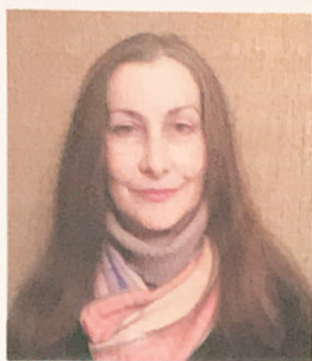


Facebook Discussions as a Type of Language Activity and Assessment

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The idea of having an online class discussion with the participation of the 2nd-year students of Vinnytsia State Pedagogical University (VSPU) was suggested by Dr. David Powell of Missouri State Pedagogical University (USA) back in 2015, after his first visit to Ukraine. He had already moderated many class discussion forums on his course web pages on Moodle, while for his Ukrainian colleagues, Olena Zmiyevska and Tamara Glazunova, it was new experience. Since VSPU did not have a university-sponsored discussion platform, it was decided to have the discussion in a closed group in Facebook (FB). The topic of the discussion was prompted by the Curriculum of the Faculty of foreign languages and sounded like "Do you think factors like climate, geography of a country, its history affect national character? Write about the USA, Great Britain and Ukraine". There were some fears and doubts concerning the probability of stereotyping the attitudes to nations and countries.

The discussion started in April 18, 2015 and lasted for a week. The discussion group of 14 students and 3 moderators was created and clear ground rules were set up.

Before the beginning of the discussion clear expectations were stated. All the students were supposed to write an initial post of 150-300 words about one of the countries (Ukraine, England, Ireland, Scotland, the USA, Wales) in the form of a

solid paragraph of informal English, using proper punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and reasonable spoken grammar. It was required that in their initial post the students should talk about one main point at a time. They were to stay focused, but illustrate their points with rich detail from personal experience. They also had to post at least two replies, a bit shorter than 100 words, but still, quite substantive posts. They could also initiate a new discussion thread. They had to exchange ideas and discuss issues raised from their own perspective. Every new post was to carry the conversation forward with new examples, elaboration, or perspective – not just to be a string of "I agree with what she said." They had to specify what in particular prompted the agreement, how they had arrived at their conclusion or what they had experienced to support it. One of the main conditions was to be open and friendly, polite and tolerant of other students' opinions.

The students were also informed of the assessment criteria, worked out by Dr. Powell and presented in the form of the following rubric.

Having started with the initial posts, the discussion drifted from country to country, from history and geographical position to national character, from culture in its broader sense, to values, national cuisines etc.

The members of the discussion shared their *love of their countries* and peoples:

Svetlana A.: "One of the main features of the Ukrainian people is respect for the mother. This is the consequence of the fact that Ukrainians have always been farmers. The land feeds and protects us as a mother protects her child...".

Standard	Does not address standard (0 pts)	Minimally addresses standard (5 points)	Meets or exceeds standard (10 points)
Quality of detail	No post or post does not address topic	Original post on topic with some detail from relevant to topic, personal experience and/or class resources.	Original post on topic with rich detail relevant to topic, personal experience and/or class resources
Length of post	No post or post does not address topic	Too short; Just a topic sentence or two OR Too long: More than 400 words. Do not ramble.	Starter post: at least 6-8 sentences/100-300 words, good focus on topic Follow-up Comment: at least 4-5 sentences (50-60 words) – specific focus on one clear idea with detail
Number of posts	No post or post does not address topic	Fewer than minimum number of posts OR Did not reply to direct question from instructor	One starter post, two replies to students, and one reply to each instructor post* If instructor asks you a question you must respond.
New Contribution to Conversation	Off task OR Simple statement of agreement or disagreement	Post refers to new information or perspective but does not elaborate or explore the topic.	Post conveys a clear sense of new information or perspective with new details or examples to extend the conversation.
Personal Point of View	Unoriginal restatement of textbook or other's points of view.	Simplistic statements of preference or uncritical, knee-jerk responses. Little real sense of authentic identification with viewpoint being described	Clear sense of authentic personal identification with viewpoints with details from personal experience, elaborating on personal values or perspectives.
Language	Serious problems with several categories of usage and composition	Intermittent problems with multiple categories of usage and composition OR many repetitions of one or two problems	Minimal minor issues with usage and composition
Student's initial post - 1-4 points; Student's reply to Instructor A - 1-2 points; Student's reply to Instructor B - 1-2points;		Student's reply to student 1 – 1 point; Student's reply to student 2 - 1 point.	

David At Cape to Svetlana Andreyeva: *Your words are so evocative, I can almost hear the swelling of a stirring, spiritual Slavic anthem rising behind the words... The rest is pure enchantment in colors, sound, and motion, that makes your heart ache with joy. This is the love of the land, the pride of people and place. Yes. This is the Ukrainian soul.*

Bozhenko I.: *The Ukrainians are hospitable. Everybody in Ukraine knows that the saying "my house is at the very end of the street" means "I don't care, it is not my business". But actually, this saying was taken from the kossacks' words, and the real*

meaning was "Please, come and visit me first", as kossacks' houses were built at the very end of the village.

Cultural differences were specified:

David At Cape: *What I remember most about Ukraine (besides the wonderful people and the food – omigod the food!) is that everybody walks or rides the train. Both modes of transport are almost unheard of in U.S. culture. The U.S. is characterized by vast open spaces and a deep historic attachment to individualism. Because of this - and historical ac-*

cidents of entrepreneurship – we have been defined in modern times by the automobile. Silly as it may seem, the automobile has penetrated every aspect of social and economic structure.

Some *old stereotypes* were revealed:

David At Cape to Iryna and Olya: *It's interesting that you should ask about the Russian character. I have been conducting an on-again off-again conversation all week with a friend about how Americans perceive the Russian (and Ukrainian) character. Those who have not actually met Russians (or Ukrainians) tend to think in terms of outdated Cold War stereotypes. In fact, many would confidently tell you that Ukraine is part of Russia.*

When the discussion was driving to its close, the students answered the following questions by way of feedback:

1. What was different about the Facebook class, compared to "regular" classes?
2. Did you find the Facebook class instructive? In what particular way?
3. Would you like to have another Facebook class in this course or some future course?
4. What should be done the same or differently for a Facebook class in the future?
5. Did you find this format difficult to access or work with?

The feedback of the students was generally positive – all of the participants admitted it was a great and unforgettable communication experience. The students found the Facebook discussions instructive as they improved their English language writing and discussion skills due to the extensive communication practice and the constructive feedback from the moderators. For many of them it was a unique opportunity to communicate with a native speaker and to learn about the cultures of English speaking countries 'first hand'. They especially enjoyed free and relaxed mode of interaction, as they could visit and revisit the group page at any suitable time and work at their own pace. Accessibility of the FB discussion group page and availability of reference and assessment materials also contributed to the effectiveness of the discussion. The participants expressed their desire to participate in online discussions of the same kind in future.

Having analyzed the procedure of the Facebook discussion, we have arrived at the conclusion that it has the following advantages:

- FB discussion makes learning student-centered, as students are given a choice of topics for discussion, clear discussion guidance instructions and assessment criteria for self- and peer-assessment; the instructors' participation is minimized; students feel more responsible for the quality of their posts; students' needs and interests are taken into account.
- It caters for multiple intelligences (interpersonal, intrapersonal, verbal-linguistic, visual) as it promotes a stronger class community, develops trust between students; reduces anxiety with shy students; engages students in search of some extra materials due to the extra time they have to think over their initial post and responses; student-friendly interface of FB also attracts students.
- FB discussion develops critical thinking skills as students have to develop their writing logically, support their ideas with good arguments, reply to their peers' posts accordingly.
- It motivates students, making the process of learning interactive and engaging and giving the students a sense of achievement.
- The use of one of the most popular networks in the world gives the discussion a real life character.

Still, we also have to be aware of possible pitfalls connected with conducting the FB discussion:

- It is not always easy to keep the track of the discussion due to the format of the FB group; the discussion can go off topic.
- Some students with poor writing skills are too shy and are afraid of making mistakes.
- Some students tend to respond in an overall manner, without providing specific details or arguments.
- Students with lack of access to Internet or computers are disadvantaged;
- The discussion requires constant supervision on the part of the moderators for inappropriate content.

In conclusion, FB discussion can be a powerful tool for developing English language writing and thinking skills due to its real life character, student-centered format and motivational potential. It pushes away national boundaries and makes us realize that it is a small world and we are all more closely related to one another than one might suspect. ■