

# Improving Discussion in Virtual Communities

**William Brescia**

*University of Arkansas, USA*

Recently, several strategies have been suggested for supporting and improving virtual discussions (Brescia, 2003; Bonk, Angeli, Malikowski, & Supplee, 2001; Hanna, Glowacki-Dudka, & Conceição-Runlee, 2000). These strategies encompass coaching, questioning, providing structure, summarizing and supporting student work.

Several researchers and programs, including MentorNet (Single & Muller, 1999), CoVis (Pea & Gomez, 1996) and the Electronic Emissary Program (Dimock, 1997), have provided places for virtual discussions to occur.

Ferneding-Lenert and Harris (1994) found that the key to success in online discussions was in building strong *teacher-student and student-student relationships*. In another study, Harris, O'Bryan and Rothenberg (1996) suggest that success is based on developing clear learning goals and the frequency and number of online communications by the instructor.

In order to foster a high level of student participation, instructors have a responsibility to make the virtual discussion a setting in which: students are comfortable assuming responsibility for their own learning, inquiry is encouraged, the necessary tools are provided and the instructor is active and involved by participating in the discussion. The instructor needs to help students grow from their current understandings to richer, more complex understandings (Brooks & Brooks, 1993). An effective way for instructors to foster the learning process is to provide structure to the class by making the goals clear, managing the discussion and controlling group size. Discussion group size should depend on the nature of the task (Rikkerink & van Halstein, 1994). As facilitator, the instructor should structure the nature of the inquiry by defining the problem, developing and evaluating several solution alternatives, coming to a resolution and leading participants through a reflection on the process. Virtual *conferencing* facilitates this by allowing the instructor to observe students' messages, keep a record of the discussion forum, model appropriate posts, question students and show critical thinking about the issue (Duffy, Dueber, & Hawley, 1998). These actions provide appropriate support for learners, and allow them to perform assigned tasks (Duffy & Cunningham, 1996).

The instructor can provide examples of analysis and critical reflection that virtual community members can observe. The virtual discussion enables the students to divert the focus from one's self to the group when per-

forming tasks or making decisions (Marsick, 1987). Instructors can use virtual discussions to make reflection a regular practice that challenges students to support their hypotheses and question learners' statements. Learners can describe their practice, share their analysis of their actions, present why and how they came to the decision to do what they did and reconstruct the event (McGree, 1998).

Hanna, Glowacki-Dudka and Conceição-Runlee (2000) present their suggestions for improving discussions in virtual communities in several categories, focusing on preparation before the course begins; evaluation of learning; and use of effective teaching strategies. Bonk et al. (2001) observed the following strategies as being successful in virtual discussions:

- **Social (and Cognitive) Acknowledgement:** "Hello..." "I agree with everything said so far ..."
- **Questioning:** "Another reason for this might be...?" "An example of this is ... " "In contrast to this might be ... " "What else might be important here...?" "Can you justify this?"
- **Direct Instruction:** "I think in class we mentioned that..." "Remember back to the first week of the semester when we went over X, which indicated that..."
- **Modeling/Examples:** "Remember that video we saw on X wherein Y decided to ... " "Doesn't X give insight into this problem in case Z when he/she said..."
- **Feedback/Praise:** "Wow, I'm impressed ... " "That shows real insight into ... " "I have yet to see you or anyone mention ..."
- **Cognitive Task Structuring:** "You know, the task asks you to do ... " "How might the textbook authors have solved this case?"
- **Cognitive Elaborations/Explanations:** "Provide more information here that explains your rationale" "Please clarify what you mean by ..."
- **Push to Explore:** "You might want to write to Dr. XYZ for ... " "Perhaps there is a URL on the Web that addresses this topic ..."
- **Fostering Reflection/Self Awareness:** "How have you seen this before?" "When you took over this class, what was the first thing you did?" "How might an expert teacher handle this situation?"

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- **Encouraging Articulation/Dialogue Prompting:** “What was the problem-solving process the teacher faced here?” “Does anyone have a counterpoint or alternative to this situation?” “It still seems like something is missing here, I just can’t put my finger on it.”
- **General Advice/Scaffolding/Suggestions:** “If I were in her shoes, I would ...” “Perhaps I would think twice about putting these kids ...” “I know that I would first ...”
- **Management (via private e-mail or discussion):** “Don’t just criticize ... please be sincere when you respond to your peers” “If you do this again, we will have to take away your privileges” (Bonk, Angeli, Malikowski & Supplee, 2001)

Brescia (2003) puts forth a list of strategies based on traditional mentoring methods. They are edited here to not repeat already suggested strategies:

- **Frame Tasks:** The instructor must provide structure for the discussion to proceed toward a reasonable end.
- **Nourish Good Ideas:** Instructors sometimes need to market good points a student has made to the group or intervene in a conflict to defend points a student has presented.
- **Feedback:** Provide simple positive or negative feedback.
- **Challenge Hypotheses:** Challenge any hypothesis that is not supported by references. You may introduce some conflict into the proceedings by challenging those hypotheses.
- **Ask for Clarification:** This is a simple request to make the post clearer and provide more supporting references.
- **Recommending Resources:** Referring students to specific references or additional resources that are recommended, but not required.
- **Summarize:** The virtual instructor<sup>3/4</sup>by summarizing key points, topics covered and those still needing to be covered<sup>3/4</sup>brings the group to a convergence from which it can move on to other questions.

These strategies have proven to be successful in promoting learning in several contexts.

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