




Moving Beyond Transactional Coursework to Enhance Student Success in University Classes


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Abstract

The goal of teaching is student success, but defining success can be daunting. A rudimentary description of student success involves academic achievement and students' attainment of a high level of satisfaction with their educational process. The pinnacle of student success is transformational learning. Transformational learning is ultimately evidenced by knowledge-based, responsible, and autonomous thinking. Student engagement enhances student success. As a result, course design and assignment design are critical. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how an online discussion assignment can be used to enhance student engagement and increase student success in a university class. The assignment presented in this paper was used in three sections of Global Environment of Business classes in 2021. We designed it to be more than a simple transactional assignment. For the discussion assignment, students were required to address the following: "Should society adopt capitalism or socialism as an economic system? Why?" Students were presented relevant information and were required to think critically about the topic, write their thoughts on a discussion board, and respond to their peers. Then, the instructors evaluated students' comments, sought to understand their perspectives on the topic, and followed up with appropriate materials in subsequent classes. The coursework moves students toward transformational learning. The assignment requires students to present new information, reflect critically on their point of view, consider the applications of what they have learned, and, finally, think responsibly and autonomously, which is the goal of transformational learning.

Keywords: *transformational learning, transformative learning, transactional learning, student success, student engagement, online discussion, economics*

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Introduction

The primary focus of this paper is pedagogical. The purpose is to demonstrate how an online discussion can be used to enhance student engagement and increase student success in a university course. The discussion assignment is simply a tool used to lead students toward transformational learning. It can be effectively used to promote learning through collaboration. It can also enhance social presence in the virtual classroom (Strauß & Rummel, 2020). We designed the assignment discussed in this paper to be used on the first day of class. It is specifically intended to create an environment where students can learn foundational information to pique their interest in the economics course and engage with other students in a non-threatening way. The objectives of the assignment include getting students to engage with each other, learn foundational information about the course content, and lead them to begin to think critically in the course. The goal is to increase student success in the course.

The topic can vary, depending on the class being taught. The course in which the discussion assignment was used for this paper was Global Environment of Business, an introductory-level economics course that explores various economic and international economic issues. The topic, economic systems, is appropriate for transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000).

An overview of the topic is provided below, along with information describing how Americans generally feel about the topic. We provide details of the value of using the discussion assignment to enhance student engagement and increase student success and then focus on transformational learning as our ultimate goal. We then describe the assignment in some detail, summarize student responses, and include an analysis of their responses. Instructor evaluation is also provided. Limitations and conclusions are included.

Topic Overview: Capitalism, Socialism, and American Perceptions

Society must contend with the great economic problem of scarcity. Scarcity means that society must decide how to allocate its limited resources to best fulfill its unlimited wants. Economic systems are the institutions by which society does so. We take the stance that economic systems can be viewed on a continuum with capitalism on one end and socialism on the other. This view is provided to students in the assignment instructions.

Capitalism is thought of as economic individualism. The Clemson Institute for the Study of Capitalism describes it as an economic system wherein society's scarce resources are allocated through the decentralized decisions of numerous individual economic actors (Clemson Institute, n.d.).

Socialism can be thought of as economic collectivism. We follow Schumpeter (1950, p. 446) in defining socialism as "that organization of society in which the means of production are controlled, and the decisions on how and what to produce and on who is to get what, are made by public authority instead of by privately-owned and privately managed firms." Essentially, the government controls all means of production (Heilbroner, n.d.). Resources in a socialist system are allocated by central planners. The idea is that a just society seeks the material well-being of all (Wilde, 1915).

The majority of Americans hold capitalism in a favorable light. Polls conducted by Gallup from 2010 through 2019 revealed that 60% of Americans polled in 2019 had a positive view of capitalism compared to 61% in 2010 (Jones & Saad, 2019). Americans hold a less favorable view of socialism. Of those Americans polled by Gallup in 2019, 39% viewed socialism as favorable relative to 36% in 2010. Yet, those polled appear to be more sympathetic to individual ideas of socialism than the term socialism itself. For instance, 47% of Americans polled in 2019 held that government should do more to solve problems (up from 36% in 2010), while 53% of those polled in 2019 felt that businesses would harm society if not regulated, an increase of 8 percentage points from 2010.

Results from the Pew Research Center are similar. In 2019, 65% of Americans polled had at least a somewhat positive impression of capitalism, compared to just 33% that had at least a somewhat negative impression of capitalism (Hartig, 2019). On the other hand, 42% of Americans polled had at least a somewhat positive impression of socialism, while 55% had at least a somewhat negative impression of socialism. Likewise, a January 2020 NBC News/Wall Street Journal survey found that 52% of people polled held a positive view of capitalism, to just 19% with a positive view of socialism (Kamisar, 2020).

The Pew Research Center sheds some light on why Americans hold the views they do. For those Americans with a positive view of capitalism, 24% favor the economic system because it promotes individual opportunity (Pew Research Center, 2019). However, those with a negative view of capitalism argue that the system creates an unequal distribution of wealth that benefits the few at the expense of the many (23% of respondents) and that capitalism is corrupt and exploitative by nature (20% of respondents). On the other end of the economic system continuum, 31% of those with a positive view of socialism argue that it creates a fairer and more generous economic system. Conversely, those who hold a negative view of socialism argue that socialism undermines work ethics while increasing reliance on government (19% of respondents) and point to the poor historical record of socialism (18% of respondents).

A closer look reveals stark differences between the views of older and younger Americans. Younger Americans view socialism much more favorably than older Americans. According to a 2021 Fortune Analytics survey, Gen Zeers, born before 1996, and Millennials, born 1980–1995, prefer capitalism to socialism by a margin of 12 percentage points and 3 percentage points, respectively (Lambert, 2021). Conversely, Gen Xers, born 1965–1979, and Baby Boomers, born 1945–1964, prefer capitalism to socialism by a margin of 31 percentage points and 41 percentage points, respectively.

A survey conducted by YouGov (2020) on behalf of the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation found that younger Americans are even more supportive of socialism. In 2020, 52% of Gen Zeers polled and 43% of Millennials polled reported having favorable opinions of capitalism, while 49% and 47% of respondents reported holding favorable opinions of socialism. This compares to 58% of Gen Xers, 62% of Baby Boomers, and 69% of the Silent Generation holding favorable views of capitalism to just 39%, 34%, and 27%, respectively, holding favorable views of socialism. When asked whether they would support the gradual elimination of the capitalist system in favor of a more socialist system of government, 31% and 35% of Gen Zeers and Millennials polled reported that they would, which was a greater percentage than those who said they would oppose (28% and 30%, respectively). Older respondents overwhelmingly opposed such a transition.

The surveys clearly demonstrate that a greater share of younger Americans are open to socialism while shunning capitalism. With these national trends in mind, we designed a discussion assignment to explore how university students view economic systems and to provide a more enriching educational experience. We not only sought to determine whether the opinions of our students resembled national trends but also to gain insight on why our students hold the views they do. We then used student responses to shape subsequent class content to educate students on the attributes of economic systems as well as the arguments for and against them.

Moving Beyond Transactional Learning

The assignment and follow-up activities described are relevant for an introductory economics course (Bowles & Carlin, 2020). Accordingly, we administered the assignment in the spring 2021 semester to three sections of a lower-division course titled Global Environment of Business.

It is not uncommon for course activities to simply be transactional. A transactional activity is focused on students learning facts, performing a technical analysis, or learning how to complete some process, and then

demonstrating to their instructor that they have done so (Mezirow, 1997). Students learn but are not transformed. This is certainly appropriate as students need to learn facts, gain knowledge, and demonstrate that they have done so. However, our coursework is designed to go beyond the transactional to the transformative.

In the 1990s, transformative learning came to be understood as the process of effecting change in a frame of reference (Mezirow, 1997). There are several parts to this process. First, we must understand that a person's frame of reference comes from "cultural assimilation" and from "the idiosyncratic influence of caregivers" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 6). Basically, our friends and family help us formulate our points of view as we grow up.

It is important to recognize these students as mostly freshmen and sophomores. These are young adult learners. They are no longer children. This is important to recognize "as children often don't have the same kind of transformation with their learning experiences" (Western Governors University [WGU], 2007). These students, in their young adult stage of education, are ripe for transformative learning (Mezirow, 2004).

Transformative learning has some process to it, but it is simple at its core. It involves an adult learner becoming aware of their distorted or limited view of the world, critically considering different perspectives, and becoming open to the possibility that their view can change (Cranton, 2002).

This economics course is suitable for transformative learning for several reasons. First, most students enrolled in the course are underclassmen. In our sample, 40% of enrolled students were freshmen, while 31% were sophomores. The students were generally familiar with the terms capitalism and socialism. However, based on the analysis of their discussion posts, they had some transactional knowledge but had not thought of the topic critically or transformatively.

To achieve transformational learning, students must be led to consider something they have not heard before, examine their own beliefs regarding the issue, and then reflect critically on what they have learned. Transformational learning may occur gradually or suddenly, depending on the learner's experience (Baumgartner, 2001). As a consequence, the results are not always clear in the classroom, only becoming evident in a situation where the learner must apply what they have learned (Wenger, 2008). Finally, students should be able to establish their own beliefs based on completing this educational process (WGU, 2007). Mezirow (1997) describes the ultimate goal of transformational learning as students becoming autonomous, responsible thinkers.

Of course, transformational education benefits society also as students learn to think critically and make responsible decisions as informed citizens. This speaks to the value of transformational learning. It is not about demonstrating the learning of facts to earn a grade and pass a class. It is about students learning how to think for themselves based on factual information, applying that information, and making reasonable, responsible, and informed decisions. These are very appropriate considerations as academics and communities desire greater citizen responsibility and want responsible and informed citizens to take actions to improve society's conditions (Stearns et al., 2017). As a result, an exploration of economic systems is particularly important for this group of students. These individuals are actors in the economy, and many will make civic decisions based, in part, on their conceptions about economics. At a minimum, a formal exploration of economic systems prepares this group of students to be more informed citizens.

We found many examples of models used to describe the transformational learning process. Typically, these models contain several steps and often describe a complicated learning process. Mezirow's 10-step model is a good example. But even Mezirow (2000) acknowledges that "transformations often follow some variation" (p. 22). For our work, we simplified the transformational learning process as presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. *Transformational Learning Progression Model*

Step 1 is *transactional* learning, which is particularly relevant for educating children who must learn information before they can begin to understand how to apply that information. It is also very appropriate for teaching/educating adults when the focus is on technical, analytical, and/or process training (Mezirow, 1997).

Step 2 is *transformative* learning and builds on step 1. It applies to adult learners and requires an actuating event, which can be as simple as a class discussion assignment. Critical thinking and being open to other views are necessary (Cranton, 2002). In our classes, students demonstrated the achievement of step 2, as described below in our Results and Analysis.

Step 3 is *transformational* learning, the ultimate goal of higher education. Step 3 builds on Step 2. At this level, an adult person has acquired the necessary information to critically analyze a topic, considered their own view as well as others' views, and established their own autonomous view (Mezirow, 1997; WGU, 2007). In our Results and Analysis, we stop short of claiming that students have achieved Step 3; although, based on their comments, we believe they are leaning towards it. It is worth noting that some scholars have included other dimensions in their descriptions of transformational learning, but our model is meant to reflect simplicity and does not include the wide variety of other potential dimensions of transformational learning theory.

Seeking Student Engagement

On the first day of class, students are often hesitant to engage with each other and the instructor. Even when given the opportunity to speak, students often shy away from engaging due to issues related to diversity, gender, age, or lack of knowledge of the topic (Damron & Mott, 2005; Ensign & Woods, 2014; Reavis, 2020; Seethamraju, 2014). Nevertheless, engagement is vital and should be encouraged to establish an environment of learning free from personal criticisms. An online discussion assignment can accomplish a variety of things to overcome students' reticence and enhance engagement. Using an online discussion after the first day of class allows students to engage outside of the classroom. This avoids many of the challenges that exist in the physical classroom and frees up class time for the instructor to address other topics in class (Gao et al., 2013; Seethamraju, 2014).

Online discussions can be used for either online, blended, or face-to-face classes. In fact, using online discussions for face-to-face classes has been growing along with broader adoption of hybrid or blended class designs (Gao et al., 2013; McGuinness & Fulton, 2019; Nortvig et al., 2018; Seethamraju, 2014). This is not any surprise, given that today's students "have been raised in a culture of expression, engagement, and learning through online interactions using technological devices" (Carrasco-Gallego, 2017, p. 19).

The purpose of student engagement is to increase student success, as evidenced by "students learn(ing) the knowledge and skills they need to be engaged citizens and workers" (Barkley & Major, 2020, p. 5). Of course, learning knowledge and becoming an engaged citizen are important components of transformational learning (Mezirow, 1997).

As instructors and students know, it is common in the physical classroom to have one or a few students who dominate an in-class discussion (Wiest, 2018). By putting a discussion assignment online on the first day of class, all students have equal opportunity to participate without prejudice or fear of intimidation. The coursework used for this paper was specifically designed to increase students' engagement by requiring student-to-content interaction and student-to-student interaction to satisfy the discussion assignment requirements.

Aiming for Student Success

“Student participation, encouragement, and peer-to-peer interaction consistently emerge as being significantly and positively related to critical thinking” (Smith, 1977, p. 180). Teaching students to think critically is a primary goal of higher education (Thorington et al., 2022). It is important “so that they can address real-world issues in a responsible manner” (Stearns et al., 2017, p. 193). With engagement and critical thinking, students are moving toward success in their educational process.

Student success means not only academic achievement, it also includes achieving a high level of student satisfaction with the overall education process (Law & Law, 2018). There are several elements affecting student success. The most important is a Teaching Presence. Teaching Presence is characterized by the overall course design, organization, facilitation of the class, and quality feedback (Van Wart et al., 2020). After Teaching Presence, Cognitive Presence is next in importance. Cognitive Presence is characterized by including materials to facilitate deep learning, pique curiosity, provide a variety of perspectives, and “spur reflection, debate, and insight” (Van Wart et al., 2020, p. 15).

Beyond Teacher Presence and Cognitive Presence, a Social Presence has been shown to be very important in student success. Social Presence is broadly defined as student-to-student interaction and student-to-instructor interaction. Research is mixed in this area based on the subject and student demographics (Van Wart et al., 2020). However, there is support for the position that a Social Presence leads to greater student success. Some researchers discuss this as building a sense of community in the classroom, whether physical or online (Law & Law, 2018; Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012; McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

The top student interactions that may be incorporated in an online discussion assignment or in the classroom to establish a Social Presence are a) student introductions, b) collaborative group projects, c) student contributions of personal experiences, and d) entire class discussions (Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012). The online discussion assignment created for Global Economics accomplishes two of these. It requires students to introduce themselves and post multiple comments to others.

With this online discussion assignment, Teaching Presence is achieved by introducing the students to a well-designed discussion assignment on the first day of class and by providing quality feedback as is appropriate for each individual and for the class as a whole. Cognitive Presence is achieved by providing materials that introduce the topic in an interesting way, encouraging learning and spurring reflection, debate, and insight. Social Presence is achieved by requiring students to introduce themselves to the class (to the extent they are comfortable with) and by engaging each other in the discussion board. All of this leads to academic achievement and increases overall satisfaction with the education process (Van Wart et al., 2020).

Achieving Transformative Learning and Leaning Toward Transformational Learning

The value of using the discussion assignment described in this paper is in motivating students to go beyond transactional learning toward transformational learning. First, we must recognize a starting point. Students enter the classroom, physically or virtually, with their own sets of ideas, emotions, points of view, and fears. This is the starting point. Getting them from this point to transformational learning is certainly challenging for instructors. Recognition of this starting point is a critical place for instructors to start. This is simply the

recognition of the not-so-new idea that instructors should meet students where they are, adapting to students' "individual needs, interests, and abilities" (Dohrn, 2002, p. 180), and having an Awareness of Learner (AOL) perspective (Rodriquez & Mascio, 2018).

From this point, transformative learning can begin as students encounter information they have not likely seen or heard before. They begin to examine their own views of the issue. A critical assessment of the topic follows this. Along the way, students must be able to make their own decisions regarding the topic; form their own views based on facts, reflection, and interaction with their peers; and move toward thinking autonomously and responsibly (WGU, 2007; Mezirow, 1997). To be successful, instructors must be purposeful and articulate but also "flexible enough so as not to constrain critical and creative thought" (Garrison, 2000, p. 4). They must also be aware of students' needs and adopt an approach that will meet them.

It is critical to state that transformational learning is not defined herein to mean indoctrination or getting students to change their minds. That is, students must be free of coercion from the educator (Mezirow, 1997). Instead, transformational learning takes place when students change the way they think, from simple acceptance of another person's views to thinking autonomously and responsibly. Since transformational learning does not mean that students must change their view, it would not be appropriate to measure before and after views as proof of transformational learning. Indeed, transformational learning may not be evident for years, until the learner finds themselves in a situation where they must apply what they have learned (Baumgartner, 2001).

Discussion Assignment

The discussion board assignment was administered in the spring 2021 semester to three sections of Global Environment of Business. One of these sections was in-person, while the other two sections were online. The assignment was administered via the university's learning management system (LMS) for each section. We set LMS controls to require students to write and submit a first post before they were able to see the posts of other students.

Students were required to examine socialism and capitalism as economic systems and answer the questions "Should society adopt capitalism or socialism as an economic system? Why?" Students were assigned four works before making their first post. These were *iPencil* (Competitive Enterprise Institute, 2012), *Capitalism and Inequality* (Kling, 2016), *Socialism* (Heilbroner, n.d.), and *Socialism and Incentives* (Osterfeld, 1986). Each of these works was selected to provide a basic introduction to capitalism or socialism, or an introduction to at least one major criticism of each system.

Students were expected to make what the instructor described as "quality posts," defined as posts that demonstrate that the student read/viewed the required materials, formulated an opinion, and presented their opinion in a professional manner. The intent was to get students to engage with the material and with other classmates. Grading was intentionally very liberal. Students who participated fully and made good-quality posts earned full credit. There was no consideration for students providing "the right answer" or "the wrong answer." This would be very inappropriate since the discussion asked students for their opinion rather than a definitional answer on the topic. The instructor did not grade students on their opinions as this would risk the appearance of indoctrination and/or coercion more than transformative learning.

Measuring the learning of facts/knowledge is transactional (Wenger & Arohanui, 2008). This was done in class quizzes/exams and other coursework in the class. Our goal was not to get the students to think in a particular way—to indoctrinate them or to get them to change their minds. Although we are able to demonstrate some evidence that transformative learning took place, provided in the Results and Analysis section below, we did not attempt to quantify this in our grading.

Follow-Up Class Content

Class discussions provide an opportunity for the instructor to reinforce the material provided to students as part of the discussion assignment. To “meet students where they are,” “adapt to individual student’s needs,” or “have an awareness of the learner,” the instructor must have a good understanding of students’ posts (Dohrn, 2002). Therefore, it is critical that instructors read students’ posts, provide personalized and whole-class feedback, and use the information in students’ posts in follow-up class discussions (Dennen et al., 2007; Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012).

These follow-up class discussions should be in class for face-to-face classes meeting physically. Lectures, question-and-answer sessions, and peer-to-peer engagement are important to complete the process of making the assignment more than transactional. For web classes, the instructor should follow up the assignment with additional content that communicates an overall understanding of the comments made by the class, more relevant resources as appropriate, and summary comments, possibly using a recorded lecture.

Results and Analysis

In total, 121 students were registered in the three classes. To diminish the influence that other students could have had on a respondent, we considered only the first post made by each student. We employed criterion sampling in our design, analyzing only the student responses with sufficient quality such that they could be reasonably rated (Patton, 2002). As a result, we discarded responses that did not provide adequate information to determine the student’s preferences. There were 17 students who did not do the discussion assignment or provided such limited information that the raters were unable to evaluate them. Finally, one of our focuses was to analyze the views of traditional-aged students. So, two students born before 1996 were not included in our analysis. Our final sample consisted of 102 responses.

Student responses were rated separately by three professors on a 5-point scale based on the student’s answer to the assignment questions, “Should society adopt capitalism or socialism as an economic system? Why?” One end of the scale represents strong support for socialism, while the other end represents strong support for capitalism. Between the endpoints are values to reflect students leaning toward one system or the other, as well as a neutral position. Figure 2 provides the rubric used by the raters.

Figure 2. *Scoring Rubric*

Socialism	Toward socialism	Neutral/balanced	Toward capitalism	Capitalism
-2	-1	0	1	2
Strongly supports socialism. The views in this category do not necessarily reflect absolute support of socialism, but also do not contain any significant reservations.	Lean toward socialism. Views contain some reservations.	No strong preference for one economic system over the other.	Lean toward capitalism. Views contain some reservations.	Strongly supports capitalism. The views in this category do not necessarily reflect absolute support of capitalism, but also do not contain any significant reservations.

To effectively and appropriately evaluate students’ posts, multiple raters were used and an intraclass correlation coefficient was calculated. This step allows instructors to have a high level of confidence in

interpreting students' views accurately and to prepare follow-up materials appropriately. The purposes for focusing on students' posts in this way are to evaluate the quality of students' posts and understand students' views. The purpose is not to determine if students' views have changed. This intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) index is used to measure the reliability because ICC reflects "both degree of correlation and agreement between measurements" (Koo & Li, 2016, p. 156). Intrarater reliability was calculated using ICC 3,1 (two-way mixed-effects model with consistency). The result of ICC with a 95% confidence interval is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. *Intraclass Correlation*

Intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC)	95% Confidence interval	
	Lower bound	Upper bound
0.982	0.975	0.987

The obtained ICC value of .982 indicates excellent reliability as per Koo and Li (2016). The 95% confidence interval of ICC ranges between .975 and 0.987, suggesting that there is a 95% chance that the true ICC value will be between 0.975 and 0.987. Overall, the results of ICC suggest that the level of reliability is excellent.

Also, we analyzed the pairwise correlation among the three raters. The results of the pairwise correlation are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. *Pairwise Correlation*

Pair	Correlation coefficient
Rater 1 and Rater 2	.958**
Rater 1 and Rater 3	.944**
Rater 2 and Rater 3	.947**

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

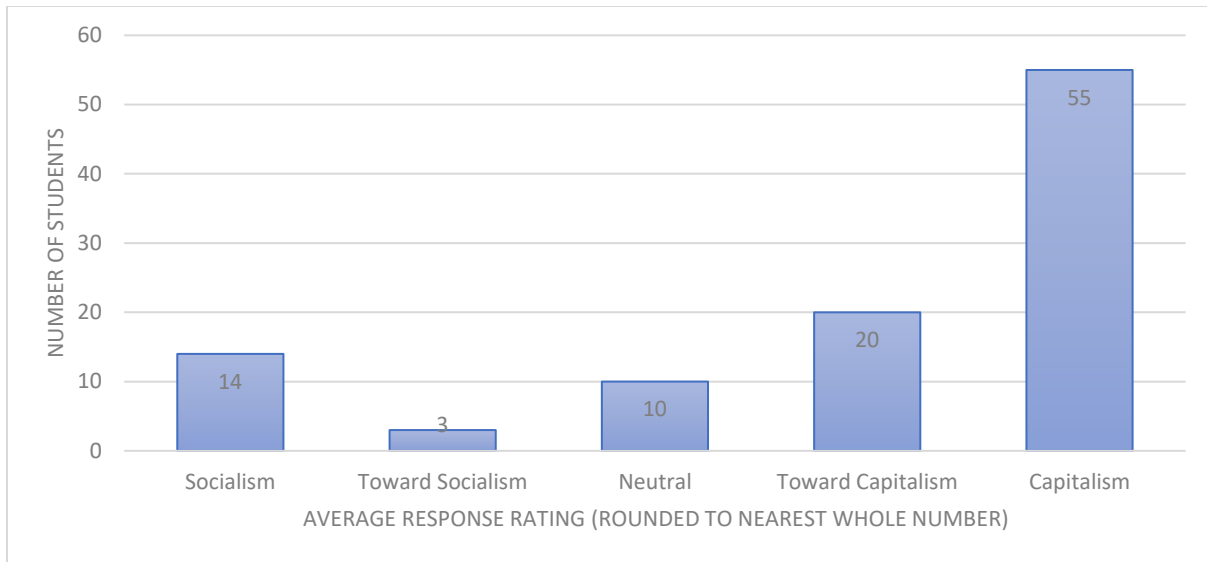
The descriptive statistics shown in Table 3 suggest that, on average, students lean towards capitalism.

Table 3. *Student Post Mean Ratings*

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Rater 1	0.901961	1.3966708	102
Rater 2	0.950980	1.4028080	102
Rater 3	1.107843	1.4205484	102

Overall, 73.5% of students either lean toward adopting capitalism or strongly support adopting capitalism as society's economic system. This compares to just 16.7% of students who lean towards or strongly support the adoption of socialism and 9.8% of students who hold no strong preference for either economic system.

Figure 3. Discussion Board Rating Results



Our results tell a different story than the national figures discussed in the *Perceptions of Economic Systems* provided in the Topic Overview section above. Nationally, younger Americans tend to be more evenly split in their preferences for socialism and capitalism. However, the students in our classrooms on average favor capitalism to socialism. This result likely reflects the general political preferences of people in Arkansas, the state in which the university exists. At the time of this research, the Governor of Arkansas was Republican Asa Hutchison and he enjoyed a 70% approval rating with only a 25% disapproval rating (Parry, 2020). The Arkansas Poll, conducted in 2020, asked respondents to answer this question, “Do you think of yourself as _____?” The responses were 52% Conservative, 30% Moderate, and only 16% Liberal (Parry, 2020). This clearly reflects a general population with more conservative views and is similar to the results of our discussion post ratings.

Examining student’s individual discussion responses reveals enlightening details. For example, 20 of the students whose comments were rated as “2” specifically discussed their view that capitalism rewards “work” or “hard work” and that people should “work for what you get.” Additionally, four students with a “2” rating focused on how capitalism provides incentives for people to work. Finally, three students focused on their view that socialism is good in theory but simply does not work well when put into practice. Interestingly, five students whose ratings were “-2” or “-1” focused their comments on the inequality of capitalist economies and supported socialism as a result.

Table 4. Individual Student Posts Reflecting Transformational Learning

“I never looked at it from the perspective that... .”
“After reading I ... have a better understanding of both capitalism and socialism. I do see pros/cons. I think... .”
“I really liked the ... video... . The capitalism and inequality pdf I saw the different beliefs Reading the socialism pdf really showed me I believe ...”
“Personally after reading all of the ... materials, I think”
“I found the video and articles very informative and thought provoking I feel that our society should adopt ... I think”

In analyzing student posts, we found evidence that transformative learning took place by noting the number of times students used the phrases “I think,” “I believe,” and “I feel.” In the 102 discussion posts analyzed for this research, “I think” was stated 107 times, “I believe” was stated 66 times, and “I feel” was stated 26 times. These are three key phrases used to describe transformative learning (Cranton, 2002; Fazio-Griffith & Ballard, 2016; Mezirow, 1997; WGU, 2007).

Limitations

Our paper comes with limitations. First, when considering the ratings of students’ comments, instructors must keep in mind that students do not always seek or recognize a transformative assignment. In fact, 17 of the 121 students in the sections did not make a single post or made a low-quality post and were eliminated from the final sample as a result. Also, several students, while consuming the required materials and making a satisfactory post, were obviously doing so only to receive a grade. Our experience is not unique (Thorington et al., 2022).

Second, when considering the results of our discussion assignment, it is important to consider whether our results are generalizable. We acknowledge a small sample size of students from a single college in a single state, which is likely to affect generalizability. Preferences for economic systems can vary from state to state. Thus, it is worth considering whether college students in other regions of the United States share similar views as those in Arkansas, the state where the university for this study exists. Accordingly, our results may be, and are intended to be, more informative for pedagogical purposes than for economic analysis.

Conclusions

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the value of using an online discussion assignment to enhance student engagement and increase student success in a university course. The goal is to move students beyond a transactional assignment toward transformational learning. While the assignment topic can change from course to course, the process can remain. Thus, this design can be applied across many courses in higher education. Barriers to student success can be overcome, to some degree, by good course design and good assignment design. The discussion assignment described herein can be used to overcome some barriers to learning (Damron & Mott, 2005; Ensign & Woods, 2014; Reavis, 2020; Seethamraju, 2014). The online discussion assignment not only encourages students to engage with each other, but also provides an interesting and course-relevant topic discussion to promote student engagement with the subject in a non-threatening manner. Student posts analyzed for this paper demonstrate a high level of student engagement with each other and with the topic. Generally, student posts were high quality. Most of the students’ posts were well thought-out.

Individual and whole-class instructor evaluation of students’ discussion posts enhances follow-up class content and encourages students to continue to engage in the class and with each other. The entire process is demonstrated as useful for instructors in creating/implementing effective course design and in moving students toward transformational learning. The detailed descriptive verbiage used by students to describe their views, as evidenced by the comments in Table 4 above and the use of the phrases “I think,” “I believe,” and “I feel,” demonstrate that students did learn new facts, became more informed citizens, and thought critically about the topic, indicating that they achieved Step 2 in our Transformational Learning Progression Model.

Finally, the voluminous literature on Transformational Learning Theory can be overwhelming and often does not provide useful examples of coursework that can be used to move students beyond transactional learning. We believe the simplicity of the Transformational Learning Progression Model we include can be useful for other educators. This simple model eliminates much of the noise in Transformational Learning Theory. This paper demonstrates an assignment that can be easily replicated in other university classes to enhance overall student success.

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