Core Competencies for Facilitating Asynchronous Discussions

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INTRODUCTION: THE ROLE OF ASYNCHRONOUS DISCUSSION

A number of online tools can now be used in courses for group interactions. This article focuses specifically on asynchronous discussion software that allows one-on-one and one-to-many interaction, still predominantly text based and independent of time. It remains a useful communication tool because online classes commonly have learners checking in at different times or from different time zones. This discussion tool offers great opportunity to faculty if thought of as "the classroom space," and skilled facilitation by faculty in these spaces encourages community and interaction not only among class members, but also with content (Bedard-Voorhees, 2005; Dawley, 2007).

BACKGROUND

Still relevant are instructional cornerstones like Chickering and Gamson's "Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education" (1987), and Patricia Cross's, *The Role of Class Discussion in the Learning-Centered Classroom* (2002), both of which emphasize the contribution of interaction to increased learning. Good discussion practices demonstrate Western Cooperative of Higher Education "Principles of Good Practice for Online Instruction" (2003), and Colorado Community Colleges Online's faculty review exemplifies the measures of these practices and the rewards for faculty who demonstrate them (Colorado Community Colleges Online, 2004). Existing surveys support the value of student interaction in a course: One survey of more than 3,000 at Capella 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 (Picciano, 2002; Rossman, 1999). 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. Review of the Literature). 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.

Several sources define 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, Paprock, and Covington (1999) specifically list "questioning techniques," "giving and receiving feedback," and "use of participative methods and techniques" (1999, 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, prepared for "e-moderators" in her writings and presentations, is provided by Dr. Gilly Salmon of Britain's Open University; readers may view a grid in *E-Moderating: The Key to Teaching and Learning Online* (Salmon, 2000, p. 40). 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

additional professional development. Beneath each descriptor, Salmon (2000) offers specific competencies for areas 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).

According to Salmon (2000), 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). "Content Expertise" (Salmon, 2000, p. 40) involves creating contributions of substance, suggesting additional resources, engaging and reengaging students through questioning techniques, and developing and providing an informed method for evaluating discussion participation. 5) Last, "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). Together, technological competencies for posting in course discussion are needed, and the competencies for skilled facilitation of asynchronous discussions can be grouped into two general categories: 1) text-based, interpersonal and group communications skills, and 2) instructional process.

MAIN FOCUS: 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). Most recently, course management and electronic tools have made adding a picture or a sound file to an online course discussion quite easy; faculty can use these techniques and invite learners to do the same to establish community and immediacy (Bedard-Voorhees & Comstock, 2007; Ulmer, 2003).

The creation of 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 a Yale Library (1999) netiquette course advises writers of online messages to take the time to read what has been written and ask how he or she 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 (Paloff & Pratt, 2001; Salmon, 2002). Gilly 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

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