

DEBUTANT TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE BENEFITS OF THE DISCUSSION METHOD IN UNIVERSITY STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

Aim. This study investigates how first-year Ph.D. students who lack prior teaching experience perceive the role of virtual discussions in developing their teaching-related competencies, including pedagogical and communicative skills.

Methods. Data collected from debutant Ph.D. students at three universities in 2021, 2022, and 2023 was analysed using a phenomenographic approach. The Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework (Garrison et al., 2000) guided the design of discussion tasks and the analysis of students' experiences, enabling a deeper understanding of the value students place on virtual discussions.

Results. The analysis identified four primary benefits of virtual discussions in the study process: (1) as an interactive study method, (2) as a medium for enhancing clarity in thought articulation, (3) as a tool for developing topic-specific discussion skills, and (4) as a way to foster personal growth in communicative competencies.

These benefits contribute to Ph.D. students' preparedness to engage in collaborative academic environments and build essential interpersonal skills.

Conclusions. Even though the discussion method and the discussion are treated as an "unusual study" format, the discussion method is not familiar to debutant teachers with no teacher training background. If organised correctly, the discussion increases students' social and cognitive presence and fosters critical thinking and empathy. Virtual discussions serve as a valuable learning tool and contribute to developing valuable skills and enhancing participants' academic and personal growth. The findings suggest that incorporating structured virtual discussions as an instructional method in synchronous higher education settings could be beneficial for developing Ph.D. s

Keywords: discussion, discussion method, communicative competence, virtual learning environment, beginning university teachers

INTRODUCTION

Effective communication competence is essential in any profession and significantly determines an individual's success. In today's fast-paced world, the requirements for effective communication are increasing. Employers seek professionals who communicate clearly, concisely, and persuasively to various audiences. Therefore, communicative competence is essential to all university graduates, but in the first place – to the university teachers. They have to obtain tools and competencies to develop communicative competence in their students. However, university teachers are not professional educators; they gain didactic competency with time. However, for a debutant teacher, developing students' competencies is a more significant challenge than just presenting the subject material. Debutant university teachers usually are not familiar with the main theories of pedagogy nor have they mastered teaching methods. Therefore, they face various issues, including how to develop students' communicative abilities and how to promote critical thinking. Developing these communicative competencies is even more challenging when studies occur remotely when teaching is done in virtual environments.

One of the ways of developing communicative competence and critical thinking is the discussion method (Iman & Angraini, 2019). The collaborative knowledge construction in the discussions is essential in recent learning theories (Gao et al., 2022). Group discussion is a regular activity in learning, and it is used to ensure effective communication skills. The research on group discussion in online education after the pandemic has expanded significantly (Yoo et al., 2022, Liu et al., 2017) as its relevance has increased

The discussion method is a classic educational method at all levels of education, but is it widely used in higher education, especially for a technical profile? Do debutant university teachers all know the benefits of discussions, particularly in virtual

environments of education, how do they experience the benefits of discussions? We focus on D. Randy Garrison, Terry Anderson & Walter Archer's 'theory of the community of inquiry (CoI)', a well-known framework in online education and distance learning, to ground the questions in theory.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Community of Inquiry theory

According to Garrison, Anderson, and Archer's the Community of Inquiry framework consists of three essential elements:

- *Cognitive Presence*: This aspect relates to developing critical thinking and meaningful learning. It involves activities such as exploration, integration, and resolution of cognitive conflicts within the online community.
- *Social Presence*: Social presence refers to the ability of learners to form a sense of community and establish interpersonal connections in the online learning environment. This is essential for engaging and motivating learners.
- *Teaching Presence*: Teaching presence involves the instructor's role in guiding and facilitating the learning process. It includes designing and organising the course, facilitating discussions, and providing guidance and feedback to learners (Garrison et al., 2000).

The CoI model has been influential in designing and delivering online courses, helping educators create compelling and engaging learning environments. Teachers consider all three elements when organising group discussions in the virtual learning environment. Firstly, they have to help students to evoke cognitive and social presence. When education occurs remotely, the students choose how much to be active and show themselves on the screen. When the social presence of each student is different, the teacher's role is to facilitate the discussion in the way it fosters students' critical thinking, helps to assimilate the material, and appears to students simply as a helpful study method. For that purpose, the teacher must 1) have communication competence, 2) understand the benefits of discussion as a method in education, and 3) take leadership in discussion and be able to demonstrate it.

Discussion is a part of communication competency

Communicative competence refers to the ability to communicate with others in a given language or culture effectively. Effective communication involves a reciprocal process of information exchange via speech or other means without interrupting,

question-clarification, listening, and expressing understanding, thoughts, and information (Henly, 2016).

Discussion is essential to communicative competence, allowing individuals to express their thoughts, ideas, and opinions collaboratively and interactively (Gutiérrez-Puertas et al., 2020). Individuals engage in a dialogue, share their perspectives, and engage with the perspectives of others. Through discussion, individuals can clarify their ideas, learn from others, and better understand the topic in hand. When students are encouraged to ask thoughtful questions, give reflective responses, and challenge each other using reasoned arguments within classroom discussions, they are more likely to become builders and owners of their knowledge (Murphy et al., 2020).

Discussions allow individuals to develop social skills such as turn-taking, respect for others' opinions, and empathy. Effective discussion also requires individuals to use appropriate language, tone, and nonverbal cues to convey their messages and to engage in collaborative problem-solving and decision-making. Special competency is required for the discussion – the ability to express emotions and reflect on it.

Optimising classroom discussions requires specific considerations of the content-focused goal, teacher knowledge of content and discourse orchestration, student instruction on classroom talk, and context of content learning (Murphy et al., 2020).

Some special competency of the university teacher is needed to lead the discussion by giving the freedom to students to express their opinions and not manipulating the discussion to the point that it reflects the only a predetermined outcome of the Discussion

The training of communication competencies is widely studied in medical education (Gutiérrez-Puertas et al., 2020, Monti et al., 2020) and, unfortunately, on a much smaller scale in other fields of education, for example, technical and engineering education. However, there is a high demand for communication competencies on behalf of employers (Hirudayaraj et al., 2021) It is essential to understand if the teachers of technical higher education institutions are ready to train the communication competence if they see the benefits of it.

Benefits of discussion as a method in education

As future teachers embark on their pedagogical journeys, their experiences as discussion participants significantly shape their perceptions of the method. These experiences can have a profound impact on how they incorporate discussions into their teaching practices, and they play a pivotal role in shaping their pedagogical approaches (Borg, 2019).

The teachers who have had positive experiences in discussions as students are more likely to recognise the inherent benefits of this method. The benefits include the development of critical thinking skills (Iman & Angraini, 2019). Discussions

encourage students to think critically and analyse information. Engaging in dialogue teaches students to evaluate arguments, consider multiple perspectives, and develop reasoned opinions (Szabo & Schwartz, 2011). The discussion method helps students practice communication and critical thinking skills applicable to real-world situations.

Participating in discussions helps students improve their communication skills (Henly, 2016; Lock & Redmond, 2021). They learn to articulate their thoughts clearly, express ideas persuasively, and respond to others' viewpoints respectfully and clearly. Discussions create a collaborative and inclusive learning environment (Lock & Redmond, 2021). Students can learn from each other's experiences, share insights, and benefit from diverse perspectives within the group. Discussions enhance student engagement and motivation. When students can express their opinions, ask questions, and interact with their peers, the learning experience becomes more exciting and relevant. The discussion method promotes active learning by involving students in the learning process. Instead of passively receiving information, students actively participate in the construction of knowledge through conversation and debate.

Scholars also report on the benefits of discussions in virtual environments. Online discussions provide benefits such as a real-life audience, current information, and increased topic focus (Sutherland-Smith, 2002).

According to Lyndsay R. Buckingham et al. (2021), the students agree that synchronous online discussion provides a live learning environment because they share emotional expressions through thinking emotions and support. This condition has good psychological effects on the students. This causes better engagement, activity, and motivation to follow the discussions.

Online discussions encourage students to share experiences and learn from each other (Parra, 2000). This helps the lecturers to provide a live and constructive learning environment for developing the students' knowledge.

In summary, the discussion method is a powerful teaching strategy that promotes active learning, critical thinking, communication skills, and social interaction among students, contributing to a more comprehensive and engaging educational experience.

Teachers would be more inclined to integrate discussions into their teaching methodologies if they had experienced them in their own studies and acknowledged these advantages.

Discussion as a leadership development

Integrating discussion as a study method requires teacher preparation and bold shared leadership. According to Khalid Abdalbaki et al. (2018), the lecturer is among many authorities in class. The lecturer should allocate the leadership to other members of the study environment, not being afraid of losing influence. On the one hand, the lecture time limits and the desired outcomes required

in the structured organisation of the discussion; on the other hand, there is a risk of leading a ‘counterfeit discussion’ (Patterson 1979), where people are talking in a group, so it looks collaborative, open, and accessible. But in fact, the teacher manipulates the discussion to move towards a specific pre-defined end. In that case, it is a manipulated conversation that happens under the veneer of a supposedly democratic classroom activity (Brookfield et al., 2022). Therefore, teachers need to know the concept of the discussion benefits and the techniques to lead it to the desired results: communication competency, the ability to lead the discussion, and knowledge of the subject.

Discussions are a good opportunity to interact, and communication is one of the main skills of a leader (Vial, 2019; Boughzala et al., 2020; Henderikx & Stoffers, 2022). Leaders who engage in productive discussions with their teams are more likely to build trust, foster collaboration, and achieve their goals. Through discussions, leaders can identify and address the concerns and needs of their team members, build relationships, and foster a sense of shared purpose. Discussions can help leaders develop their leadership skills by exposing them to diverse perspectives and challenging their assumptions. By actively listening to others and considering their viewpoints, leaders can expand their understanding of complex issues, identify areas where they need to grow, and develop new strategies for addressing problems. Moreover, leaders who create an open discussion and encourage feedback are more likely to cultivate a culture of continuous learning and improvement within their organisation. By inviting constructive criticism and new ideas, leaders can inspire innovation, promote creativity, and identify new opportunities for growth and development (Rath & Conchie, 2008; Goffee & Jones, 2015).

The discussion is a critical prerequisite for leadership expression and development because it helps leaders build relationships, foster collaboration, and develop new strategies for addressing complex problems (Audi, 2012). By encouraging open communication and feedback, leaders can cultivate a culture of continuous learning and improvement and inspire their teams to achieve their full potential.

Creativity enables individuals to think outside the box and develop novel ideas for addressing sustainability challenges. By approaching problems from new angles, individuals can identify opportunities for reducing waste, conserving resources, and minimising negative impacts on the environment and society. The quantitative meta-analysis by Dohyoung Koh et al. (2019) of 68 studies, including 56 journal papers and 12 studies, revealed that leadership could help develop creativity. Leaders can actively encourage and initiate the autonomous decisions of their employees as they raise the outcomes of work and satisfaction. Responsibility is crucial because it ensures that individuals consider their actions’ ethical and social implications. Responsible decision-making requires individuals to weigh the potential benefits and risks of different approaches, consider the perspectives of all stakeholders, and strive to balance short-term and long-term goals.

Expressing a person's creativity in a concise and attractive presentation of information requires a quick reaction, a sense of the situation, etc. Notably, during contact discussions, it is easier to feel the current and changing situation than during a virtual discussion. Words convey less information than body language, intonation, volume, etc. (Alabbasi, 2022). Therefore, we need reasoning, active thinking, analysis, and creativity during a virtual discussion. Developing and expressing creativity requires listening to the environment, sensitivity to the environment, and responsibility for one's ideas, choices, and behaviour. The freedom to create also carries responsibility for the results and consequences of creation (Audi, 2012). The leaders do not give in to the crowd's opinion or pressure; they seek the common good (Audi, 2012; Rowe, 2007; Yunis, 2011).

In summary, communication and leadership skills are essential for university teachers to have and develop. Discussion enhances their ability to think critically and to take responsibility for the direction of the discussion outcome in other words, it develops leadership in the discussion. However, debutant eachers having various backgrounds do not necessarily have the competency to lead the educational discussion and do not acknowledge the whole potential of the method therefore, to continue introducing the discussion method to the debutant teachers, it is interesting to find out if they know the benefits of discussions, in particular discussions in virtual environments of education?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Design Framework

The study used a phenomenographic research approach. It aims not to summarise the experience but to present various aspects that characterise the experience of virtual discussion (Marton, 1986; Moore, 1993; Yin, 1984). The analysis identifies a few qualitatively distinct descriptive categories of how the subjects experience (or understand or conceptualise) the phenomena of interest.

The qualitative study was conducted with first-year Ph.D. students from 3 universities (Vilnius Gediminas Technical University, Vytautas Magnus University, and Klaipėda University) in Lithuania. Study was carried out at the beginning of the Ph.D. study, within the subject "Academic communication," which was compulsory for all first-year doctoral students. Ph.D. students performed a task the teacher gave in Moodle's virtual learning platform. The task was counterbalanced with respect to CoL theory, which says that teachers must help students evoke cognitive and social presence. Therefore, active participation was evoked by giving the students the task to formulate the discussion questions that would attract most of the group members' interest but were not provided by the teacher. The task

included: 1) watching three movies specified by the teacher; 2) creating the topics for discussion based on movies; 3) formulating discussion questions; 4) participating in discussions raised by colleagues; and 5) supporting the discussion in the discussion topic created by colleagues. Two weeks are allocated for the task. After completing the task, the students were anonymously asked to answer in written form an open-ended questionnaire about virtual discussions and their benefits in the study process

The study was done in the fall of 2021, 2022, and 2023.

Research ethics: Ethical issues were carefully considered and addressed. The procedure ensured the anonymity of the participants' identities. The data obtained from the study was generalized without revealing the participants' affiliation to a city or a specific university. The answers were only used after getting the students' agreement. The whole process met the requirements of the General Data Protection Requirements (GDPR).

Research Aim and Purpose

This study aimed to explore students' perceptions of the benefits of virtual discussion for developing Ph.D. students' competencies as a teacher. In this study, the Community of Inquiry theory (CoI) (Garrison et al., 2000) was employed as the theoretical lens to construct the students' task and understand the discussion experience phenomena. The following research question guided data collection for this study: How did this virtual discussion task contribute to developing your competencies as a teacher? What are the benefits of the virtual discussion for you? What are the benefits of the virtual discussion for others?

The aim was to conduct a descriptive, exploratory study using variation-based generalisation (Smaling, 2003). Therefore, when summarising the data, we focused on reflecting on the phenomenon under study rather than theorising about it.

Participants

Non-probability convenience sampling (Etikan et al., 2016; Yang & Liu, 2007) was used in this study. The forty-one 24–51-year-old first-year doctoral students of the 13 doctoral study programmes (Informatics, Management, Economics, Communication and Information, Electrical and Electronic Engineering, Civil engineering, Transport engineering, Environmental engineering, Informatics engineering, Materials engineering, Mechanical engineering, History, and Theory of Arts) participated in the study. Most Ph.D. students were debutant teachers at the University and had part-time university positions. One-third of the students did not yet have

the teaching experience. None of the students had a teacher training background or any degree in education. The informants were coded with numbers. The citations of each informant were marked with the number they had and used to describe the data in the this text.

If the number of informants had been higher, the results might have been deeper or another descriptive category discovered. Nevertheless, the descriptive category system of study is not definitive, as the results are derived from limited sources (Marton, 1986).

Data analyses

The content analysis approach was applied to analyse the data (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). The subcategories and categories were identified (Moser, & Korstjens, 2018; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). The qualitative content analysis was carried out first, and after that, the subcategories and categories were counted to demonstrate the importance of virtual discussions in forming a creative, communicative teacher (Boyatzis, 1998; Dey, 1993). The results became clearer (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). when the subcategories, categories, and themes were calculated. The authors followed the approach that the outcomes might be judged based on their insight into more effective ways of operating in the world (Kvale, 1994).

Variation-based generalisation was used to describe the findings. The categories were not derived from an explicit theory but were the results of interpretative descriptions of the collected material (Patton, 1990; Smaling, 2003). The findings will act as a vehicle for generalisation to other cases of virtual discussions in university studies (Yin, 1984). A scheme was created based on the aforementioned distributions of learners' opinions (Figure 1). Phenomenography assumes some transferability, as the descriptive categories in a phenomenographic study are abstracted to a collective level of experiences as phenomenon concepts (Marton & Booth, 1997). So, the study is designed only to demonstrate the discussion method experience of the debutant teachers with no teacher training background and to explore the thoughts that could help construct educational help for university teachers.

The data was analysed following seven steps: 1) familiarisation (the text is read, content is learned, technical mistakes are eliminated), 2) compilation (the most significant elements in the responses of every informant are identified), 3) reduction (the essence of every more extended response or dialogue is searched for), 4) grouping (responses are grouped according to categories), 5) preliminary comparison of categories (boundaries among categories are established), 6) naming (categories are named), 7) contrastive comparison (categories are compared, their differences are highlighted) (Dahlgren & Fallsberg, 1991). The coder reliability check was conducted when two researchers independently coded the transcribed

texts of all the interviews and compared the received categories with each other. The dialogic reliability check was done through researchers' discussions (Åkerlind, 2005). Variation The "critical friend" method was used to assure rigour and focused on a reflective approach (Wolcott, 1994). The role of the critical friend is "to provide a theoretical sounding board to encourage reflection upon, and exploration of, multiple and alternative explanations and interpretations as these emerged in relation to the data and writing (Smith & McGannon, 2017).

Validation was done by verifying the findings during the research process with continual checks of the findings' credibility, plausibility, and trustworthiness (Kvale, 1994). Communicative validity checks were not carried out as the study aimed not to capture a particular individual's understanding but to capture the range of understandings within a particular group (Åkerlind, 2012). The authors followed the approach that the outcomes might be judged in terms of the insight they provide into more effective ways of operating globally (Entwistle, 1997). A pragmatic validity check was performed, and recommendations were provided to the teachers and institution executives in the discussion section.

Limitations

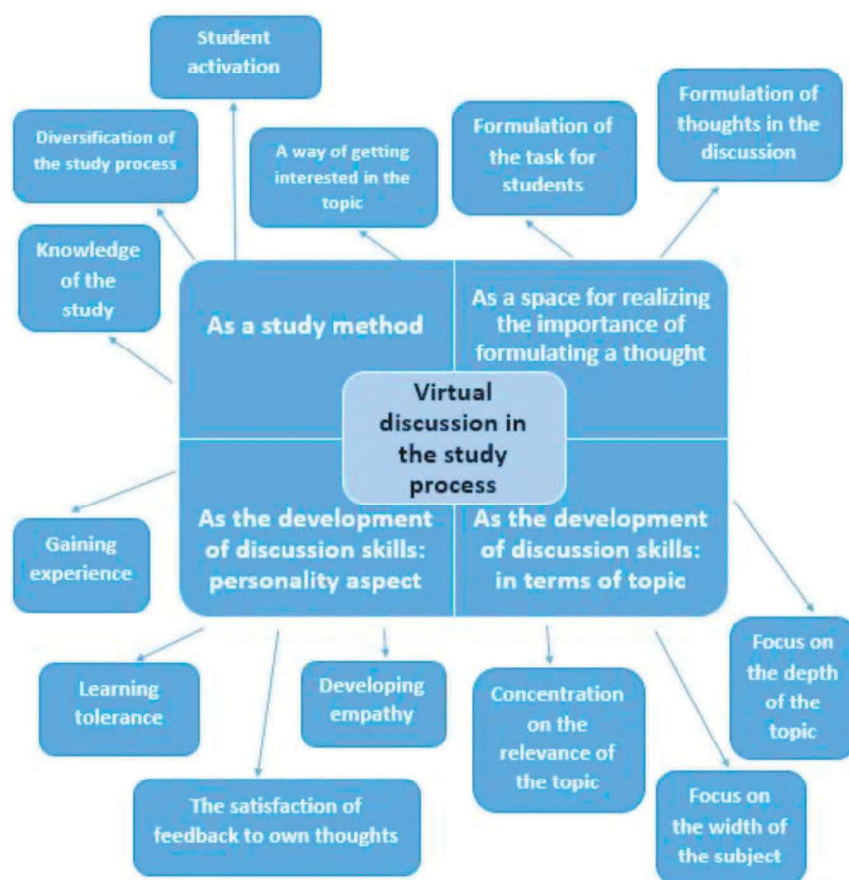
The study was conducted with first-year Ph.D. students from three specific universities. The findings may not be fully generalisable to a broader population of Ph.D. students or those in different academic settings. Also, a relatively small sample of 41 participants might impact the breadth of perspectives captured. It was taken into consideration that the student's academic experiences during the years of the research may introduce temporal variations that are not accounted for in the analysis. The transferability of the results to other cases of virtual discussions in university studies may be constrained by unique contextual factors. Using a phenomenographic approach, the study aimed to identify and describe qualitatively distinct categories of how individuals experience a discussion method in the studies. The focus was on the variation of experiences rather than statistical relationships or predictive modeling, which can be perceived as a limitation.

RESULT

Four categories of benefits of virtual discussions in the study process were distinguished: virtual discussion in the study process 1) as a study method, 2) as a space for realising the importance of formulating a thought, 3) as the development of discussion skills: in the aspect of the topic; 4) as the development of discussion skills: in terms of personality (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Distribution of debutant university teachers' insights on the benefits of using virtual discussion in the study process for the growth of competence



Source. Own research.

DISCUSSION AS A STUDY METHOD

The *Study method category* comprises four subcategories: knowledge of the study method, diversifying the study process, way of interest in the topic, and student activation. The following insights of young teachers are assigned to the categories of knowing the study method and diversifying the study process: “I found out that there is such a study method” (12); “I learned that this can be one of the study methods” (5); “A great method that I could use in my lectures” (29); “I learned that it is possible to organise a study method even in such an unusual format” (4); “Given the knowledge

and understanding that this method can be perfectly applied in substitutions” (11); “I have never used such a method, it turned out to be interesting [...] I could apply this method to the subject I teach” (18); “I realised that I can apply such a method in my practical activities” (26); “Idea for teaching” (7), “I found myself analysing, so that is a good method” (37). The subcategory of the method of interest in the topic is probably best illustrated by the informant’s insight that the discussion method “made it clear that it is necessary to interest the students from the very first sentence” (1).

The research results show not only the desire of debutant university teachers to respond to student-oriented studies by diversifying them with the discussion method but also reveal the informants’ limited learning experience. They are unfamiliar with the discussion method, and the discussion is treated as an “unusual study” format.

In the subcategory of student activation, we find the process of educating debutant teachers as an individual learning process, adapting to each student’s experience, needs, aspirations, and opportunities: “I realised that students need to pay much more attention and effort in their education” (20); “Gives ideas on how to discuss with different students” (16); “I would see a virtual discussion not as an alternative to a live discussion, but as a unique way to involve all members of the group, not just the bravest or the most spontaneous” (2), “It takes some special competency to lead the discussion and raise the questions” (41).

Discussion is treated as part of individualised learning that responds to everyone’s needs, allows for everyone’s development, and ensures that every student is engaged. The role of the passive observer, listener, or reader (depending on the organised form of discussion) is not enough. During the discussion, you must present arguments, represent some opinion, and be able to listen, understand, react, and convince. The doctoral students claim that the virtual discussion helped them analyse movies more carefully, pay attention to details, etc. In other words, the virtual discussion made it possible to see the analysed film more deeply and broadly

Discussion as a space for realising the importance of formulating a thought

The category of *Discussion as an awareness of the importance of formulating a thought* is made up of two subcategories—formulating a task for students and formulating thoughts in the discussion: “I realised how important the minimum requirements of the task set by the teacher are” (4); “It made it easier to express my thoughts and formulate answers more concisely because in my opinion, the discussion cannot be very long. Otherwise, other participants will not read your thoughts. I think that when the discussion takes place in writing, it should be short and clear” (9). During the research, one of the advantages of virtual discussions became clear—the ability to express thoughts concisely in writing. During direct contact, discussions can be organised

in the form of debates. In this case, each participant's speech is limited by a time limit. However, speaking in an unstructured way is also possible. That leads to revealing less content. It is more difficult for listeners and/or opponents to understand, but they still listen and try to understand. When discussing in writing, a person does not read or even try to understand a text that is too long, unattractive, or complicated. This means that the participant who submits the text incorrectly loses the opportunity to be heard and understood. So, the virtual discussion requires the creative expression of the participants. A person's creativity is required to present a written text in a concise, attractive, intriguing, and persuasive.

Discussion as the development of discussion skills: in the aspect of the topic

The category Discussion as the development of discussion skills: in terms of the topic it is formed from three subcategories: attention to the depth of the topic, attention to the width of the subject field, and concentration on the topic's relevance. Regardless of the phenomenon's origin under discussion, the discussion enables a person to expand his horizons in the analysed topic, to see the otherness of other people's thinking, and "gave new thoughts about various circumstances" (15). In other words, the discussion method allows one to realise the limitations of one's approach and thinking and, at the same time, the breadth and depth of the analysed phenomenon: "the task in the form of a discussion forced one to take a deeper look at the issues raised. I began to pay more attention to the details" (28). This corresponds to the specifics of the 21st-century labour market, where a person who can cooperate and work in a team is expected. Only in discussions and debates can the "reality" of the phenomenon be identified. Empirical research evidence shows the importance of the ability to listen to others and understand a discussion. The informants say that the discussion helped them to go deeper in to the idea of the movie, to see it from the perspective of others: "First, I did not see that in the movie, but I agreed with the idea after the discussion" (36)

Only adhering to their understanding as the most correct prevented debutant teachers from overcoming their limitations and seeing the breadth and depth of the topic under analysis. Not only that, the discussions "draw attention to topics that are interesting, relevant" (10). In the endless flow of information, selecting the necessary, relevant, and reliable information is difficult. This process requires critical and creative thinking.

Gaining experience: the sub-categories of empathy development, learning tolerance, and satisfaction of feedback to one's thoughts form the category of Discussion as the development of discussion skills: personality aspect. In the discussion, it is important to listen, to hear ("virtual discussion teaches empathy, to listen to others" (22)), to understand and react, and to justify the represented opinion. Another person's opinion, even if it is opposite, is just as respectable and tolerable: "I practiced

responding tolerantly to the thoughts expressed by others, which I may not agree with” (13), “I learned to express my opinion and respect the other—to write without insulting” (32).

Discussion as the development of discussion skills in terms of personality

Doctoral students themselves formulated the topics for the virtual discussion. Responding to topics raised by colleagues was a free choice. In many activities, it is nice to have like-minded people. During the virtual discussions, the feedback for doctoral students was satisfying: “it was very nice to receive an answer to the question I raised” (18), “I did not expect to be interested in my question, but it raised my motivation when I had the answers”(38). Feedback from colleagues and responses to discussion thoughts gave them self-confidence and allowed them to believe that the course of thinking was interesting, attractive, and worth the time of other people. Spending time practicing is an investment in higher abilities: “I gained a new experience that I had not had before” (21), and “Any experience is useful. Maybe it will help you to maintain a discussion with your students in the future” (23). Acquired expertise is an investment in a better future. Today’s choices are made with the future in mind.

DISCUSSION

The discussion method predates university studies, so it is not surprising that it was first used in university studies (Gao et.al., 2022). Today, every person is expected to be a leader in a particular field (Monti et al., 2020, Goffee & Jones, 2015, Audi, 2012). Therefore, the discussion method should experience revival and increase the value of discussions even more. However, the results of the research conducted show the opposite. Doctoral students are not practically familiar with this method during their studies.

Doctoral students identified the virtual discussion as the study method, not the teaching method. Considering that some Ph.D. students already have some teaching experience, they do not see the benefits of learning or see the method as helping to teach the subject for themselves. On the one hand, it is a good student-centered teaching approach, as teaching is not the most important aspect of learning, so the student, rather than the instructor, should remain the learning focus (Schlesselman, 2020).

However, it can demonstrate the absence of the ability to relate its own learning experience with the possibility of using the method in their teaching. The “Study method” category encompasses four distinct subcategories: knowledge of the study method, diversifying the study process, the way of interest in the topic, and student activation.

The findings reveal that the debutant teachers involved in the study had limited prior experience with the discussion method. They viewed the discussion as an “unusual” study format. While this lack of experience is somewhat surprising in the context of doctoral studies, it is important to consider that debutant university teachers may not have been exposed to this pedagogical approach during their own education. The study asks whether these informants had prior experience with the discussion method and, if so, why they did not recognise it or take the initiative to organise discussions. This aspect highlights the need for better integration of discussion methods in university teacher training and preparation programs.

The “Method of Interest in the Topic” subcategory underscores the significance of generating student interest from the outset of any academic endeavour. It was noted that the discussion method emphasises the necessity of engaging students and piquing their curiosity from the very first sentence. The research in the “Student Activation” subcategory demonstrates that educating debutant teachers involves recognising each student’s unique learning experiences, needs, aspirations, and capabilities. Virtual discussions create a space where individualised learning is integral to the educational process. That shows that the student’s cognitive presence was evoked during the discussion task. The students understood the activation’s benefit by presenting their arguments, expressing opinions, reacting or persuading. However, the literature indicates that the conventional approach to online discussion – asking probing questions – does not necessarily advance the discussion through the phases of cognitive presence: triggering events, exploration, integration, and resolution, which are crucial for deep knowledge construction (Darabi et al, 2011).

Therefore, the task was constructed to involve the students in asking questions, not the teachers; the formulation of the task and the exploration phase were essential to the success of the discussion.

The category “Discussion as an Awareness of the Importance of Formulating a Thought” consists of two subcategories: formulating a task for students and formulating thoughts during the discussion. The findings reveal the vital role of setting clear and concise task requirements for students. Furthermore, virtual discussions emphasise the importance of expressing thoughts and responses concisely, as lengthy contributions may hinder comprehension by other participants. The discussion method also requires the student’s preparation and the amount of knowledge at a higher level (Gao et.al., 2022; Alabbasi, 2022).

In the final category, “Discussion as the Development of Discussion Skills: In terms of the Topic,” three subcategories emerged: attention to the depth of the topic, attention to the width of the subject field, and concentration on the topic’s relevance. The discussion method facilitates the expansion of participants’ knowledge and perspective on the topic under analysis. It enables participants to appreciate the diversity of thinking and gain new insights into various aspects of the subject. During discussions, it is possible to change the other’s point of view (Gao et.al., 2022, Henly, 2016),

but tolerance is necessary for that process. Discussions encourage more profound exploration of the issues raised, increased attention to detail, and critical thinking. It corresponds with the results of Jaya Nur Iman and Nike Angrainti (2019) study and leads to further analyses of overcoming barriers that diminish the use of discussion methods at universities.

Finally, the study identified the category “Discussion as the Development of Discussion Skills: Personality Aspect,” which encompasses sub-categories related to empathy development, learning tolerance, and satisfaction with feedback. Virtual discussions foster empathy, active listening, understanding, and respectful responses to differing opinions. Participants learn to express their own perspectives while respecting opposing views, promoting a tolerant and respectful environment. Moreover, the feedback received during discussions enhances participants’ self-confidence and belief in the value of their contributions.

CONCLUSIONS

As the study with the doctoral students demonstrated, the discussion method in the university virtual classroom is not taken for granted, and it is treated as a new practical method of learning and personal growth. The qualitative study identified four key categories of advantages associated with the use of this method: 1) as a study method, 2) as a space for realising the importance of formulating thoughts, 3) as the development of discussion skills in the aspect of the topic, and 4) as the development of discussion skills in terms of personality.

The results of qualitative research show that the discussion method is appropriate and necessary for academic studies. The discussion method includes the necessary knowledge of the topic (the more knowledge students have, the more confident they are, can argue various statements, can look for new approaches to a phenomenon) and the development of social skills (improves the ability to work in a team, listen to others), and the development of personal qualities (respect yourself, the environment and the opinion of others, tolerate those who think differently, control yourself, proactively express your opinion). The discussion method can be termed a comprehensive specialist education method, combining old and new educational practices. Consequently, it is a study method that ensures the sustainability of the knowledge gained during the studies.

However, this method may need to be simplified and more time-consuming for mass education. In addition, to be led by the teacher and successful, the discussion method can only be applied during synchronous virtual classes. The reason for abandoning this method in higher education may be the inappropriate organisation of studies for applying the discussion method.

Even though the discussion method and the discussion are treated as an “unusual study” format, debutant teachers sow the benefits of virtual discussions in the study process. They perceive the discussion as a study method, a space for realising the importance of formulating thoughts, a development of discussion skills in the topic, and a development of discussion skills in terms of personality. The organisation of student-oriented studies must be based on developing communication skills by using discussion methods and helping students become leaders in their field.

Participating in discussions provides future teachers with insights into their students’ needs and preferences. These teachers can use their experiences to tailor discussions to cater to diverse learning styles and preferences.

Future teachers who actively engage in discussions during their academic journey tend to develop improved facilitation skills. They comprehend the importance of promoting a respectful and inclusive atmosphere, encouraging all students to participate, and guiding discussions effectively. This firsthand experience equips them with the necessary skills to lead discussions in their classrooms successfully.

Their positive experiences contributed to a deep understanding of the benefits of discussions as a study method and the skills required for effective facilitation. These experiences influence future teachers to incorporate discussions into their teaching practices. As educators, it is crucial to acknowledge these experiences’ profound impact and support future teachers in leveraging discussions to create engaging, inclusive, and critically stimulating learning environments for their students.

In conclusion, this qualitative study sheds light on the numerous benefits of virtual discussions in higher education. It emphasises the importance of integrating discussion methods into pedagogical training for debutant university teachers. It demonstrates that the discussion method is not familiar to debutant teachers with no teacher training background. The study underscores the need for educators to pique students’ interest from the outset, emphasising the importance of clear and concise communication. If organised correctly, the discussion increases students’ social and cognitive presence and fosters critical thinking and empathy. Virtual discussions serve as a valuable learning tool and contribute to developing valuable skills, enhancing both participants’ academic and personal growth. The findings highlight the significant role of the discussion method in the labour market, where the ability to cooperate and work effectively in a team is highly valued.

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