

Using Guided Roles in Virtual Forum as a Strategy for Empowering Students' Participation in Online Classes: A COVID-19 Response

Nur Aira ABDRAHIM

Faculty of Educational Studies, University Putra Malaysia, Malaysia
nuraira@upm.edu.my

Abstract: This paper illustrates the use of guided virtual forum as a teaching strategy for empowering students' participation in online classes. The design of the virtual forum was derived based on the principles advocated by flux pedagogy, focusing on teaching design that are adaptive and responsive to the impact of COVID-19 on teaching and learning norms. The purpose of the virtual forum was twofold. First, as an online activity for the students to learn about the course' subject matter in interactive ways. Secondly, the purpose was to empower and encourage all students to participate in online classes from behind the screen. The survey results show positive feedbacks from the students who participated in the virtual forum; reporting learning gain from both the content (subject matter learned) and process (increased in skills and confidence levels).

Keywords: Virtual forum, online teaching strategy, flux pedagogy, online participation, student engagement

1. Introduction

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, life has become an indefinite state of flux with unprecedented concerns involving the global health, life uncertainties, as well as disrupted routines and changing norms. Since in-person teaching and classes became a non-viable option, the outbreak has since disrupted and altered the landscape of teaching and learning among the education community. As noted by Ravitch (2020), this global moment requires educators to learn a set of new skills for designing and enacting humanize and transformative pedagogy with the students as we teach them specific content areas.

Teaching and supporting learning during pandemic COVID-19 is an unknown territory for most members of the academic community. With universities being abruptly closed and academics are suddenly expected to teach remotely, how do academics adapt and transform their teaching practices and approaches into online and digital spaces without compromising on the students' learning experiences and outcomes?

This paper presents an online teaching technique that was used for facilitating and empowering students' participation while learning about a subject matter during an online class. This paper is built upon the perspective of flux pedagogy as elaborated by Ravitch (2020), referring to an inquiry-based, emergent teaching design that integrates relational and critical pedagogy framework into a transformative teaching approach in times of crisis or flux situation.

2. Flux Pedagogy

The term "flux pedagogy" was coined by Prof. Dr. Sharon M. Ravitch (2020) to refer to the transformation of teaching approaches in times of radical flux through the integration of relational and critical pedagogies. The word flux itself describes something that constantly changes. When faced with

sudden changes such as those impacted by the outbreak of COVID-19, flux pedagogy advocates for teaching approaches that are adaptive, generative, and compassionate.

Flux pedagogy entails six primary dimensions as follow:

- 1) Trauma-informed pedagogy;
- 2) Emergent design, student-centered, active teaching;
- 3) Inquiry as stance;
- 4) Critical pedagogy;
- 5) Racial literacy pedagogy; and
- 6) Brave space pedagogy

In specificity, the teaching strategy discussed in this paper is scaffolded by the principles elaborated from the second dimension, based on emergent, student-centered, and active teaching principles. In a flux situation, this dimension calls for co-creation of a learning environment that is supportive, active, responsive, and contextualized. Instructors are asked to engage in active listening and perspective-taking with their students, and adapting and replanning their classes while taking into consideration the impact of the current crisis on the students (Ravitch, 2020)

3. Student Engagement and Online Participation

A major flux that the students faced while learning during pandemic COVID-19 was the socio-environment shift in their learning context. With classes being held fully online, it requires the students to immediately adjust to the changing social dynamics and interactions between their classmates and instructors. As classes no longer take place in a physical, face-to-face environment, the experience is no longer the same as context of learning is highly influenced by the mode of delivery (Westera, 2011). As noted by Westera (2011), digital media tend to bring about new dimension of context and thus, requires reconsideration of the learning context.

The differences between in-person and online classes have been acknowledged by Wua et al (2008). The authors contend that instructors must seriously think how to redesign learning delivery that uses new technological capabilities that are of different nature than the previous technological knowledge, such as those in face-to-face delivery. Respectively, this implies that instructors must continually seek to be creative and innovative in their teaching design and approaches especially when the teaching medium or context has changed.

One of the major challenges in online teaching is to sustain student engagement and encourage their active participation while learning online. Cole and Chan (1994) described student engagement as “the extent of students’ involvement and active participation in learning activities (p. 259). Engagement takes place on a continuum and is contingent to several degrees of involvement (Avendano, 2003). Therefore, academics must play the important role of designing courses that encourage interaction, participation and communication in their online courses in order to promote higher level of engagement from the students (Johnson, 2003; Weiss et al., 2000).

4. Online Learning Activity using Guided Roles in Virtual Forum

4.1 The Course

The course taught was a postgraduate course for Principles of Adult Education subject. The course caters to primarily postgraduate students in the Human Resource Development program. The coursework for this subject was planned and structured for 14 weeks of face-to-face classes (one semester duration). However, the regular classes was disrupted during Week 5 due the Movement Control Order (MCO) that was implemented during the COVID-19 global crisis back in March 2020. After several weeks of MCO, classes were asked to be taught fully online in order for the semester to proceed.

In order to redesign the class delivery and learning activities, the instructor conducted a simple survey to gauge the students’ readiness to learn online. The total students enrolled in this course was

33, although only 29 students responded to the survey. Majority of the students was not accustomed to attending classes online and have to adjust to the new learning environment (93.1%). However, majority of them reported that they are absolutely prepared or will get themselves prepared (96.6%) to attend classes online. In terms of online class delivery, majority (48.3%) prefer a combination of both synchronous and asynchronous classes throughout the remaining semester. Based on these insights, the instructor started to redesign the class delivery and activities structured based on the course contents.

The online class was taught using Zoom as the online platform. After the first two weeks of resuming classes online, the instructor noticed the key challenge faced was the absence of online social presence and two ways communication during the synchronous (real-time) class. When prompted for feedback or answers from the students during online lecture, responses received were either none, or lapse and short-lived. The lively interaction that was observed during the first few weeks of in-class teaching could not be replicated the same way. Online participation among the class members were also unbalanced; only a small pool of students were willing to unmute their microphone and speak, whereas some felt more comfortable writing their responses in the Zoom Chatbox. Majority of the of the class members however, were silent or noncommunicative. Since the instructor attached “Class Participation” as one component of the class evaluation, she felt like some students might missed out on the learning activities conducted during the online class. This inadvertently and eventually may affect their class participation assessment at the end of the semester.

4.2 Virtual Forum

In distance, online and blended learning context, the term forum typically refers to asynchronous online discussion (AOD) among the class members that takes place in a virtual environment (Ithindi, 2013; Lonkar, Barrett, & Liu, 2014; Thomas, 2002; Thomas, 2013). Most online forum discussions were conducted through or on Learning Management System (LMS) platforms (Lonkar, Barrett, & Liu, 2014). However, in this paper, the forum activity was carried out in synchronous setting using Zoom, and involved pre-planning and live participation from all registered students in this class (n = 33). The virtual forum was conducted as a learning activity during the course’s online class at Week 8. The topic was predetermined by the instructor so that it is aligned with the course’s learning outcomes (LO), titled “Adult learners & adult learning: Post COVID-19 situations”.

The activity was called Guided Virtual Forum because the structure of the forum was guided by predetermined roles. One week before the forum, the instructor released information about the virtual forum on the course’s LMS. The instructor provided a Google sign-up form for 33 roles, where each student was asked to sign up for a role that they would like to contribute during the forum. In the sign-up sheet, the task for each role was elaborated so that the students are aware of the term of reference (TOR) for the role that they chose to contribute. Please refer to Appendix for the 33 roles that were outlined for this guided forum activity.

The sign-up was on first come first serve basis. The following message was also shared to the class in order to build the class’s understanding on the purpose of the virtual forum activity:

This activity is designed to encourage online interactions from all the class members. The goal is to start familiarizing everyone to a new normal of attending virtual class. Therefore, everyone in this class must contribute in their own ways, and cannot constantly be passive from behind the screen. Otherwise, in the future, your presence in the class might not be noticed by the instructor. Social presence is really important in recognizing your class participation as it is part of your course assessment. Now that classes are unable to take place in a physical space, it’s important for students to know how to contribute your social presence in an online context.

4.3 The Implementation

The guide their preparation for the forum, the class was provided with one reading (see Boeren, Roumell, & Roessger, 2020) and divided into seven groups (based on their existing grouping from the class’s assignments). There were seven questions that were posed as subtopics that each group will need to pre-prepare and answer during the virtual forum, outlined as follow:

1. *In general, how are adults affected by the Covid-19 situation? In Malaysia? Asia? Across the world?*
2. *What are the key challenges that will be faced by adults during post Covid-19? Please share at least 2 points.*
3. *What kind of new normal that adults will be expected to adapt in post Covid-19 situation? Please share at least 2 points. Can all groups of adults adapt to these new norms?*
4. *What important roles do adult education play post Covid-19 situation? Please share at least 2 points.*
5. *How will the 2020 global pandemic present opportunities for elevating adult learning in post Covid-19 situation? In what ways, please elaborate.*
6. *What kind of policy (either company or government policies) can be proposed to help adults adapt and recover during post-Covid 19 situation? Please share at least 2 suggestions.*
7. *What are the key lessons and future of adult education in post-Covid 19 situation? Please share at least 2 points.*

During the virtual forum, the above questions were answered and responded by students who were assigned as panellists. To ensure there are some interaction and two way discussions during the forum, there were also audio commenters assigned to respond to the discussions presented by each panellist. The overall virtual forum was moderated by two students who take on the role of moderators, while the technical aspect of the forum was administered by the technical moderator.

To cater for different learning and communication styles among the class members, the instructor also prepared several roles that can be fulfilled through text-based communication. As she noticed some students prefer to respond via Zoom Chat and some were introvert communicator, several roles such as scriptwriter, chat moderator, chat commenters and note takers were also provided as part of the virtual forum ecosystem.

The key role in ensuring the successful conduct of this forum was pinned on the role of the class's representative who acted as the invigilator during the planning and implementation of the virtual forum. The instructor requested the class's representative to take on the role as the invigilator. The instructor outlined the invigilator's role as follow:

The invigilator will be responsible to help and monitor the sign-up and online forum participation from behind the scene. Please be prepared to prompt the assigned person to stay alert & responsive to their assigned roles during the virtual forum. Invigilator will also double as time keeper to ensure that the online forum will not go more than 90 – 120 (maximum).

The invigilator key duties was to ensure that all the roles were assigned and filled by all 33 students, and met the conditions as requested by the instructor (please see Appendix). During the implementation of the virtual forum, the invigilator also played a key role in ensuring that all students participated or responded as per their assigned roles.

The virtual forum took place during the class time as a learning activity. This activity was designed as a strategy to empower the students' participation in an online class. The guided roles were provided and preassigned to scaffold the planning and implementation of the virtual forum. The administration of the forum was fully led by the students and the instructor only played the role as an observer cum evaluator during the virtual forum. The forum took about 90 minutes in total and was successfully implemented without major disruption or difficulty.

5. Results and Discussions

Upon completion, all students were asked to provide their feedback about the virtual forum activity. A total of 32 out of 33 registered students in the class answered the survey. All but one students reported that this was their first time participating in a virtual forum that is fully students-led (96.6%). Students were asked about their satisfaction level and their perception about the learning that they gained from the virtual forum activity. All students reported that they were very satisfied (62.5%) and satisfied (37.5%) with their own contribution during the virtual forum. As a matter of fact, almost all the students (96.9%) felt like their role is significant and important in contributing to the success of the virtual forum.

All of the students were also satisfied with the learning experiences that they had during the guided virtual forum. Please refer to Figure 1 for an overview of class's feedback about the guided virtual forum activity.

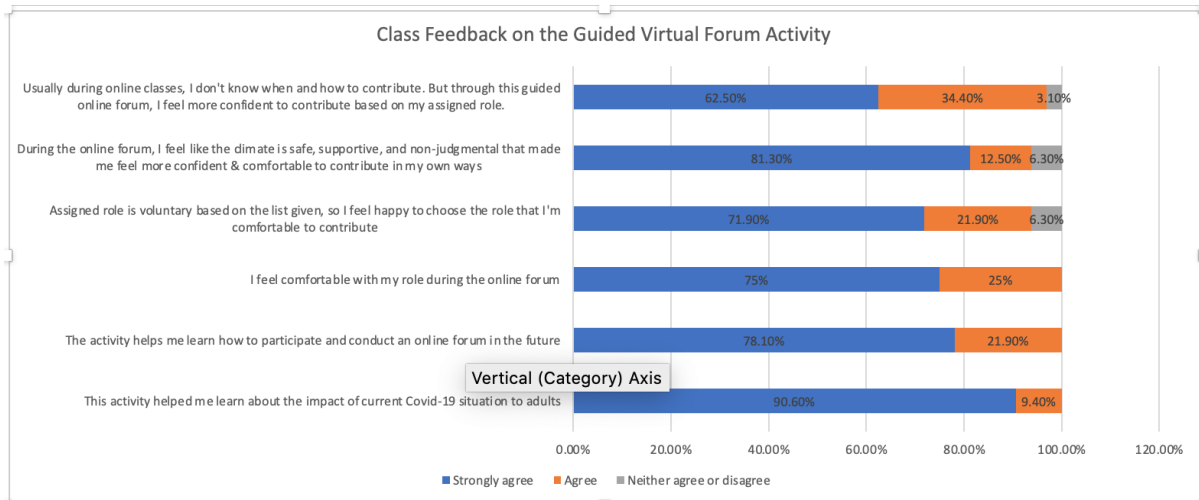


Figure 1: Survey results on the guided virtual forum activity

Some students also shared their written feedback in the survey provided. They reported positive comments about their learning experiences as a result of participating in the virtual forum. The students reported their learning gains both from content (i.e. topic of the forum related to the course's subject matter) and process perspectives, namely their increased speaking skill and confidence level in learning online.

- *Everything goes smoothly for our first online forum. Firstly, I learned to express my view and opinion virtually in front of lecturer and classmates confidently. Besides that, I can also learn some new insights from the sharing of my friends in the forum.*
- *I can contribute my ideas as an audio commentator and learn my weaknesses when speaking online. Learn how others delivering their points and focus on their strength to be inspired. Admired others contribution with different roles which they are managed to do perform it very well. This is my first and excellent experience involve in students led online forum.*
- *The forum build up my confidence level & become active user of media and technology in learning.*
- *Honestly, at first I have no idea how online class will be conducted. I prefer to have the normal ways of learning through physical class. However participating in our online class give me new experience and opinion that online class can be so much fun and interactive.*
- *This is a great opportunity for us to explore the new paradigm of online learning. Post COVID-19 situation had bring the education to be conducted online or via distance learning. However, it is throughout this AE class, that we are able to experience different interactive way of online learning (despite the regular one) such as experiencing break out room activities and online forum. Perhaps, we could perform other variety methods of learning in the future.*

The overall results showed that the virtual forum activity was successful in achieving its purpose; to empower the students' participation in online classes while at the same time, learning about the content or subject matter effectively. Several principles of flux pedagogy were also inculcated in the design of the virtual forum; emphasizing on safe climate for learning, reciprocity of efforts from the instructor as well as the students, and a contextualized topic that was based on the current issue (the impact of COVID-19 on adults).

6. Summary and Future Work

Forums, when carefully designed, can be a powerful learning tool to empower and engage students' learning. This paper reports on a strategy used in an online class using guided virtual forum. Atypical to asynchronous forum discussion (AOD) that are commonly used in online classes, this virtual forum was designed to emulate the real-world forum that took place synchronously after some careful planning and preparation by all the students involved.

The key purpose of this virtual forum was twofold. First, the virtual forum was designed as an interactive online activity for learning about the subject matter in interactive and effective ways. Secondly, the purpose of the virtual forum was to familiarize the students with new norms of learning online, where each student must learn to participate and contribute their opinions from behind the screen. Past studies have reported that development of speaking skills was not the primary strength of online mode of education (Robinson & Hullinger, 2008). However, this paper reports a contrary finding among the students who participated in this virtual forum. In addition to being able to effectively learn about the subject matter, many students reported increased confidence levels in their ability to speak and participate in online classes. Overall, the survey results show feedbacks received from the students were overwhelmingly positive.

Moving forward, the instructor would like to further explore the use of guided virtual forum as a teaching strategy in other classes (for different subject matters and different levels of students), and compile more systematic empirical evidences of its effectiveness as an online teaching strategy.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank all her students in DCE5011 who participated in this guided virtual forum activity and completed the survey; which made the writing of this paper possible.

References

- Avendano, J. (2003). Student involvement: Assessing student satisfaction, gains, and quality of effort (No. AAT 3115177). Bloomington: Illinois State University. (Proquest Digital Dissertations)
- Boeren, E., Roumell, E. A., & Roessger, K. M. (2020). COVID-19 and the future of adult education: An editorial. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 70(3), 1- 4. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713620925029>
- Cole, P.G., & Chan, L.K.S. (1994). *Teaching principles and practice* (2nd ed). New York, NY: Prentice Hall.
- Johnson, J. (2003). *Distance education: The complete guide to design, delivery, and improvement*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Loncar, M., Barrett, N. E., & Liu, G. Z. (2014). Towards the refinement of forum and asynchronous online discussion in educational contexts worldwide: Trends and investigative approaches within a dominant research paradigm. *Computers & Education*, 73, 93–110. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2013.12.007>
- Ravitch, S. M. (2020). Flux pedagogy: Transforming teaching & learning during Coronavirus. Retrieved from <https://www.methodspace.com/flux-pedagogy-transforming-teaching-learning-during-coronavirus/>
- Robinson, C. C., & Hullinger, H. (2008). New Benchmarks in Higher Education: Student Engagement in Online Learning. *Journal of Education for Business*, 84(2), 101–109. <https://doi.org/10.3200/JOEB.84.2.101-109>
- Thomas, M. 2002. Learning within incoherent structures: The space of online discussion forums. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 18(3), 351-366.
- Thomas, J. (2013). Exploring the use of asynchronous online discussion in health care education: A literature review. *Computers & Education*, 69, 199–215.
- Weiss, R. E., Knowlton, D. S., & Speck, B. W. (2000). *Principles of effective teaching in the online classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Westera, W. (2011). On the changing nature of learning context: Anticipating the virtual extensions of the world. *Educational Technology & Society*, 14 (2), 201–212.
- Wua, J., Tennyson, R., Hsia, T. & Liao, Y. (2008). Analysis of e-learning innovation and core capability using a hypercube model. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 24(5), 1851-1866.

Appendix: Sign-Up Sheet for Guided Virtual Forum

	Role	Task/Prompts	Sign-up (Name & Matric No.)
1.	Master Audio Moderator	Responsible for moderating the online forum. Key tasks: Decide the entire flow of the online forum and facilitate the Q&A discussions between panellists and audio commentors. End the online forum with concluding remarks and key points from the online forum discussions	
2.	Second Audio Moderator	Provide assistance to master audio moderator in moderating the online forum. Introduce the panellists, and provide some recap and general comments throughout the session. Will be covering for master moderator if he/she needs to step away from the screen.	
3.	Scriptwriter	To assist audio moderators in preparing scripts and write up for the online forum. Scriptwriter will assist behind the scene where she/he can provide scripts to the moderators to read during the online forum, especially when concluding and summarizing the online forum as it is happening live.	
4.	Chat Moderator 1	Responsible for monitoring, prompting and responding to chat responses for Q1 – Q3 questions and other general comments asked in the Zoom Chatbox. Will be covering for Chat Moderator 2 if she/he needs to step away from the screen.	
5.	Chat Moderator 2	Responsible for monitoring, prompting and responding to chat responses for Q4 – Q7 questions asked in the Zoom Chatbox. Will be covering for Chat Moderator 1 if she/he needs to step away from the screen.	
6.	Technical Moderator	Responsible for preparing slides for all the 7Qs, navigating the Zoom shared screen during the guided online forum, and providing technical support in Zoom for panellists and commentors during the online forum (where applicable).	
7.	Invigilator / Time Keeper	Will be responsible to help and monitor the online forum participation according to the class assigned roles from behind the scene. Be prepared to prompt the assigned person to stay alert & be responsive of their assigned roles during the online forum. Invigilator will also double as time keeper to ensure the online forum will not go more than 90 - 120 minutes (max).	
		Note: All panellists MUST provide audio responses to the following Qs during the online forum. The groupings are based on the class's	

		<p>group assignments.</p> <p>Answers can be pre-prepared together by group members for each group. Please premise your answers based on what you've learned and read so far in this class, as well as current information & literature that you can find to support your answers.</p>	
8.	Panellist from Group 1	Q: In general, how are adults affected by the Covid-19 situation? In Malaysia? Asia? Across the world?	
9.	Panellist from Group 2	Q: What are the key challenges that will be faced by adults post Covid-19? Please share at least 2 points.	
10.	Panellist from Group 3	Q: What kind of new normal that adults will be expected to adapt in post Covid-19 situation? Please share at least 2 points. Can all groups of adults adapt to these new norms?	
11.	Panellist from Group 4	Q: What important roles do adult education play post Covid-19 situation? Please share at least 2 points.	
12.	Panellist from Group 5	Q: How will the 2020 global pandemic present opportunities for elevating adult learning in post Covid-19 situation? In what ways, please elaborate.	
13.	Panellist from Group 6	Q: What kind of policy (either company or government policies) can be proposed to help adults adapt and recover during post-Covid 19 situation? Please share at least 2 suggestions.	
14.	Panellist from Group 7	Q: What are the key lessons and future of adult education in post-Covid 19 situation? Please share at least 2 points.	
15.	Note Takers 1 & 2 (2 persons)	Consolidate and summarize key points from panellists & commenters (from both audio & chats) for Q1 – Q4 Please work together with Note Takers 3 & 4 to come out with a reflection report to be shared to the class later	
16.	Note Takers 3 & 4 (2 persons)	Consolidate and summarize key points from panellists & commenters (from both audio & chats) for Q5 – Q7, and overall conclusions from the online forum. Please work together with Note Takers 1 & 2 to come out with a reflection report to be shared to the class later	
		Note: You cannot be a commenter for your own group's panellist.	
17.	Audio Commenter 1	Respond to information/answer provided by Panellist 1	

18.	Chat Commenter 1	Respond to information/answer provided by Panellist 1	
19.	Audio Commenter 2	Respond to information/answer provided by Panellist 2	
20.	Chat Commenter 2	Respond to information/answer provided by Panellist 2	
21.	Audio Commenter 3	Respond to information/answer provided by Panellist 3	
22.	Chat Commenter 3	Respond to information/answer provided by Panellist 3	
23.	Audio Commenter 4	Respond to information/answer provided by Panellist 4	
24.	Chat Commenter 4	Respond to information/answer provided by Panellist 4	
25.	Audio Commenter 5	Respond to information/answer provided by Panellist 5	
26.	Chat Commenter 5	Respond to information/answer provided by Panellist 5	
27.	Audio Commenter 6	Respond to information/answer provided by Panellist 6	
28.	Chat Commenter 6	Respond to information/answer provided by Panellist 6	
29.	Audio Commenter 7	Respond to information/answer provided by panellist 7	
30.	Chat Commenter 7	Respond to information/answer provided by Panellist 7	
31.	General Commenter (General conclusion of the forum)	Respond to information/answer provided by any Panellist (Q1 - Q7) during the live online forum	