Chapter 4. The Literacy Load is Too Damn High! A PARS Approach to Cohort-Based Discussion

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Abstract: This chapter demonstrates how a cohort-based model of student discussion can ameliorate student and instructor literacy loads within the current paradigm of online course enrollments that often exceed the recommendations of the CCCC. The PARS approach to online writing instruction offers a framework for understanding and designing a model of discussion that encourages quality over quantity for low stakes student engagement and that lowers the stakes for instructor engagement in student discussion. The focus of this chapter emphasizes the role student collaboration and peer to peer learning and assessment in online learning. Readers of this chapter will learn how to develop personalized cohorts, strategically administrate cohort-based discussion, and provide accessible and responsive assessment of student engagement within cohorts.

Keywords: online writing instruction, literacy load, assessment, discussion, discussion boards

As a former online English student and current online English instructor, I am quite guilty of skimming discussion boards, hoping to find a quick intervention or a place to insert an easy, helpful comment. The cause of this phenomenon, the cumulative amount of reading and writing one must perform in a course, has been labelled "literacy load" by June Griffin and Deborah Minter (2013). According to Griffin and Minter's (2013) report, "the reading load of the online classes was more than 2.75 times greater than the face-to-face courses" (p. 153). What for Scott Warnock (2009) is the very virtue of online writing courses, that students and instructors "write, write, and write some more" (p. 69), is what leads Griffin and Minter to conclude that "online courses as they are often configured can overtax students, particularly academically underserved and ELL [English Language Learner] students" (2013, p. 153). Quantity of writing and reading has been a point of emphasis in advocating for the validity of online writing instruction (OWI). However, the literacy load required by quantity-focused OWI pedagogy leaves both students and instructors "stretched," according to Lisa Melonçon and Heidi Skurat Harris (2015), often at the expense of learning outcomes. How can we as online writing instructors mitigate the detrimental effects of a high literacy

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load on us and our students without sacrificing the rich interactions that take place in online writing courses?

For the past three years I have managed to mitigate the literacy load in my online writing courses (OWCs) through cohort-based discussion. Simply put, cohort-based discussion revolves around student discussion in small groups over the course of an entire class term. If most OWC discussions are analogous to the one big class-wide discussion favored by face-to-face (F2F) instructors, cohort-based discussions are analogous to the breakout group discussions also used in F2F and other synchronous courses. Working with a limited number of peers allows students to develop more intimate, trusting relationships with one another while still learning from other and opposing perspectives. As the research team of Cunningham, Hilliard et al. (2019) have demonstrated, stronger relationships among discussion participants in OWCs equates to better outcomes from discussions and peer review sessions. But perhaps the most important conclusion put forth by Cunningham et al. (2019) is that smaller class sizes correlate to a stronger sense of community within the class. We may not be able to rely on our institutions to do the right thing and institute lower course caps, but we do have control over how we structure discussion (i.e., creating small discussion cohorts) and therefore how large and how strong the peer communities are.

My use of cohort-based discussion extends the research and application of group discussions in OWI, a pedagogical method that is currently underutilized in OWCs. For example, Carmen Kynard (2007) has described a hybrid model of first-year writing in which she used group-based Blackboard discussions in tandem with F2F class wide discussion. Also using a form of cohort-based discussion, Ken Gillam and Shannon R. Wooden (2013) have endorsed an ecological model of writing in OWCs where students collaborate in small groups for a single assignment cycle in order to balance cognitive and communal writing outcomes. The logical next step from both Kynard (2007) and Gillam and Wooden (2013) is to implement cohort-based discussion in a fully online course for an entire semester. Fewer peers means greatly reduced literacy loads, allowing for deeper reading and more meaningful conversation among peers. A greater emphasis on socially constructed knowledge and collaborative learning creates a more student-centered online classroom, allowing instructors to take a more "hands off" approach to discussion. By providing less direct feedback and focusing more on discussion monitoring and facilitation, instructors can reduce a significant amount of their writing load.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will lay out practical guidelines for how to implement cohort-based discussions in an OWC. For instructors, there are three areas to focus on when implementing cohort-based discussions: *development*, *administration*, and *assessment*. Each of these areas incorporate aspects of the PARS approach and are informed by my own experience and observation of previously conducted courses, and feedback and interviews with former students participating in cohort-based discussions.

Design: Personalized and Accessible

Putting together cohorts should be a collaborative process between instructors and students. Cohorts can naturally reduce literacy loads for students just by reducing the number of peers they interact with, and strategic decisions regarding cohort development can help increase the quality of interaction between students. While cohort development can add some extra work for instructors at the beginning of the course term, they can help reduce instructor literacy load in the long term. Rather than just randomly putting a certain number of students into a virtual pod together, it is best to make sure that cohorts have some common ground and some rationale for why peer cohorts have been selected. In other words, cohorts should be personalized.

As Jessie Borgman and Casey McArdle (2019) suggest, icebreaker activities in the first week of a course are a great method for personalizing the online classroom. Naturally, an icebreaker or introductory discussion is the best place to begin the process of selecting cohorts. In order to learn more about them, and to have their peers do the same, have students self-identify their areas of study, paper topic interests, educational/professional background, and personal information (that they are comfortable disclosing) in these introductory discussions. Personal disclosures allow students to see their peers both as fellow humans and allows them to make personal connections with one another. These interactions are vital for instructors to see who gets along with whom and can be an important set of data for constructing cohorts.

In addition to instructor observation, it is a good practice to solicit student input for such an important decision as deciding who they are going to be stuck with for the next six to 14 weeks. As Jessie Borgman and Jason Dockter (2018) have persuasively argued, online student populations have a variety of needs that can be met through the concept of user-centered design (UCD). One such tool for instructors to tailor their courses to their students' learning needs, Borgman and Dockter (2018) suggest, are private polls and surveys for students to communicate their "learning preferences, expectations and experiences as online students" (p. 98), information that is also useful for cohort construction. Instructors should be explicit about what these surveys will be used for and solicit student input on what type of experience they wish to get out of a cohort: are they looking to interact with disciplinarily like-minded people, or are they more interested in a supportive group with whom they a share a number of personal interests? By soliciting and collecting this information, instructors can ensure a personalized and *accessible* cohort experience.

Once all this information is collected within the first week, it is time to organize students into cohorts. For starters, it is important to make sure there are the right number of participants in each cohort. The key is to balance reducing literacy loads for students, while ensuring that there is still a lively community where discussion is taking place. Too many participants and there is not much benefit

to the reduced cohort number and students will not have the same recognition of their peers; too few and the discussion boards will feel like a ghost town, which can be further exacerbated by mid-semester enrollment attrition. Ideally, a cohort should have just enough members that they can survive a student dropping the course and that each student can name their peers off the top of their head (which will be important for assessment). I have found the magic number to be six for my purposes. That number could easily be expanded to eight, depending on student and instructor preference.

Once cohort sizes are established, it is time to sort students into cohorts. I have found that cohorts can operate very similarly to discourse communities, so putting students into cohorts based on similar majors or areas of study, like fine arts and IT majors, has been very successful. Combing students with similar topic interests (like in Gillam and Wooden's 2013 study) has also been effective, whether students have been interested in writing about sports or social justice. Similarly, students who have similar educational and professional backgrounds, like military veterans and returning students, have been able to draw on their shared experiences and really come together to build some lively connections and conversations.

Of course, there are some cohort construction methodologies to avoid. For example, Paul Kei Matsuda (2006) warns against linguistic containment, the isolation of multilingual students from their monolingual peers. Instructors need to be mindful of cohort demographics, including race, gender, linguistics, (dis)ability, and so forth. As Josephine Walwema (2018) asserts, in an online learning environment "dialogue with people of other cultures helps build social responsibility and the goodwill to promote the wellbeing of all people" (p. 31). It is important to remember that students who benefit from white cultural hegemony are both the ones who need to be educated about other cultures and who are often resistant to such learning. For this reason, students from currently marginalized and historically underrepresented backgrounds should not be made to carry the burden of educating their more privileged and recalcitrant peers. Whenever student information is available, instructors should avoid containing students to homogenous cohorts or relying on tokenism to "diversify" cohorts.

1. What did you already know about the subject of this week's reading?
2. What did you learn from this reading?
3. What do you not understand from the reading?
4. How can you use this reading to help you complete the next assignment?

Figure 4.1. Reading response questions.

Instruction: Personalized and Strategic

Having assembled the discussion cohorts, the literacy load should begin to lessen for students and instructors. In order to separate cohort discussion spaces,

instructors can create separate discussion boards for each cohort. Depending on the course management system (CMS) being used there are some shortcuts to creating multiple discussion boards for different cohorts. Some CMSs have a built-in "group" function that facilitates the use of discussion cohorts. However, CMSs are not always desirable to use, so there are ways to bootstrap discussion cohorts in any online space. For example, instructors could simply create multiple versions of the same discussion prompt, labelled for each individual cohort. Although less ideal, discussion could continue to be conducted in one single message board, but students would only be responsible for interacting with members of their cohort.

Once the discussion boards are made, it is time to think about discussion prompts. One type of prompt that has benefitted the most from the cohort-based discussion, in my experience, is a reading response discussion. Students are asked to answer the four questions listed in Figure 4.1 in response to the week's assigned reading and respond to one another based on their answers. These questions (adapted from Cheryl Glenn's teaching practice for an online context) allow students to reflect on their own reading and synthesis of course material, while also inviting students to deliberate over difficult concepts.

Moreover, discussion boards in a cohort environment function as a site of collaboration and knowledge construction, as a result of fewer discussion participants. As Kenneth A. Bruffee (1984) and John Trimbur (1989) suggested several decades ago, collaborative learning is an integral part of composition pedagogy and the "democratization" of learning. As personalized cohorts and communities of practice, discussion participants are likely already familiar with the topics and concepts that their peers are working with, more so than the instructor. Since instructors know more about writing concepts than about the disciplinary content of students' interests, the personalization of cohorts enables students to take charge on matters of content. For this reason, discussion boards in many cases can be turned over almost exclusively to the students as "their" space. It is, of course, recommended for instructors to continue reading through student discussions, but instructor input can be kept to a minimum through some early discussion modelling, along with conflict resolution and thought provocation when necessary.

In keeping with the strategic instruction advocated by Borgman and McArdle (2019), instructors need to be strategic about how they interact with students in discussion, which can be aided by collaboration. Whenever a member of the cohort has a question about the reading, their peers are prompted to answer the question and help explain more difficult concepts to one another collectively. Rather than the instructor being the locus of knowledge, students are encouraged to discover their own meaning-making and knowledge-building capacities through collaborative discussion. This collaborative, meaning-making discussion is exemplified by the "Blackboard Flava-Flavin" that Kynard (2007) observed in her hybrid first-year writing courses. Trickstering and digital signifying are meth-

ods of re-constructing knowledge and the university that are culturally specific to the Black working class students in Kynard's study. However, they offer proof that students are more than capable of advanced meaning-making without the direct hand of instructor intervention.

In addition to reading responses, writing workshops also work well in cohort-based discussions. These can take the form of planning or brainstorming for the next assignment, concept exercises, or peer review of rough drafts. Like reading responses, workshops in cohort-based discussion encourage students to collaborate with one another to improve their writing through planning, exercise, and draft review. A strategic use of cohort discussion helps to mitigate instructor literacy loads by leveraging the potential of collaborative learning.

On occasion I have found that some cohorts just do not result in fruitful discussion, either because there was conflict, too many participants had to drop the course, or there was not the alignment of interests that there appeared to be at the beginning of the course. Rather than ask students to bear through it for the rest of term, redistributing the cohort members into other appropriate cohorts has proved to be surprisingly effective. If instructors have kept notes from the introductory discussion and have continued to monitor discussion, it should be quite easy to place students into new cohorts. After several weeks, many of the cohorts have been able to create congenial communities that are welcoming to newcomers rather than exclusive and reactionary. A quick explanation and introduction should be more than enough to add a new member to a cohort and to keep it running smoothly.

Assessment: Accessible and Responsive

When Borgman and McArdle (2019) talk about responsiveness, they discuss determining the how and the when of giving feedback to students. Cohort-based discussions present new opportunities for instructors to assess and provide feedback on student participation in discussion. In typical discussion environments, instructors can assess participation based on completion, which does not provide much holistic feedback, or on the instructor's sense of a student's contributions to discussion, attended by a burdensome literacy load. Students can also be asked to provide self-reflections and self-assessments, but this individualistic look at discussion can ignore the rich social and cognitive interchanges that occur in discussion boards. With cohort-based discussions, students can be asked to reflect on their own contributions to discussion, as well as that of their peers. These reflections can in turn be used by instructors to assess the quality of participation and to offer feedback for improvement and encouragement.

This instructor-proctored peer assessment can best be performed using surveys, as seen in Figure 4.2. Each student can receive the following survey questions, repeated for the number of peers in their cohort (e.g., if there are six stu-

dents in each cohort, individual students will need to answer the assessment questions five times). The questions in Figure 4.2 help instructors to assess individual student participation through the experience of their peers, while helping to mitigate instructor literacy load during assessment. Students not only help instructors wade through discussion boards by highlighting specific strengths and weaknesses throughout the instructional unit, they offer their own feedback for peers that can be curated, anonymized, and distributed to the student.

1. Which of your peers are you assessing?
   a. How well did this classmate contribute to your learning in this unit?
   b. They were an excellent resource for myself and others.
   c. They were an active and helpful participant.
   d. They were not a very helpful participant.
   e. They actively prohibited my learning (explain why below).
2. What is the best example of this classmate's helpful participation during this unit? Be specific.
3. What could this classmate do to be a more helpful participant in the course? What specific things would be helpful to yourself or others?

Figure 4.2. Peer assessment survey.

Turning to the individual questions in the survey, Question 2 asks students to provide a holistic assessment of their peers' contributions to discussion. I have found this method makes assessment *accessible* to students, because they have a seat at the table for assessing a space that is more theirs than the instructor's, particularly since standards of assessment have historically placed the instructor as the arbiter of "good" and "bad" participation. Student answers to Question 2 can be used as a rough heuristic for assigning letter grades. For example, the student who is "an excellent resource" has earned an A, whereas the student who was "not very helpful" has earned a C. It is of course helpful to scaffold this practice of grading for students beforehand. Instructors who practice ungrading can still use the holistic assessment as a heuristic to identify students that need more support. Option d ("they actively prohibited my learning") allows students the opportunity to disclose issues in discussion that they had not previously brought to the instructor's attention or were not readily apparent to the instructor. As one example, I have had a student recognize that one of her peers was frequently plagiarizing her posts and responses in discussion. The student she accused was changing the language enough that I was unable to recognize what he was doing, but as the original author of the posts, the first student recognized this pattern of her own ideas being passed off in another's words. By bringing this to my attention, I was able to privately intervene.

Question 3 of the survey asks students to provide evidence and a rationale for their holistic assessment of each peer. This question not only helps students practice analytical writing by requiring them to support their original claim, but

it also allows them to calibrate their response to Question 2. If they selected option a for one of their peers but are having difficulty identifying a particularly helpful post or behavior from that peer, this allows them to rethink their original assessment. Furthermore, this question helps instructors to identify the strengths of an individual students' participation without having to review every discussion board in every cohort.

Question 4 acts similarly to Question 3, by asking students to reflect on how their peers could improve their contributions to discussion. Even students that instructors may perceive as helpful and insightful contributors to discussion can improve as peers. For example, I have had an excellent student with previous writing experience who I thought was a very helpful and insightful contributor in discussion. However, a few of her peers who were less experienced writers observed that her comments to them, particularly in peer review, could be overwhelming and even intimidating. Thanks to their input, I was able to remind this student of her audience and her responses quickly became more amenable and helpful to her peers.

In addition to allowing students a moment of reflection, the peer assessment surveys allow instructors to be more *responsive* when assessing discussion. As Beth Hewett (2015) reminds us, "minimal, yet personalized response sets boundaries that ease the instructor literacy load" (p. 105) By curating students' reflections into a single assessment comment, the literacy load is further eased. Once students complete the surveys, I go about collating the responses for each student, reading all the encouraging and constructive comments that students have provided on their cohort mates. From these responses I write up a brief comment for each student that summarizes the assessment of the discussion participation, highlighting the areas of excellence and suggestions for improvement. This process allows peer feedback to be anonymized, so that students can speak honestly about their peers; students do not feel pressure to keep quiet about issues for fear of personal blowback, and instructors can filter out unwarranted comments about a student.

In my experience, such comments typically come from students who are perpetuating linguistic racism against their peers who use Black Language (Baker-Bell, 2020) or Global Englishes (Canagarajah, 2013). Such comments can offer a moment for instructors to push back against students' prejudices and advocate for what April Baker-Bell (2020) defines as "Linguistic Justice," a pedagogy that "affords Black [and other non-white] students the same kind of linguistic liberties that are afforded to white students" (p. 7). It goes without saying that comments that perpetuate linguistic racism in peer assessment should not be used to negatively affect grades of the students targeted by these comments.

As an example of successful instructor-proctored peer assessment, this was my feedback in the first unit for the abovementioned student whose participation was excellent, but was at times overwhelming for her peers (names changed to protect the innocent):

> The people loved your contributions to discussion, Hannah! One thing that came up is that your comments can be a little overwhelming and intimidating for others to engage with, given your ethos as someone with previous writing experience. Something worth keeping an eye on as you modulate your participation to suit your audience of peers.

I have found that sometimes students perfectly describe someone's contributions better than I could and are worth quoting in my feedback. For example,

> One of your peers referred to you as a "rockstar." Keep on rocking, Andrew.

Discussion cohort assessment gives students access to the structure of power entailed through assessment and allows for responsive feedback based on the principles of collaborative learning.

Final Thoughts and Application

As I have illustrated in this chapter, cohort-based discussion greatly mitigates the burden of student and instructor literacy loads associated with discussion and assessment. An additional benefit of reduced literacy load is that discussion boards no longer emphasize the quantity of reading and writing students need to perform, but rather emphasize the quality of peer interaction. Moreover, cohort-based discussions are demonstrably practical through an adherence to the PARS approach: they offer personalized discussion spaces and feedback for students, follow existing recommendations of accessibility and universal design, are responsive while managing instructor literacy load, and offer a strategic way to structure an OWC.

Students themselves have spoken to the perceived benefits of using cohort-based discussion, not only for managing the literacy load they experience, but for helping develop their writing skills and making class more enjoyable. According to one student, "the fact that there were [only six people in the cohort,] we were not exactly overwhelmed . . . trying to give so many people feedback on what they were doing." Another student expressed his favor for cohort-based discussion by observing that for him, "the smaller the size [of participants in discussion], the less trepidation" about participating. Some students attributed the improvement of their writing and that of others to the cohorts. One stated that "small group sizes were by far the best format in my opinion to develop basic writing skills," while another observed that "using cohorts for discussion is an effective way to help the students better their writing." But perhaps most importantly, several students graced cohort-based discussion with the epithet, "enjoyable."

As an instructor, my observations also support student claims about their own development through cohort-based discussion. Students have made more

substantial connections with their peers and have turned out higher quality writing through discussion cohorts than through other discussion models I have used. Furthermore, student attrition has been curbed significantly, perhaps as a result of students' increased learning or even enjoyment. Whereas previously only around 70 percent of students had completed the course, students in the cohorts now complete the course closer to 90 percent of the time now. My job as an instructor has also changed and improved in some ways. Using cohorts allows me to better keep track of who individual students are because of how the cohort divisions group students. Most importantly it has lightened my literacy load in terms of responding to students in discussion and in feedback. As a result, reading through student discussion has become less of a chore and more of a rewarding experience.

As observed throughout this chapter, cohort-based discussions still need to consider issues that can arise from intercultural and linguistic engagement, especially when it comes to assessment. Certainly, there is further work to be done to adequately address linguistic racism within cohorts-based discussion. With that being said, my hope is that this chapter, to put it in Borgman and McArdle's golf metaphor, can help instructors avoid the bunkers as they assemble their own cohort-based OWCs.

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