue to write on the forum for issues I care about.				
8. I will continue to read English newspapers on a regular basis.				
9. In these activities, I learnt to provide comments objectively.				
10. I feel that writers of messages really care about the issues posted.				
11. I have learnt some new language items in this series of activities.				
12. I hope there will be more activities of this kind in English lessons.				
13. The activities allowed more time for critical thinking.				
14. I have always enjoyed reading social issue articles.				
15. This series of online activities improves my language proficiency.				
16. Classmates' messages are more useful than strangers'.				
17. Teachers allowed us more freedom in voicing our opinions online.				
18. I value others' comments in these activities.				
19. I am ready to discuss political issues openly with my peers in future.				
20. I will try my best to offer objective comments to forum responses.				

Reflections and comments: