Building good discussions

Kes Schroer (with Jing Qi and Scott Millspaugh)

Dartmouth, Educational Technologies

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Who am I?

- Instructional designer

- Coordinator of Dartmouth's **Learning Fellows Program**, which places advanced undergraduates in the classroom to help with small group activities (like discussions)

Do discussions matter?

Discussions:

- Empower students to express themselves
- Build community and identity
- Allow time for reflection
- Help develop critical thinking & writing skills
- Encourage peer-peer learning

Discussions help students:

Explore

Challenge

Relate

Diagnose

Hypothesize

Prioritize

Summarize

Discussions help students imagine their future communities.

Read more: Schaellert et al. 2016

...but what if students don't connect?

- Scheduling
- Grading
- Quality of responses
- Students not participating
- One student dominating the conversation
- Balancing an instructor's visibility

Common issues with discussion boards

- Scheduling
- Grading
- Quality of responses
- Students not participating
- One student dominating the conversation
- Balancing an instructor's visibility
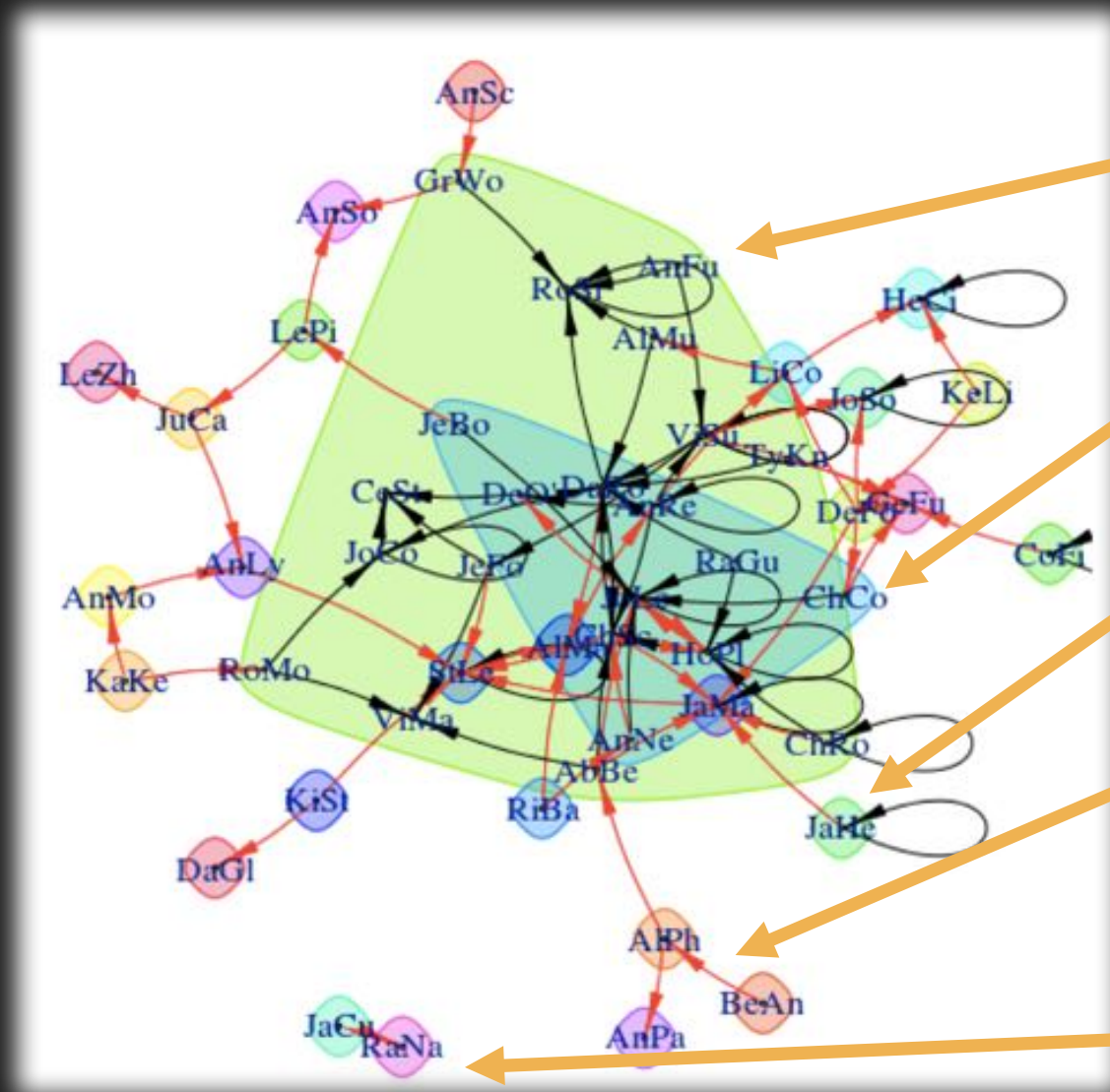- Getting students to talk to one another

Common issues with discussion boards

Using data to understand dynamics
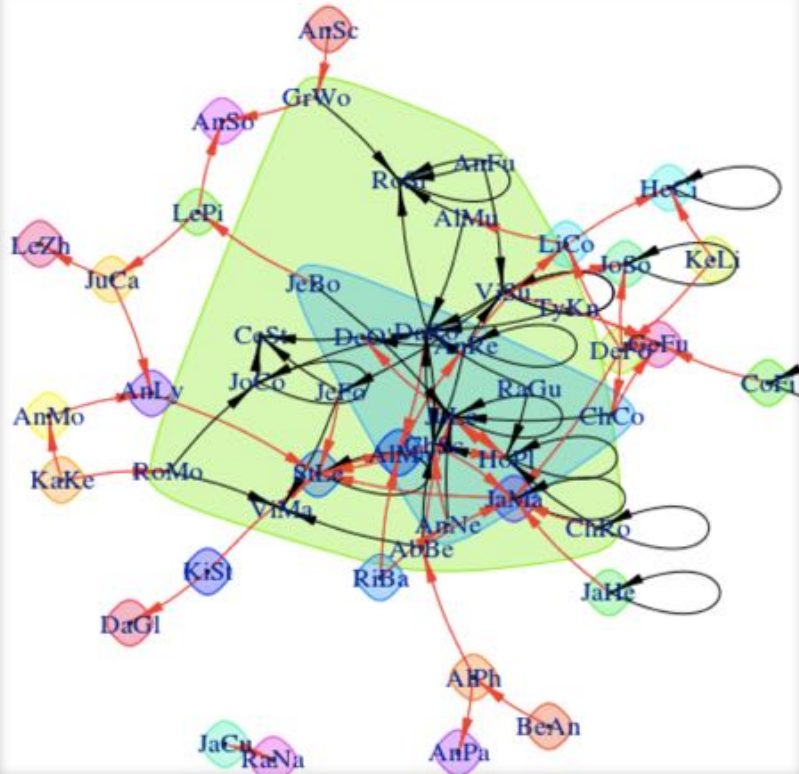
- Image from Jing Qi's shiny app

- How many communities are interacting in this discussion?
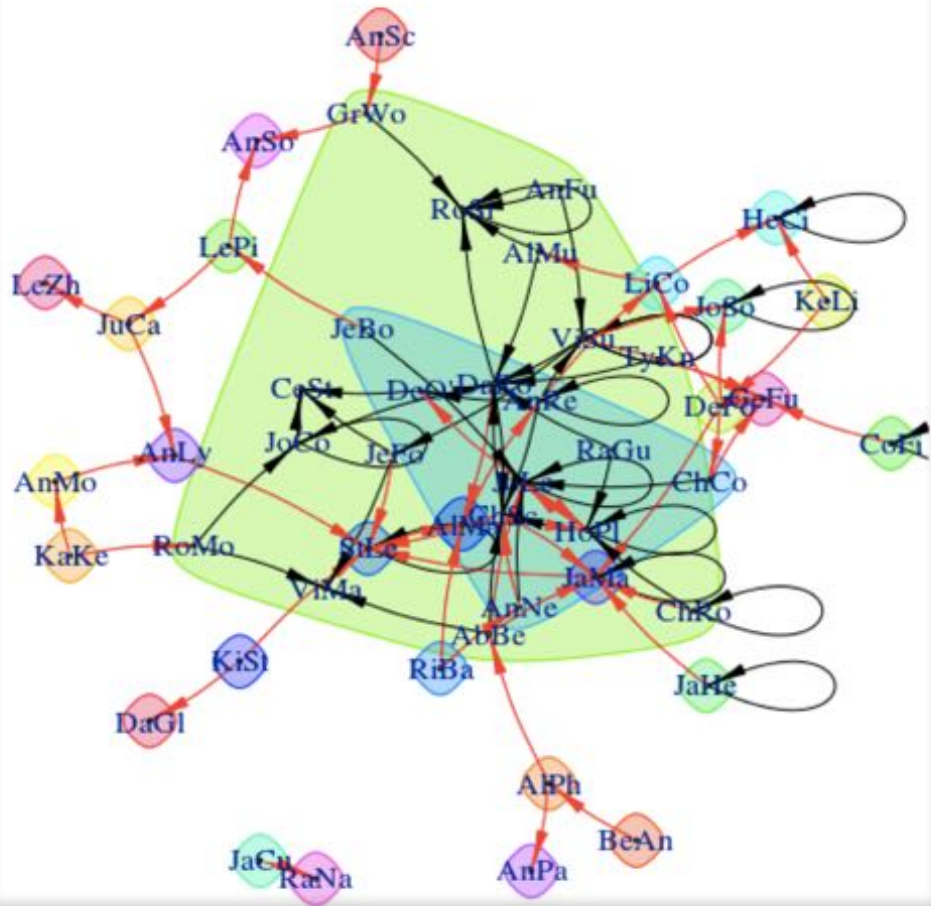
What I see happening:
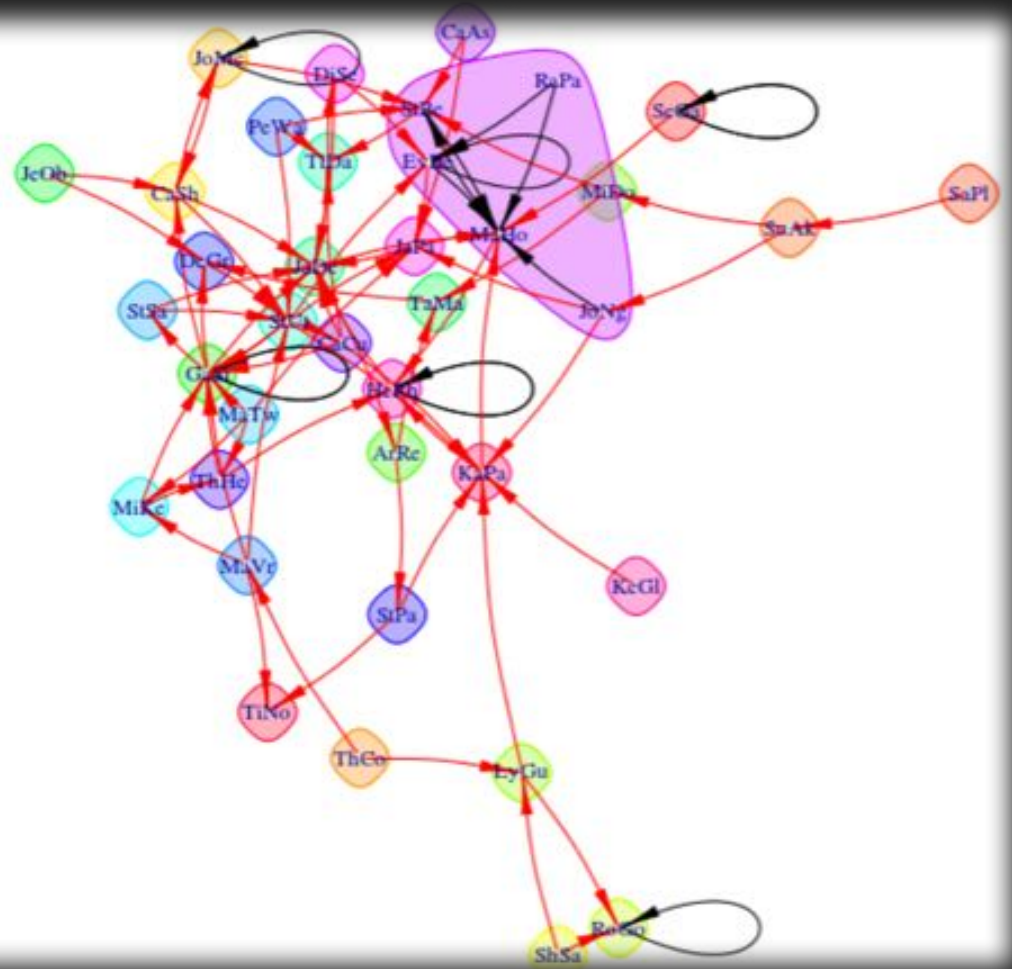

Majority voice

Tight-knit group

Peripheral voices

Mediated voices

Isolated group

Discussion 1

Discussion 2

Help students talk to each other

Instructor prompts

Think-pair-share

Jig-saws

Affinity grouping

Role-playing

Fishbowls

Instructor prompts

Created by Gan Khoon Lay
from Noun Project

○ Point out how student responses might connect to one another

○ Include writing **multiple** responses as a mandatory part of the grade

○ Revisit the type of questions asked and the length required for responses

○ Assign small groups and encourage inter- and intra- group interactions

Instructor prompts

Created by Gan Khoon Lay
from Noun Project

- Self-selected groups get off to quicker starts, but instructor-assigned groups lead to deeper engagement
- Instructor-assigned groups encourage students to develop new skills, including communication skills

Read more: Hilton & Phillips 2010

Created by David from Noun Project

Affinity grouping

- Cluster similar ideas in the same discussion board or use threaded responses

- Offer students the opportunity to address subcategories of a question

- Ask students to come up with their own subcategories

Created by FBianchi
from Noun Project

Think-pair-share

○ Encourage students to write a draft response (think), share it with one other person (pair), and then post their response to the discussion board (share)

○ Use class time for part or all of this strategy (e.g. have students pair in class but share at home)
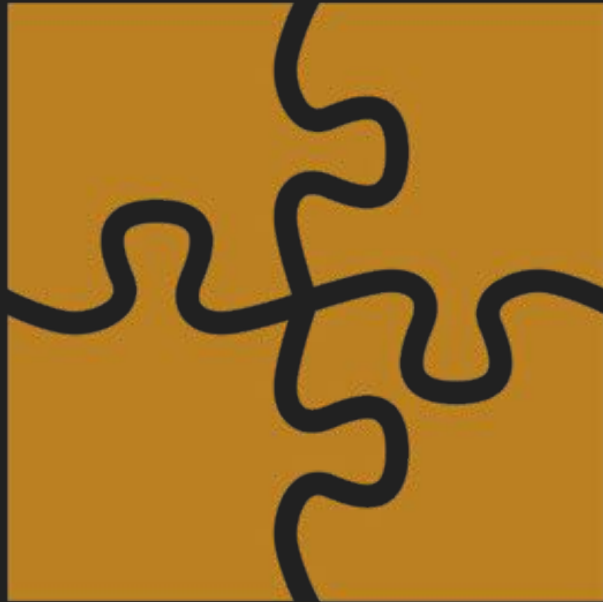
Created by Yu luck from Noun Project

Role-playing

○ Ask students to imagine different perspectives, perhaps each others'

○ If your course uses small groups, assign each person in the group a role (scribe, facilitator, harmonizer, Devil's advocate, etc.)

○ Mix up the group roles from week-to-week

For more ideas on group roles, google "group work rules Carnegie Mellon"

Created by Hea Poh Lin
from Noun Project

Jigsaw

- If your course uses small groups, have each group prepare a set of responses

- Form a new group with one representative from each of the established small groups

- Ask the representatives to first present their groups' responses, then work with their new group to improve upon them

Created by Tomas Knopp
from Noun Project

Fishbowls

- Ask students to reflect on other discussions, perhaps from other groups or from previous iterations of the course

- Are the discussions closed-ended or open? What could have been improved or avoided? How might the student respond to these discussions now?

Do you have more ideas?

Let me know!

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Twitter: kesschroer

Who am I?

- Instructional designer – Arts and Humanities

- Co-facilitator of Dartmouth's Digital Humanities initiative with Laura Braunstein (Digital Humanities and English Librarian)

How might Canvas data inform course design?

"Burstiness" ... or Not?

- "Burstiness" is a term adopted from statistics used to describe discussion boards characterized by short posts with many replies

- "Bursty" discussion boards might promote learning objectives ... or not

- Some professors may desire discussion boards with posts that are longer and more reflective

- Harvesting Canvas data can help us determine if objectives are being met

How might this work in practice?
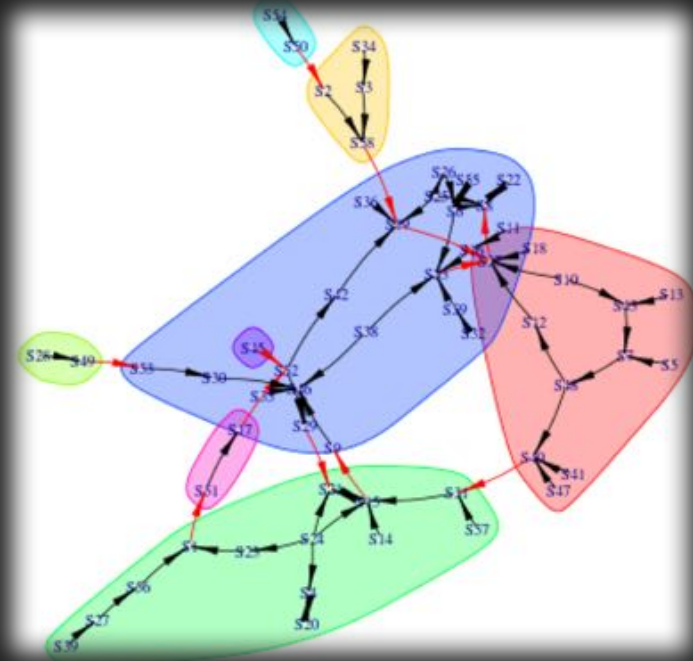
⤓ Download the Matrix

Show 10 ⬍ entries

	gr	number_sent	total_send_word_count	number_received
S6	discussion 1	2	1596	5
S33	discussion 1	1	795	4
S52	discussion 1	1	666	4
S9	discussion 1	1	448	4
S13	discussion 1	1	1835	3
S19	discussion 1	1	604	3
S22	discussion 1	1	1091	3
S36	discussion 1	1	607	3
S15	discussion 1	2	1157	2
S26	discussion 1	1	621	2

Showing 1 to 10 of 56 entries (filtered from 167 total entries)

⬇ Download the Matrix

Show 10 ⬍ entries

	gr	number_sent	total_send_word_count	number_received
S37	discussion 2	1	661	5
S15	discussion 2	2	2017	4
S19	discussion 2	1	778	4
S33	discussion 2	1	643	4
S46	discussion 2	1	1006	4
S8	discussion 2	1	830	4
S21	discussion 2	1	855	3
S40	discussion 2	1	769	3
S1	discussion 2	1	566	2
S29	discussion 2	1	632	2

Showing 1 to 10 of 58 entries (filtered from 167 total entries)

⬇ Download the Matrix

Show [10 ⇅] entries

	gr	number_sent	total_send_word_count	number_received
S33	discussion 3	1	574	6
S17	discussion 3	1	809	4
S9	discussion 3	1	435	4
S26	discussion 3	1	880	3
S14	discussion 3	1	1391	2
S20	discussion 3	1	995	2
S3	discussion 3	1	999	2
S34	discussion 3	1	379	2
S38	discussion 3	1	694	2
S43	discussion 3	1	742	2

Showing 1 to 10 of 53 entries (filtered from 167 total entries)

- Look at the discussion boards themselves – are there any commonalities between S33's posts
- All of S33's posts used subjective language "I think", "I believe", "I feel".
- One post invited student engagement by asking questions and referencing readers in the 2nd person.

To the source!

- Look at a sample of posts by students who received no responses
- Posts were longer and more "academic"; i.e. they used the discourse of the discipline to engage in intellectual discussion and were less subjective

To the source!

Coincidence? Maybe …

- The prominence of S33 could be explained by a number of factors:
  - Time of post
  - Length of post
  - Popularity – more influential?
- More analysis is needed, but it's not too early to have a conversation with the professor!

Instructional Design

- Does the professor want to promote "burstiness" in asynchronous discussions? Or does the professor want longer, more sustained reflection?

- Students are currently operating in both modes, with the result that some students (S33) are receiving many replies and create "bursts" in the discussion boards, while others are writing thoughtful posts to which no students respond

- How might we write discussion prompts or alter instructions given to students to better ensure that course goals are met?

Thank you!