In this issue:

The ORID in IS Classes

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Abstract: Asking questions to promote learning and sharing is important to all disciplines. In the IS discipline, graduates also need to learn how to help their project stakeholders articulate their needs and wants. Therefore, IS instructors should model how to ask questions that are applicable inside and outside the classroom. However, many IS instructors are not prepared to ask the appropriate questions that will help students provide responses to stimulate their understanding and learning of the materials presented. In turns, students do not have a good model to emulate when they work with each other and their stakeholders. This paper introduces the Focused Conversation or ORID method, used in facilitating collaborative work, as an appropriate tool to help IS instructors prepare to engage students and enhance their participation in the classroom. Real-life examples of applying the ORID method and the advantages gained when the method is used in IS classes are also presented.

Keywords: questioning techniques, focused conversation, ORID method

EDSIG activities include the publication of ISEDJ, the organization and execution of the annual ISECON conference held each fall, the publication of the Journal of Information Systems Education (JISE), and the designation and honoring of an IS Educator of the Year. • The Foundation for Information Technology Education has been the key sponsor of ISECON over the years. • The Association for Information Technology Professionals (AITP) provides the corporate umbrella under which EDSIG operates.

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ABSTRACT

Asking questions to promote learning and sharing is important to all disciplines. In the IS discipline, graduates also need to learn how to help their project stakeholders articulate their needs and wants. Therefore, IS instructors should model how to ask questions that are applicable inside and outside the classroom. However, many IS instructors are not prepared to ask the appropriate questions that will help students provide responses to stimulate their understanding and learning of the materials presented. In turn, students do not have a good model to emulate when they work with each other and their stakeholders. This paper introduces the Focused Conversation or ORID method, used in facilitating collaborative work, as an appropriate tool to help IS instructors prepare to engage students and enhance their participation in the classroom. Real-life examples of applying the ORID method and the advantages gained when the method is used in IS classes are also presented.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Asking questions to promote learning and sharing is important to all disciplines (Cashin, 1995, Gordon, 2003; Kassner, 1998; Kreiger, 1991; Middlecamp & Nickel, 2005; Ostergard, 1997; Sida, 2005; Swartz, 2004). Students often learn through active dialogues and not rote responses (Bruner, 1996; Light, 2001). However, how many instructors prepare the questions ahead of time to facilitate and guide discussions to complement the materials presented for the day?

Imagine the following scenario: A class of students just finished watching a video illustrating a concept in an introductory IS class and the first question posed by the instructor was, "Well, what do you think about what we just saw?" And there was total silence in response. "Don't be shy. Say what comes to your mind," the instructor urged. One brave soul finally volunteered, "I like it." "Why?" the teacher prodded. Again deafening silence. "It's time to speak up," the instructor's frustration level was rising and he could not fathom the non-participative nature of his students after all his efforts in procuring the video to complement the subject matter and make the learning more in- teresting. Were they not interested in learning? Were they not paying attention? If not, why weren't they more engaging? This scenario illustrates the instructor's lack of appropriate question preparation. Thus, he did not get what he "expected" from his class.

When we as instructors start with questions that are too broad, similar to the question above, our students are not ready or uncertain how to answer them. If they were to offer a response, where should they begin? Some students are afraid that their response might not be what the instructor is looking for? Will a student be put on the spot if the instructor replies, "Well, John. That's a good point but we aren't quite ready to discuss that yet. We may come back to that later. Who else wants to share another answer?" Will another brave soul take the lead after what just happened to John? Furthermore, different students with varied levels of preparation will respond to the question at different levels of detail and/or complexity. If we desire more classroom participation, we must learn to structure the questions we ask; we must help our students to process the information presented so that they can have the foundation to anchor their re-

sponses. As the YouthLearn Initiative (2006) points out, "Ask the right questions in the right way, and you'll engage people; do it differently, and you'll put them off." Therefore, do we as IS instructors anticipate what we might get in response to our questions? Should we be surprised when our students do not respond accordingly and to our expectation? And before our students work with their project stakeholders, how can we help them learn to prepare the appropriate questions by modeling our interactions with them in class? Our students' project outcomes will only be as good as the input shared by their stakeholders.

2. QUESTIONING TECHNIQUES

There are numerous questioning techniques developed to enhance the teaching and learning experience. Several are highlighted below.

Busching and Sleshinger (1995) advocated soliciting questions from students and then helping them "sought consensus about what were the most important questions they had raised." The sorting of the questions would enable the instructor to understand the meaning behind the questions and what role the questions played in the students' learning. Menke and Pressley (1994) promoted an "elaborative interrogation" that used "Why" questions that would lead "students to activate prior knowledge and tie it to the new information." Penick, Crow, and Bonnstetter (1996) suggested "the effective use of questions in scientific inquiry" through a logical order of questions: History, Relationships, Application, Speculation, and Explanation.

In her paper on classroom questions, Brualdi (1998) shared two levels of cognitive questions: low-level ones that "concentrate on factual information" and the high-level ones that require "students to use higher order thinking or reasoning skills" to "problem solve, to analyze, and to evaluate." Some research advocated for use of more low-level questions whereas others argued for more high-level questions. However, Arends (1994) found "the effects of using lower-level-cognitive versus higher-level-cognitive questions has been inconclusive."

The ORID method's four levels of questioning encompass the low- and high-level cog-

nitive questions. The author believes that both low- and high-level questions together help to support the students' learning and sharing. However, it is not the author's intent to advocate ORID over other questioning techniques.

3. FOCUSED CONVERSATION/ORID

The Focused Conversation is a method developed by the Institute of Cultural Affairs International (ICA) for "enabling better conversations" (Standfield, 2000). ICA is an international, non-governmental organization with member offices in nearly 30 countries. Founded in 1962, it strives to create and implement community development and training programs, as well as engage in policy research. Included in ICA activities are sustainable development projects, educational research, youth and women's programs, health and HIV/AIDS initiatives, group facilitation courses, and leadership training (www.ica-international.org, 2006). ICA realized very early on the necessity to facilitate group interactions and nurture a culture of participation if people were expected to work together toward common goals and formulate collaborative decisions and plans. However, participation will only yield result through guided conversations.

The Focused Conversation, commonly called the ORID method, is a four-stage process that enables a group facilitator to ask a series of questions to elicit responses that take a group from the surface of a topic to its deeper meaning and implications (Standfield, 2000). The four levels of questions are:

- the **O**bjective level: questions about facts and external reality that people take in with their senses,

- the **R**eflective level: questions to call forth immediate personal reaction to the data, an internal response, sometimes emotion or feelings, hidden images and people's past associations with the facts,

- the **I**nterpretive level: questions to draw out meaning, values, significance, and implications for the individual or group by building on the data from the objective level plus the associations from the reflective level, and

- the **D**ecisional level: questions to elicit resolution, enable the individual or group to make a decision in response to the event or about the future.

Using the ORID method, the IS instructor in the scenario described earlier could have formulated the following questions ahead of time for the discussion that follows the screening of the video:

- **O**bjective: What were the components shown? What scenes and/or sound grabbed your attention the most? What words or phrases still linger in your mind?

- **R**eflective: Where did the video excite or frustrate you the most? What past experience did you associate with scenario B? What was your first reaction? How did you feel when that happened? What was a slow part of the video?

- **I**nterpretive: What were some of the key points made in the video? What message(s) came through to you as very important? What did you learn that you didn't know before?

- **D**ecisional: Specifically, how did you find the video helpful? Where would you like to have seen more detail? How will you apply this to your upcoming project? What other areas of our course will benefit from this video?

4. ORID IN PRACTICE

In addition to his academic responsibilities, the author is also a trained facilitator who works with for- and non-profit groups in addressing operational issues and strategic directions. His groups range from multi-million dollar companies to local school boards. He attended a Focused Conversation facilitation workshop in the late 1990's because he felt the need to enhance the participative level of his groups. The fact was that the group discussions and decisions were only as good as the input shared by the group members using his service. Certainly, there is an abundance of literature and how-to resources on managing meetings better (Doyle & Straus, 1993; Frank, 1989; Nunamaker, Dennis, Valacich, Vogel, & George, 1991; Rosner, 1999). However, question preparation was not one of the key focal points of those materials. Similar to facilitating a discussion in class, asking the

right questions can enable a group to move forward in their working together. If not, group meetings and class discussions can degenerate into aimless conversations with no meaningful outcomes. Below are two examples of using the ORID method in non-academic settings.

Example 1: At the beginning of a day-and-a-half session with a commercialization division of a healthcare organization, the following ORID questions were posed to the participants: 1. to identify the accomplishments of the division in transforming the organization's research into revenue-generating medical ventures, and 2. to explore how they can better their accomplishments in the future:

- **O**bjective: What were the significant accomplishments we had in the last two years?

- **R**eflective: What were some of the high points of our division in the last two years? What were some of the low points of our division in the last two years?

- **I**nterpretive: What do you think was the impact of our division's accomplishments on the organization?

- **D**ecisional: What are some changes you would like to see made to our division so that we can achieve even better results?

Example 2: The project involved a monthly community-oriented newspaper, delivered to homes and businesses for over 25 years. They were considering the possibility of publishing a Hispanic version of the newspaper within the next six months. This consideration arose due to the increase in the Hispanic population in the surrounding neighborhood. The initial conversation with the editor and board members of the newspaper covered the following:

- **O**bjective: How long has your newspaper been in circulation? What target audience does the newspaper serve? What are the contents and sections of the newspaper?

- **R**eflective: Do you see a change or changes in the neighborhood over the last five years? What are they?

- **I**nterpretive: How do the changes impact your newspaper? What changes are too important for the newspaper to ignore? Why?

- **D**ecisional: What should the newspaper do to respond to the changes in the neighborhood? How should the newspaper implement the response?

Having found success in using the ORID method with many for- and non-profit groups, the author decided to use it with his students in his IS classes.

5. ORID IN IS CLASSES

The author had over 10 years of teaching experience before learning about ORID. One consistent frustration was the lack of participation during class discussions. Furthermore, the responses volunteered by the students might be outside the scope of the topic at hand. After attending an ORID workshop to complement his facilitation skills, the author realized how important question preparation was to group discussion and how he could begin to enhance his interactions with his students. Whether it was an introductory IS class or an upper-level one, the author began to observe greater participation from the students and more quality responses after using the ORID method. The flow of the discussions also seemed to be more fluid and logical in progression. Below are four examples of using the ORID method in the author's IS classes.

Example 1: In exploring the topic of selecting a personal computer during an introductory IS class, the following ORID questions were used to guide the students through the evaluation and decision making process:

- **O**bjective: What are the features you need for your personal computers? What are the features you want? What is your budget? When do you need to purchase the computer? What will you use the computer for?

- **R**eflective: What are the advantages of having your own personal computer? What are the disadvantages? What were your past experiences with personal computers?

- **I**nterpretative: How will you prioritize the various models? How does each model fit your "needs"? How does each model fit your "wants"?

- **D**ecisional: Given what you have gathered, which model will fit your requirements and resources the best?

Example 2: During an upper-level systems analysis and design class, the author posed the following ORID questions to the project group who was designing a new on-line form for a client. The questions enabled the group to address the essential elements in the design and implementation of the form:

- **O**bjective: What are some of the key items needed on the new on-line form? What are the desirable features?

- **R**eflective: What does your client like or dislike about the new form as compared to the old one?

- **I**nterpretative: How will the new form make a difference in the way your client does business?

- **D**ecisional: What can you and your client do to ensure that the new form is used properly?

Example 3: The ORID method was also used in a project management exercise to illustrate the importance of planning in any project and the use of available and appropriate resources to complete the project. The class was divided into groups of four students and each group was given a standard-size paper folder. Their task was to construct a free-standing structure, as tall as they could make it, within 20 minutes. Resources provided, both appropriate and inappropriate and not enough for each group to have its own, included materials and tools (such as tape, scissors, paper clips, highlighters, letter openers) for the project. After the structures were completed, we discussed the exercise:

- **O**bjective: What was required of your group? What resources did you take from the common resource pool?

- **R**eflective: How did your group proceed with the project? Where did you feel challenged in the process? What made you decide what resource(s) to take?

- **I**nterpretative: How supportive of your project were the resource materials you took? What insights can you derive from your group's decisions and actions?

- **D**ecisional: How will this exercise change the way you approach other projects?

Example 4: In order to illustrate that different users have different perspectives and

realities (from very narrow to broad) of a project, the children's book, Zoom, by Istvan Banyai (1998) was used. This wordless picture book portrays the effect of a camera lens zooming out; the perspective continues to recede starting from page one. Students thought they knew what the picture represented on one image but then the image on the next page revealed another perspective. The ORID questions used for the discussion were:

- **O**bjective: What images do you remember?

- **R**eflective: Where did the book intrigue you the most? Where did you really begin paying more attention?

- **I**nterpretative: What do you think is the message of the book? Where is this book going on in your project? What lessons and insights did you learn from this book?

- **D**ecisional: How will you apply the lessons learned and insights gained when working with users during the various phases of the project life cycle?

Regardless of whether the subject matter at hand is technical or non-technical in nature, the ORID method provides a supporting framework to guide the students in addressing the relevant issues in a methodical fashion. The author has introduced the ORID method to his students. Over time, the hope is that the students will learn to use the ORID method in other aspects of their lives in addition to their professional one.

6. ORID ADVANTAGES

Through over six years of using the ORID method in the classroom, the author observes the following advantages:

- ORID can be used regardless of the subject matter or the students' level of expertise.

- There is greater class participation, more quality responses, and the flow of the discussions also seems to be more fluid and logical in progression.

- The instructor has a set of prepared questions ready to guide the discussion instead of having to formulate them in an ad hoc manner during class.

- The ORID method is easy to learn and an experienced instructor can formulate the questions more quickly through repeated use, even on ad hoc basis if needed.

- The prepared questions help the instructor to identify and affirm the key areas of the subject to be shared with the class, and thus facilitate future assessment of the students' learning.

- The set of prepared questions can be as few as four, one for each ORID level.

- The questions flow in a logical way that helps the students to move from identifying the building blocks (data and information) to addressing implications and decision making.

- ORID helps to create a common starting point for everyone in the class so that nobody feels left behind or not knowing where the discussion is or where it is heading.

- For students who are not as confident, the Objective-level questions can build their confidence and encourage them to attempt questions of other levels.

- The ORID questions are more open-ended in nature and thus contribute to a more lively discussion rather than encourage 'yes' or 'no' answers.

- ORID does not judge the 'positive' or 'negative' nature of the students' responses but allows all to be heard in addressing the subject matter at hand.

- By preparing the questions ahead of time, the subsequent discussion is more focused and thus minimizes the chance of wasting class time on non-related issues and digressions.

7. CONCLUSION

It is not the intent of this paper to compare the ORID method to other questioning techniques. Rather, it is to highlight another tool that the author found useful in engaging his IS students in their learning process. The observed impact of ORID on class discussions was positive when compared with discussions the author had with his students before he learned about ORID.

In summary, we as IS instructors should encourage our students to share in class so

that they can learn from the materials and build their confidence (Roth, 1997). Through asking prepared questions, instructors and students can be more confident and focused in learning from one another and "enhance the quality of participation and effectiveness of discussion" (Dallimore, Hertenstein, & Platt, 2004). The ORID method has proven effective in helping diverse groups all over the world to address simple to complicated issues, and it certainly can play an important role in the classroom through a logical progression of questions. ORID is certainly a tool that IS students can learn to use in their professional and personal lives. As Parker Palmer (1998) observes, good instructors "are truly present in the classroom, deeply engaged with their students and their subjects" and they "weave a complex web of connections…so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves."

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