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Humanizing Online Discussions by Remixing AI and #DigitalPowerups

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Abstract: *This article explores the need to humanize online learning environments while simultaneously developing students' ai literacies and essential academic skills. Fostering meaningful student engagement by integrating ai tools within the #digitalpowerups strategy for online discussions, educators can enhance both social presence and collaborative knowledge co-construction, creating a more dynamic and interactive learning experience for students. This approach not only supports creativity, critical thinking, and interdependent thinking, but also ensures that students are equipped with the technological competencies required for success in this digital-age. Remixing these elements—humanized learning, ai literacy, and #digitalpowerups—provides a comprehensive strategy for engaging students more deeply with course content while preparing them to navigate and thrive in modern educational and professional contexts.*

Keywords: Digital Powerups, Online Discussions, AI literacy

Introduction

In this era of online education, fostering meaningful interaction and engagement among students is more critical than ever (Whiteside et al., 2023). As digital classrooms become the norm, educators face the challenge of creating dynamic and collaborative learning environments that encourage deep learning and critical thinking (Means et al., 2014) while identifying relevant ways to incorporate artificial intelligence (AI) literacies for students across the curriculum (Salhab, 2020). The #DigitalPowerups approach in online discussions is intentionally designed to invigorate online discussions by guiding students to engage in more meaningful ways with both course content and co-constructing knowledge with peers in creative and innovative ways (Soyer et al., 2024). By integrating #DigitalPowerups with AI tools, educators can continue transforming or remixing online discussions into opportunities for richer, more thoughtful exchanges that drive academic skill development and student success.

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Humanized online discussions

Humanizing online learning, as defined by Jones (2017), involves creating an online environment that prioritizes connection, empathy, and interaction, thus fostering a sense of presence and community among students. Approaching the design of the virtual learning environment with a focus on supporting student success, humanizing online courses emphasizes the importance of acknowledging the human elements behind each student's participation. This method seeks to move beyond the transactional nature of traditional online learning by integrating practices that make students feel seen, heard, and valued, which in turn enhances their motivation and engagement (Pacansky-Brock, 2012). Additionally, Kilgore et al. (2018) highlight the role of teacher presence in humanizing online discussions, noting that personalized communication and feedback are crucial for creating an inclusive and supportive learning atmosphere. By centering the design of online courses around human connection, educators can cultivate environments where students are not only equipped to succeed academically but are also encouraged to thrive as individuals.

Humanizing learning in online courses is deeply connected to both teaching and social presence, which are critical components of the Community of Inquiry framework (CoI). Teaching presence, defined by the deliberate actions of the instructor to design, facilitate, and direct the learning experience, plays a pivotal role in bridging the transactional distance between instructor and student in virtual environments (Jones, 2017). This presence is not just about being visible; it encompasses providing regular feedback, offering positive and supportive comments in discussions, scaffolding student interactions with guidelines and reminders, and monitoring the flow of conversations to ensure meaningful engagement (Kilgore, Bartoletti, & Al Freih, 2018). Social presence, on the other hand, refers to the ability of participants to identify with the community, communicate openly, and develop interpersonal relationships. When instructors focus on humanizing their approach by engaging with students through personalized feedback and active participation in discussion forums, they enhance social presence, leading to increased student satisfaction and cognitive engagement (Pacansky-Brock, 2012). However, it’s important for instructors to balance their involvement; excessive participation in discussion threads can unintentionally stifle student interaction and autonomy (Kilgore, Bartoletti, & Al Freih, 2018). Effective humanized teaching practices, therefore, involve strategic instructor engagement that fosters a supportive and interactive online learning community, ultimately promoting deeper cognitive presence among students.

When designing online learning environments that foster student engagement, it is essential to incorporate elements that support student autonomy. According to Lee, Pate, and Cozart (2015), three key guidelines can effectively promote this autonomy: offering choices, providing rationale, and enabling personalization. These components help transform online discussion forums into autonomy-supportive spaces that also function as humanized learning environments, where

students feel connected and motivated (Flowerday & Schraw, 2000; Patall, Cooper, & Wynn, 2010; Reeve & Jang, 2006; Xie & Ke, 2011).

The social presence aspect of these discussions is crucial for humanizing the learning experience. Social presence refers to the ability of participants to perceive themselves as real and connected within a community of learners, contributing to cognitive engagement (Garrison et al., 1999). By designing discussion forums that emphasize human interaction and social connection, educators create spaces where students and instructors can engage in meaningful dialogue, reflect on ideas, and collaboratively co-construct knowledge. These humanized discussion environments not only promote cognitive engagement but also make the learning process more personally fulfilling and effective (Chen, et al., 2017; Garrison et al., 2010; Gilbert & Dabbagh, 2005; Yang, Yeh, & Won, 2010).

#Digitalpowerups In Online Discussions

Hashtags offer an innovative way to embed Bloom's taxonomy into online discussions by serving as visual prompts that label the level of cognitive engagement, thus guiding students toward higher-order thinking and enhancing their overall learning experience. Students often engage in the lower levels of Bloom's taxonomy (#remember, #understand) in online discussions due to how these forums are typically structured and facilitated (Christopher et al., 2004). However, the #DigitalPowerups strategy is specifically designed to push students beyond these basic levels, encouraging them to engage with mid-levels (#apply, #analyze, #evaluate) and higher-order levels (#create, #connect) of Bloom's taxonomy, thereby enriching their learning experience and enhancing their academic skills as well (Thurston, 2020).

Each #DigitalPowerup consists of three core components: a hashtag, a cue word from Bloom’s Taxonomy, and a corresponding prompt that guides student responses in online discussions. These powerups function as instructional tools by offering specific prompts aligned with different levels of cognitive engagement, encouraging students to move from lower-order tasks like recalling information (#remember) to higher-order activities such as creating new content (#create) or making global connections (#connect). Below are examples of powerups (a hashtag, Bloom’s level verb, and associated prompt) that students can use when participating in discussions:

#remember List or restate something you just read, then, add an opinion in your response.

#understand Ask a question that will help you understand what you read. Allow a peer to respond to your question.

#apply Organize what you read into something new. Include a poem, chart, timeline, diagram or model in your response.

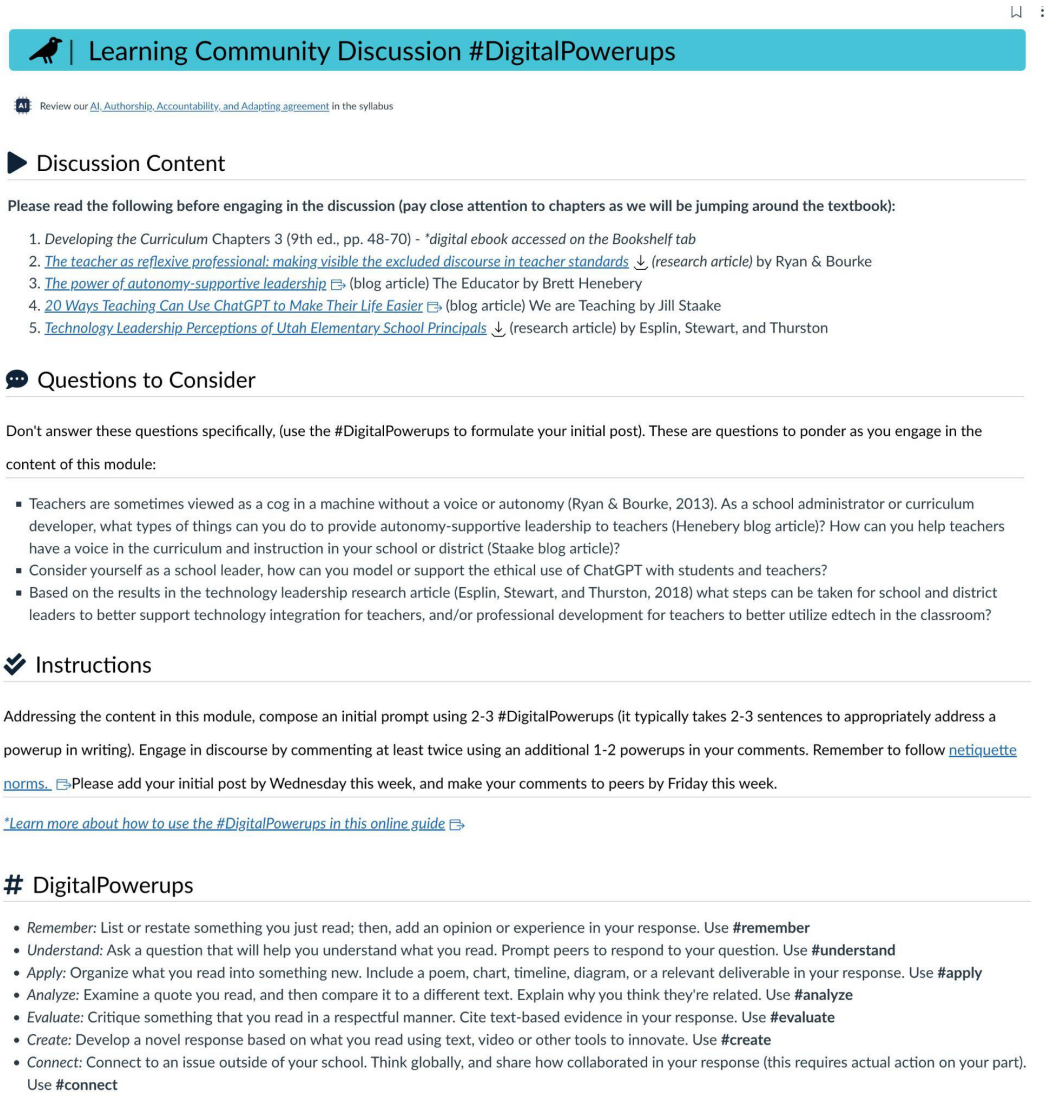
#analyze Examine a quote you read, then compare it to a different text. Explain why you think they are related.

#evaluate Critique something you read in a respectful manner. Cite text-based evidence in your response.

#create Develop a novel response based on what you read using text, video, or other supplies to innovate.

#connect: Connect to an issue outside of school. Think globally, and share how you collaborated in your response (this requires actual action on your part).

Figure 1: #DigitalPowerups online discussion example



| Learning Community Discussion #DigitalPowerups

Review our AI, Authorship, Accountability, and Adapting agreement in the syllabus

Discussion Content

Please read the following before engaging in the discussion (pay close attention to chapters as we will be jumping around the textbook):

1. *Developing the Curriculum* Chapters 3 (9th ed., pp. 48-70) - **digital ebook accessed on the Bookshelf tab*
2. *The teacher as reflexive professional: making visible the excluded discourse in teacher standards* *(research article)* by Ryan & Bourke
3. *The power of autonomy-supportive leadership* (blog article) The Educator by Brett Henebery
4. *20 Ways Teaching Can Use ChatGPT to Make Their Life Easier* (blog article) We are Teaching by Jill Staake
5. *Technology Leadership Perceptions of Utah Elementary School Principals* (research article) by Esplin, Stewart, and Thurston

Questions to Consider

Don't answer these questions specifically, (use the #DigitalPowerups to formulate your initial post). These are questions to ponder as you engage in the content of this module:

- Teachers are sometimes viewed as a cog in a machine without a voice or autonomy (Ryan & Bourke, 2013). As a school administrator or curriculum developer, what types of things can you do to provide autonomy-supportive leadership to teachers (Henebery blog article)? How can you help teachers have a voice in the curriculum and instruction in your school or district (Staake blog article)?
- Consider yourself as a school leader, how can you model or support the ethical use of ChatGPT with students and teachers?
- Based on the results in the technology leadership research article (Esplin, Stewart, and Thurston, 2018) what steps can be taken for school and district leaders to better support technology integration for teachers, and/or professional development for teachers to better utilize edtech in the classroom?

Instructions

Addressing the content in this module, compose an initial prompt using 2-3 #DigitalPowerups (it typically takes 2-3 sentences to appropriately address a powerup in writing). Engage in discourse by commenting at least twice using an additional 1-2 powerups in your comments. Remember to follow netiquette norms. Please add your initial post by Wednesday this week, and make your comments to peers by Friday this week.

**Learn more about how to use the #DigitalPowerups in this online guide*

DigitalPowerups

- *Remember:* List or restate something you just read; then, add an opinion or experience in your response. Use **#remember**
- *Understand:* Ask a question that will help you understand what you read. Prompt peers to respond to your question. Use **#understand**
- *Apply:* Organize what you read into something new. Include a poem, chart, timeline, diagram, or a relevant deliverable in your response. Use **#apply**
- *Analyze:* Examine a quote you read, and then compare it to a different text. Explain why you think they're related. Use **#analyze**
- *Evaluate:* Critique something that you read in a respectful manner. Cite text-based evidence in your response. Use **#evaluate**
- *Create:* Develop a novel response based on what you read using text, video or other tools to innovate. Use **#create**
- *Connect:* Connect to an issue outside of your school. Think globally, and share how collaborated in your response (this requires actual action on your part). Use **#connect**

With Bloom's taxonomy integrated into these structured prompts, #DigitalPowerups help scaffold student engagement, enhancing both social and cognitive presence in online discussions, and leading to deeper cognitive processing and metacognitive engagement (Valcke, De Wever, Zhu, & Deed, 2009; deNoyelles, Zydney, & Chen, 2014). By incorporating two or three #DigitalPowerups in their initial posts and one or two in responses to peers, students are learning to apply academic and analytical skills that transform how they engage with content and interact with classmates. This approach encourages students to think critically and creatively, adapting their responses to fit their own learning contexts while also considering multiple perspectives. The #DigitalPowerups offer seven distinct entry points for engagement, allowing students to draw from their lived experiences and connect them meaningfully with course content. As a result, students move beyond surface-level participation, using these prompts to explore content more deeply, synthesize ideas, and engage in richer discussions with their peers. This method shifts students' approach from simply answering questions to actively analyzing and contextualizing information, fostering a more dynamic and reflective learning environment.

#Digitalpowerups And Ai Literacies In Online Discussions

When students engage in discussions using the #DigitalPowerups strategy, they experience a more humanized and interactive learning environment that encourages creativity, critical thinking, and deeper connections with both the content and their peers (Mardi, 2020; Soyer et al., 2024). These powerups serve as tools that guide students to move beyond surface-level responses, fostering exploration, analysis, and synthesis in their discussions. This intentional design helps students feel more connected to their learning community, promoting a sense of belonging and collaboration, which is crucial for creating a truly humanized online learning experience (Henderson et al., 2023).

Moreover, the humanizing effect of #DigitalPowerups extends to developing essential habits of mind skills such as creating/innovating, metacognition, and thinking interdependently, which are critical for student success (Mardi, 2020; Henderson et al., 2023). As students engage in the intentionally designed #DigitalPowerup prompts each week students practice critical thinking, reflection, and collaborative problem-solving, enhancing both their academic growth and their cognitive and emotional development. This dynamic approach not only enriches the learning experience but also equips students with the skills necessary for success in various contexts, both inside and outside the classroom (Mardi, 2022; Thurston, 2020).

Integrating skills from an AI literacy framework into online discussions through the #DigitalPowerups strategy can significantly enhance students' ability to engage with and develop AI skills along with the other academic skills they develop through this strategy. AI literacy, as outlined by Southworth et al. (2023), involves equipping students with the competencies and

understanding necessary to navigate and critically assess AI tools, use and apply AI to their work, and understand the ethics of AI usage. When this framework is applied to online discussions, it encourages students to use AI not just as passive recipients, but as active participants who critically evaluate AI-generated content and incorporate it meaningfully into the discourse with their peers. The #DigitalPowerups strategy supports this by prompting students to engage in deeper, more thoughtful dialogue, thereby enhancing their cognitive presence and promoting a more interactive learning environment (Yi, 2021; Xia et al., 2022).

Recommendations

In Kirby Ferguson's (2023) documentary "Everything is a Remix" he leads viewers to explore the three basic elements of creativity—copy, transform, and combine—and provides a compelling argument for how those terms explain the learning process. In academia, college students need to "copy," or memorize and understand, the fundamental concepts and language of the domain they're studying, similar to how Ferguson describes fluency in a creative field. We learn to play the piano by first learning to copy from the masters. This stage is crucial as it lays the groundwork for students to engage critically with their subject matter, much like how mastering a language allows for nuanced communication. In the context of learning with AI, this means instructors should be modeling appropriate and ethical use of AI tools, ensuring students understand the potential pitfalls and limitations of these technologies as part of their foundational knowledge.

As students progress, they begin to "transform" their understanding, applying their knowledge in new and innovative ways, much like how artists transform existing works to create something new. In an educational setting, this could involve using AI to analyze, critique, or expand upon existing ideas, thereby deepening their cognitive engagement. Finally, the "combine" phase reflects how students synthesize different concepts and tools, such as integrating AI literacy with strategies like #DigitalPowerups, to create new and meaningful contributions in their discussions. By embracing the "remix" approach, students are not only learning the importance of iteration in the learning process (Buyserie & Thurston, 2024), but are also becoming adept at leveraging AI as a tool to enhance their creativity and critical thinking, ultimately leading to more dynamic and enriched learning experiences. To further support this integration, there are three specific recommendations that can help educators effectively incorporate AI tools into online discussions using the #DigitalPowerups strategy, including: creating an AI accountability section in the syllabus, utilizing AI tools for brainstorming in discussion responses, and leveraging AI tools to support co-construction of knowledge.

Create an AI Accountability Section in the Syllabus

Including an AI accountability section in the course syllabus establishes clear guidelines for the ethical and effective use of AI tools in online discussions. This section can outline expectations for how students should engage with AI, emphasizing transparency, accountability, and responsible use. By setting these standards, educators can ensure that AI tools are used to enhance, rather than detract from, the learning process. Implementation involves crafting a detailed policy that explains the role of AI in the course, including acceptable uses, examples of ethical AI practices, and consequences for misuse. This approach supports student learning by fostering a culture of responsibility and critical thinking, helping students to become conscientious users of AI who understand the implications of their choices in a digital environment (Southworth et al., 2023; Xia et al., 2022). Resources like Stanford Teaching Commons (2024) AI accountability course policy activity and the cake making analogy from Bali (2024) are excellent activities for instructors to walk through in contemplating an AI accountability section for the syllabus.

Utilize AI Tools for Brainstorming in Discussion Responses

AI tools can be leveraged to support students in the brainstorming phase of crafting their discussion responses, helping them generate ideas and organize their thoughts. These tools can provide students with a starting point, offering suggestions or alternative perspectives that they might not have considered independently. To implement this, instructors can introduce AI-powered brainstorming tools as optional resources, encouraging students to use them to develop more robust and thoughtful contributions to online discussions. This practice enhances student learning by promoting creativity and critical analysis, allowing students to explore diverse ideas and refine their arguments before engaging with their peers (Yi, 2021; Southworth et al., 2023). Then leveraging the AI accountability policy, educators should ask students to be transparent and open about their use of AI. This could be incorporated simply by adding a hashtag at the end of the post. For example, if a student used ChatGPT for brainstorming they could indicate this with a hashtag like #ChatGPTbrainstorm or #BrainstormAi. Consider including a standard hashtag format in your AI accountability section of your syllabus to keep the hashtags consistent with students.

Leverage AI Tools to Support Co-Construction of Knowledge

Another way AI tools can be instrumental in the collaborative process is in the co-constructing knowledge, particularly when engaging in discourse surrounding a course topic or collaboratively developing deliverables in class. By using AI along with the #DigitalPowerups prompts, students can iteratively build upon each other's ideas, refining and enhancing their work through multiple stages of development. In practice, this can involve using AI to generate drafts or

conceptual ideas, provide feedback, or suggest improvements during group work. Implementing this strategy in online discussions can facilitate deeper collaboration, as students use AI to collectively create more polished and comprehensive projects. This not only supports the development of critical thinking and thinking interdependently but also empowers students to take ownership of their learning, driving more meaningful and engaged participation while developing key academic skills and AI literacies (Xia et al., 2022; Yi, 2021).

Conclusion

In the context of online education, there is an increasing need to humanize learning environments by fostering connection, empathy, and social presence to enhance student engagement and success. Simultaneously, developing AI literacies and essential habits of mind skills such as critical thinking, creativity, and thinking interdependently is crucial as AI tools become more integrated into academic contexts. By remixing the #DigitalPowerups strategy to incorporate humanized learning and AI literacy skill development, educators can create dynamic, interactive learning environments that not only engage students more deeply with the course content, but also equip them with the cognitive and technological skills necessary for success in an increasingly digital world. This remix of humanized learning, #DigitalPowerups, and AI literacies ensures that students are not only learning across disciplines, but also mastering the technology tools and social strategies needed to navigate and thrive in modern educational and professional landscapes.

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