Successful Online Discussion and Collaboration:  
Techniques for Facilitation

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Abstract: As more and more instructors enter the world of online teaching and learning, a 
body of knowledge is emerging around the challenge of facilitating online interaction and 
fostering online collaboration. This paper draws from the literature on asynchronous learning 
and the authors’ own experiences with online discussion and collaborative online projects. We 
identify a variety of techniques for focusing student dialogue, fostering an online learning 
community, and promoting successful collaboration. Instructors who are teaching wholly 
online courses or simply integrating online components into face-to-face classes will benefit 
from the observations and discussion.

Introduction

Instructors who teach online, whether a fully online class or one that incorporates online components, 
face the challenge of facilitating online interaction and fostering online collaboration. Drawing from the 
literature on asynchronous learning and the authors’ experiences with online discussion and collaborative online 
projects, we can identify a variety of techniques for focusing the dialogue, fostering an online learning 
community, and promoting successful collaboration.

Face-to-face vs. Online Discussion

Face-to-face and online communication are noticeably different for the instructor and the student. 
Differences arise from the spoken word vs. the written word and asynchronous vs. synchronous communication. 
There are advantages to asynchronous interaction that instructors can use to their benefit in facilitating online 
discussion.

In a spoken discussion, the facilitator makes the effort to encourage participation across the class, to 
acknowledge all contributions without being judgmental, and to avoid having participants interrupt others. This 
can be done by calling on people whose hands are raised and encouraging non-contributors to participate.

No special skills are required to participate in spoken discussion. Some people participate in face-to-face 
discussions with confidence. They may be effective and productive but can sometimes be controlling or 
opinionated. Some people may be introverted or shy in a face-to-face setting and are reluctant to contribute to 
class discussion. Both problems may require intervention by the instructor to insure equitable, productive 
discussion.

Typically, verbal contributions are spur of the moment, spontaneous reactions. Tone of voice, accents, 
and body language help convey a message in face-to-face discussions. Unless someone is taking notes, there is 
no written record of what is said.
Written discussions differ in important ways. Both the participants and the facilitator have a written record of contributions throughout the discussion and as a reference following the discussion. Taking turns does not involve bidding for the instructor’s attention; each student simply writes a contribution when ready. Online discussion contributions tend to be more thoughtful and deliberate. They are often well constructed, and attention is paid to spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Emotion is conveyed with words and sometimes emoticons. Capital letters and punctuation may be used for emphasis.

The facilitator can send private email to non-contributors and can carefully plan interventions. Some problems arise when participants are not coherent writers or become impatient when they have to plan and write their thoughts. On the other hand, introverted or shy people may shine when they can plan what they are going to say and carefully construct an online entry.

For written discussion to be productive and effective, participants must be comfortable with online conferencing and able to navigate within the discussion area. They may need guidelines on writing subject lines for their postings and knowing when to begin a new thread. As with spoken discussion, the instructor may need to intervene occasionally to correct a problem, emphasize a point, or refocus discussion.

Facilitating Effective Online Discussions

With asynchronous interaction in mind, how can the instructor facilitate online discussion? In a face-to-face classroom discussion, the instructor needs to carefully listen to what is being said. Online, the teacher must read the written contributions and decide how and when to intervene. The literature and our experience show that fewer, but carefully constructed, instructor interventions can be effective in promoting thoughtful and thought provoking contributions by students. Effective online facilitation begins with observation of the participants to see what guidance they need from the facilitator. Sometimes this is a private e-mail reminder to an individual student to use meaningful subject lines or to reveal emotion. Often the most help an instructor can provide to the discussion as a whole is to intervene very little, merely asking a probing question or sharing a relevant story that will help refocus the discussion or motivate the participants to think at a deeper level about the topic.

Markel (2001) writes that instructors must be responsive. Feedback has long been recognized as critical to the learning process, and timely feedback is potent. This is especially true in an online course. A student assignment, question, or bid for response can come directly to the instructor via email or as part of a discussion forum posting. Feedback needs to be personal, specific, and timely (within 24 hours). Online students report checking back to see if there is a response. If they are left dangling, they lose a feeling of connection. This is a negative loop that contributes to a lessening of participation in the discussions.

Sarah Haavind emphasizes the responsibilities of a facilitator to deepen the dialogue and focus the learning. Knowing how and when to intervene is critical. Using a variety of voices and tones, the facilitator acts as "guide on the side", develops a rationale for an intervention, and carefully crafts an intervention that targets an obvious tension, an unresolved issue, or a gap in the thinking of the group. (Collison, Elbaum, Haavind, & Tinker 2000)

The best facilitators are flexible, adaptive, proactive, responsive, and resilient. They take into consideration the participants and the interaction, and they adapt their techniques to fit the situation. Sometimes this means encouraging more cooperation and less competition; other times it means emphasizing process over results. The goal is to maintain a balance that will best serve the participants and help them reach their learning goals. (Thiagarajan 1999)

Fostering Online Community

Creating a safe and challenging online community includes requiring participation and monitoring the quantity, frequency, and content of student contributions. Strategies that promote effective discussion include motivating inquiry with thought provoking questions, intervening effectively in group discussions, and supporting individual students. It is important that the instructor not be the central focus of the discussion; nor should the instructor be an equal participant; yet the instructor’s guidance is crucial. The following techniques place the instructor in a thoughtful, useful role as a facilitator.
1. **Incorporate community-building activities.** In order to develop a comfort level among students, an instructor should not launch a serious discussion without first allowing an online community to develop. Ice breaking activities can be used where there is no right or wrong answer, where humor is welcome, and personal and professional information is encouraged. An instructor can share his or her own background and outside interests as an example. Activities that encourage imagination and creative writing sometimes work well. Student introductions could remain available on a class Web page for the duration of the semester.

2. **Clarify class requirements.** Class requirements should be clear, including the expectations around contributions to discussions. Stating the number and frequency of discussion contributions is not enough. The type of contribution should be described. "I agree", "Me, too," and "No way!" are not sufficient or acceptable. Opinions should be accompanied by a rationale. Responses that answer other participant’s questions should provide clear explanations and examples. Participants should be taught how to include illustrative examples in their online postings, including Web links for further reading, images for enhancing a thought, and colored and bold text for emphasis.

3. **Know when not to intervene.** Effective online facilitation begins with the reading of conference contributions to see what guidance students need from the facilitator. Often the most help an instructor can provide is to intervene very little, merely asking a probing question or sharing a relevant story that will help refocus the discussion or motivate the participants to think at a deeper level about the topic.

4. **Privately acknowledge high quality contributions.** Instructors should refrain from publicly praising an individual participant or using one posting as a good example. Instead, the instructor can privately acknowledge how the posting helped to move the dialog in a more thoughtful direction or how it prompted others to participate that had not previously contributed. Lee (1994) explains that students who receive feedback by email are "active producers of meaning," rather than passive recipients of data (p. 152). The feedback is evidence that the instructor has read the student’s work and cares enough to provide a personalized critique. Positive feedback from the instructor reinforces a student’s accomplishments and encourages further good work.

5. **Address unsatisfactory student involvement.** If a student is not participating, or is contributing in an inappropriate way, the instructor has a responsibility to communicate with them. This should be done privately through e-mail, though sometimes a phone call is necessary. Research has shown that negative comments can result in a more positive reaction when delivered by electronic mail, rather than delivered in person. (Fishman 1999) This may be because the student is less likely to take comments and criticism personally when they are delivered asynchronously without personal contact. (Olaniran, Savage, & Sorenson, 1996)

6. **Remain neutral in heated discussions and debates.** A good facilitator acknowledges the many perspectives that have been voiced, but does not take sides or voice a personal opinion on an issue. The facilitator who voices a personal opinion runs a risk: some students will attempt to please the instructor, possibly for a better grade, by agreeing with the instructor’s opinion. In this case, a spirited debate with many viewpoints is curtailed. The instructor's role is to encourage thoughtful discussion, not enter into it as a participant.

7. **Acknowledge different viewpoints, without summarizing.** Many lists of conference guidelines encourage the facilitator to summarize the contributions in order to focus the dialogue. The danger, however, is that the facilitator infuses his or her slant on student opinions and imposes an interpretation of student contributions. Instead, the facilitator should acknowledge that there are a variety of views, citing some general ones, and encouraging further exploration of the issue. A good strategy is to state the importance of respecting other people's opinions and urge everyone to support their views with additional information. Sarah Haavind refers to this as setting a "landscape", rather than summarizing. (Collison et al. 2000)

8. **Encourage student feedback to other students.** Some instructors mandate peer interaction by requiring students to react to postings made by other students. The practice can reinforce the student’s desire to participate and encourage thoughtful reflection. A student logging into an online forum may find that other students have commented positively on a posting, or that there are six new messages in a thread that the student initiated. This feedback is both affirming and motivating.

**Collaborative Experiences**

Collaborative online projects are another aspect of online learning that benefit from careful design, monitoring, and effective instructor intervention. The design of online activities should include attention to logistics (such as grouping students), checkpoints to insure quality and timeliness of student contributions, and options that allow for joint and individual products.
When a significant online assignment is done collaboratively, the stakes are high. Students are unlikely to succeed as collaborators until they have, as Wegerif puts it, crossed the threshold from outsider to insider. (Wegerif 1998) Students may be reluctant to engage in collaborative projects or papers for a variety of reasons. Some have doubts about their ability to contribute and are concerned about pulling down another student's grade. Conversely, they may feel superior to the class and not want their own grades pulled down. The instructor addresses these and similar concerns by encouraging students to know one another well and to value their contributions before having them engage in high-stakes collaborative activities. This process is facilitated by preceding a major collaborative assignment with several smaller collaborations. Each time students are required to work with different classmates and encouraged to think about their current partner(s) as possible collaborators for the major assignment. By the time the major assignment begins, students are well prepared to choose their own partners.

While these community building activities are underway, the instructor assesses individual students’ strengths, weaknesses, styles, and skill levels. The instructor can determine which students need prodding to respond in a timely manner, which students need assistance with technical aspects of collaboration, and which students are reluctant to ask for help. In this way, the instructor and students are accustomed to timely, targeted interventions when the major collaborative assignment begins. Andriole (1997) uses the term “choreographing” to describe the careful design of pre-course, mid-course, and end-of-course activities that support successful collaboration. In particular, it is useful to step through the phases of the project, anticipating difficulties, and designing in contingencies to circumvent or respond to problems.

Experience at Lesley University has shown that online students in collaborative projects are likely to work independently and to skip any required exchanges unless these steps are clearly defined and graded. (Collier & Morse 1999) When students receive clear instruction on what material will change hands, and when they know they will be graded on the exchanges, they comply. Hiltz’s research bears this out while emphasizing that students are motivated to work hard on assignments when they know other students are reading their work. (Hiltz 1997)

Recent experience at Lesley University suggests that instructors may want to examine the components of major assignments to identify those that need to be done collaboratively and those that could be done independently. In a collaborative writing assignment, for example, Lesley students were given the option to produce individual or joint papers, but they were required to give peer feedback to their partners at several checkpoints during the collaborative assignment. The combination of providing options while requiring and grading peer feedback resulted in higher quality papers and greater student satisfaction.

In summary, techniques that contribute to successful online collaborative projects are the following: through preliminary, small collaborative assignments, encourage students to know one another and value their contributions; establish a climate of intervention early in the course to deal with the problems that will arise during a major collaborative assignment; build in checkpoints and grade those collaborative activities that are essential to the assignment; provide options for individual vs. joint efforts for some components when this will not compromise the goals of the assignment.

More Organizational Techniques

Throughout an online or face-to-face class, there are different types of online discussion that can support course content, stimulate debate, and promote collaboration among students. The following four discussion forums can be incorporated into any course.

1. Discussion of course content, readings, and debatable topics. This forum is the most academically oriented of the four and the most closely tied to the course objectives. The discussion is instructor driven, but populated by students in the class. The instructor largely controls the topics and questions, but after the initial input, the instructor can retreat, letting students take the most active roles.

2. Logistics of course, assignments, and group formation. A separate discussion area should be available for students to ask questions and discuss the logistics of the class. The instructor may be asked to clarify an assignment, or a student may contribute or request a resource that is useful for completing a project. The formation of groups for collaborative projects could be accomplished in this area.

3. Technical support. Sometimes a technical problem poses a barrier for a student trying to complete an assignment. Often another student in the class has the resources and experience to solve the problem. Having problem-solving information available on a public forum can benefit other students who may need the information in the future.
4. **Social interactions.** In this area, opinions on current world events and stories of personal triumphs and tragedies can be shared, along with informal discussion on any topic of interest to the students. The instructor may have little or no involvement in this discussion and does not need to facilitate or monitor. Often instructors "lurk" in this area, reading but not commenting, to get a sense of the culture and community of the class.

In addition to serving specific purposes, each of the four provide valuable feedback for the instructor about students’ understanding of the content and students’ ability to articulate their thinking.

**Conclusion**

Online learning is a challenge for instructors. Facilitating online discussion requires monitoring of the quantity, frequency, and content of student contributions. The instructor motivates inquiry with thought provoking questions, timely interventions, and private support for individual students. Facilitating collaborative work requires the establishment of community, timely interventions, checkpoints and grades for required exchanges, and thoughtful options for joint vs. individual products. These techniques can be learned by any instructor to provide a valuable online learning experience.

**References**


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