Facilitating Asynchronous Discussions

Alice Bedard-Voorhees
Community Colleges of Colorado Online, USA

THE ROLE OF ASYNCHRONOUS DISCUSSION

Successful online instructors demonstrate technological and content expertise, time management, and instructional and communication skills. While "asynchronous discussion" refers to a software that allows one-one-one and one-to-many text-based interaction independent of time, is it an important communication technique. And within a broader, complex definition of discussion resides the challenge and opportunity for faculty facilitation of student-centered learning.

Chickering and Gamson's "Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education" (1987) and Patricia Cross' "The Role of Class Discussion in the Learning-Centered Classroom" (2002) emphasize the contribution of interaction to increased learning. Good discussion practices demonstrate the Western Cooperative of Higher Education's "Principles of Good Practice for Online Instruction" (2003), and Colorado's faculty review provides measures of these practices and rewards faculty who demonstrate them (Colorado Community Colleges Online, 2004). Existing surveys support the value of student interaction in a course: One student survey of more than 3,000 at Capella University found that learners were appreciative of prompt, faculty feedback in discussions, reporting more student and faculty satisfaction in relationship to the quality and quantity of exchanges (Rossman, 1999; Picciano, 2002). Shea, Frederickson, Pickett, Peltz and Swan's (2001) survey of nearly 4,000 students provided these findings: "The greater the percentage of the course grade that was based on discussion, the more satisfied the students were, the more they thought they learned from the course, and the more interactions they thought they had with the instructor and their peers" (Piccianno, 2002, II).

Such asynchronous discussion provides opportunity for peer-to-peer and faculty-to-peer interaction. Given the evidence that interaction is important and the discussion tool is an effective way to maximize interaction, identifying instructional competencies and methods for acquiring such competencies is valuable for the professional development of online faculty.

A number of sources name competencies. Williams, Paprock and Covington (1999) gleaned these from several surveys: "General education theory, distance learning styles and theory, adult learning theory, teaching strategies/models, interpersonal communication, facilitatation and feedback skills … modeling of behavior skills, evaluation" (p. 33). Williams et al. (1999) list specifically "questioning techniques," "giving and receiving feedback" and "use of participative methods and techniques" (pp.16-123), which are similar competencies named by Simonson, Smaldino, Albright and Svacek (2000). These sources affirm the distance education Theory of Interaction and Communication, which states that the value of the teaching is related to the student's feeling of comfort and belonging, plus the level of course discourse, which includes questions, answers and debates. (Holmbert, 1987).

Another extensive set of competencies is provided by Dr. Gilly Salmon of Britain's Open University. She prepared the list for "e-moderators" in her writings and presentations; readers may view a grid in "E-Moderating: The Key to Teaching and Learning Online" (Salmon, 2000). Salmon's competencies express a continuum from those recommended at the time of faculty recruitment to those that could be developed through training, and finally to those that could be developed over time, ones that might be assisted by coaching or by additional professional development. Beneath each descriptor, Salmon (2000) offers specific competencies for area of expertise and characteristics related to that expertise. The categories addressed are "(1) understanding of online process, (2) technical skills, (3) online communication skills, (4) content expertise, and (5) personal characteristics" (Salmon, 2000, p. 40).

Salmon (2000) says facilitators can develop these five through training and over time:

1. Process competency includes fostering discussions; following, clarifying and acknowledging participants; inviting and engaging participants; helping the pace; and scaffolding (building on prior knowledge, sequencing).
2. Technical competency includes using course technology; supporting students in the use of the software; tracking student participation; and using course technology to manage time productively.
3. "Online Communication Skills" are defined as the ability to write clear, positive contributions in a "personable" way (Salmon, 2000, p. 40).
4. "Content Expertise" involves creating contributions of substance; suggesting additional resources; engaging and re-engaging students through questioning techniques; and developing and providing an informed method for evaluating discussion participation.
5. "Personal Characteristics" are the abilities to "adapt to new contexts, methods and roles" (Salmon, 2000, p. 40); establish a presence as the online facilitator; and model/transmit respectful and considerate communications.

Last, Coppola, Hiltz and Rotter (2001) categorize facilitative competencies as "affective, cognitive and managerial" (p.5). So in addition to technological competencies, competencies for skilled discussion draw from these categories: (1) text-based, interpersonal and group communication skills, and (2) instructional process.

TEXT-BASED, INTERPERSONAL, AND GROUP COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Creating immediacy and modeling both individual and small-group communication behaviors are central to establishing the invitational tone in an online class. The ability of a faculty to establish an invitational atmosphere in discussions largely depends on tone, a very conscious use of language and an emotional intelligence or sensitivity in creating and responding to learner posts. Coppola, Hiltz and Naomi (2001) found that faculty understood the need for projecting an online persona, that their initial tone leaned toward formality, and they were "trying to find new tools to show energy and humor" (pp. 7-8). In another study,

Rourke, Anderson, Garrison and Archer (2001) tracked and labeled communication techniques that assisted the development of a personable tone or sense of immediacy between the instructor-facilitator and learner as "affective, interactive and cohesive" (Table 1). Self disclosure might include local details and humor; interaction could include expressing interest and encouragement; inclusiveness behaviors included responding to learners by name, using pronouns such as "we" and salutations as "Hi all" to the class community, or other social remarks for openings and closings. (Rourke et al., 2001, Table 1).

Creating clearly written postings requires well-chosen, specific word choices and a keen awareness of connotation and denotation in the construction of responses. Pronouns are especially problematic. It is very easy for confusion to develop around the exact reference meant by the pronoun. Unclear pronouns often require extra time and e-mail exchanges to clarify confusion and frustration resulting from the unclear direction.

While the ability to deliver clear communications depends on the denotative choices, the ability to create sensitive communications especially depends on a control over the choice of words with perceived, negative connotations. A note from Yale Library (1999) netiquette course advises writers of online messages to read what they wrote and ask how they would feel personally as the recipient of those same remarks.

Misunderstandings can develop around exchanges in text-based environments. Knowing the causes of negative exchanges is an important competency for facilitators (Palloff & Pratt, 2001; Salmon, 2002). Salmon (2002) identifies three reasons learners may write what appear to be impertinent posts: (1) lack of clarity about learning expectations, (2) anxiety about the new text environment, and (3) a sense of displacement from community due to the virtual environment, which may explain why students sometimes make remarks online they never would in a face-to-face classroom.

While the tone for discussions is set by informing learners of respectful communication practices, some learners may still post caustic or edgy messages. Knowing baseline causes may make it much easier for faculty to distance themselves from the tone in a given learner's post and provide information that will bring the learner back to the learning, as opposed to

Related Content

ARS Evoltion: Reflections and Recommendations
Harold M. Horowitz (2008). *Online and Distance Learning: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications (pp. 2997-3006).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/ars-evoltion-reflections-recommendations/27608

A Case Study Exploring Quality Standards for Quality E-Learning
Colla J. MacDonaldand Terrie Lynn Thompson (2009). *Encyclopedia of Distance Learning, Second Edition (pp. 232-240).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/case-study-exploring-quality-standards/11760

A 3D Geometry Model Search Engine to Support Learning
Gary K. L. Tam, Rynson W. H. Lauand Jianmin Zhao (2011). *Distance Education Environments and Emerging Software Systems: New Technologies (pp. 104-114).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/geometry-model-search-engine-support/53519

ICT Use and Its Influence in Family Functioning With Reference to Process and Structure of Families: A Structural Equation Analysis
 Dinesh Kumar J.and Arulchelvan Sriram (2021). *International Journal of Information and Communication Technology Education (pp. 1-22).*
www.irma-international.org/article/ict-use-and-its-influence-in-family-functioning-with-reference-to-process-and-structure-of-families/273890

Threaded Discussion: The Role It Plays in E-Learning
Michele T. Cole, Louis B. Swartzand Daniel J. Shelley (2020). *International Journal of Information and Communication Technology Education (pp. 16-29).*
www.irma-international.org/article/threaded-discussion/239522