

Managing Online Interaction

Possible Uses for Discussion and Chat

- *Discussions of specific readings/topics*
- *Forum devoted to assignments and procedures*
Having this kind of a discussion board will save you time responding to questions that more than one student might ask in the course of the semester.
- *"Ice-breaker"*
Having a less structured forum can allow students to express themselves more freely and get to know each other better.
- *Group projects*
Setting up a forum for a group of students working on a long-term project allows you to solve a few common difficulties:
 - 1) asynchronous conferencing overcomes the schedule-coordination problems that plague typical face-to-face learning teams;
 - 2) the advantage for promoting online interaction is that learning teams should bond and thus make each student in the group want to do his or her share;
 - 3) you can easily assess the contribution of each student which is normally a difficult challenge.
- *Chats with guest experts*
When inviting a guest speaker is not possible, you can arrange a chat session. This will require additional planning, such as providing guest access to your Telesis community to the expert.

Grading

- *Require participation*
Set aside a portion of the grade allocation for participation in the online discussions. You can tell the students that they must post x-number of items each week or for each topic.
Note: you can also have a separate forum for informal interaction that is not graded.
- *Quality vs. quantity*
Try to grade on quality of the postings. That is highly subjective, but no more so than grading of term papers or essays.
- *Peer grading*
You might want to consider peer grading for some small group discussions. Tell students at the beginning of the conference that at the end of the activity they will be asked to rate each other on the value of each person's contribution. This can be a powerful incentive for students to do quality work in the conference. However, most of the students that I encounter do not like to grade each other. This is especially a problem if they have bonded as a result of operating in a learning team. In that case, they may want to give everybody an A, even when some students made distinctly greater contributions to the conference. Problems also arise by having them rank each other, because they might think that rank 1 gets an A, rank 2 gets a B, and the lower ranked students will get a failing grade. One possible solution is to have students grade the contributions of another group, which also gives them added learning experiences. Another possibility is to structure the ratings so that they don't translate directly into A, B, C, etc. The teacher might say, for example, that everyone will get an A, B, or C for the peer helping portion of the final grade, depending on the peer helping ratings. The ratings might be in the form of "superior, good, fair, poor," or some equivalent. Another possibility is to have each student name the one student in the group who helped them the most. Students who are named more than once might get bonus points on the final grade. A similar approach could be used with a ranking scheme. Students with the best ranks get the most bonus points on the final grade.

Organizing and managing forums and chats

- *Make the activity interesting*

If it is a discussion topic, make it one that students have a reason to get engaged in. Appeal to their life experiences, vested interests and ambitions. It might even be a good idea to let the students create some of the topics, especially if you provide an overall academic framework to guide them where you want them to go. If it is a group-created paper or project, let the students pick the subject within the bounds of the academic objectives.

- *Structure the activity*

Give students guideposts to help them think of things to say that are academically meaningful. Choice of topics has a great deal of influence here.

- Topics should be organized around an academic theme that serves course objectives.
- Topics should not be so open-ended that students digress.
- You can go further by creating activities that are best performed in a structured way. For example, debates can be structured by requiring students to post a position, to which others respond with pro or con supporting arguments, followed by critique of the arguments. Or brainstorming can be structured by having students first generate a list of alternatives; re-think the list by creating new ordering, structure, or relationships, systematically evaluating each item to produce a "short list" of viable alternatives; and then reaching consensus decision on the best choices, followed by prioritization.

- *Allow discussions enough time to develop*

Give at least 3-4 days for each discussion and ask your students to make several posts – at least one a day. This way they can see each other's responses and gradually develop a whole conversation. If you simply ask students to make even multiple posts, they might type them up all in one sitting and never come back to the discussion board – thus missing the whole experience of interactivity.

- *Follow-up assignments*

To make students engage with all of the view points expressed in a discussion, you might want to ask them to create a type-written summary of the discussion or a reflective piece on how the activity proceeded. As Dr. William Klemm points out, "this kind of activity capitalizes on all the advantages of constructivist theory, which holds that students learn best when they have to integrate, synthesize and apply information by creating a deliverable piece of work."

- *Instructor's role in the discussion*

Discussions tend to be more active and productive when the instructor is actively engaged in them. You should at least monitor the activity and intervene to steer students in the right direction. When the teacher participates in a conference, providing extensive critique, feedback, and encouragement, students cannot help but become more involved.

- *Managing chat discussions*

Chatroom discussions tend to be much more layered than your typical face-to-face classroom. Rather than one or two students serially responding to any given point, half the students in the chat will simultaneously respond. This can lead to a richer, more textured response to a particular question or idea, but the danger is a lack of movement across a larger knowledge constructing a narrative. The challenge for the instructor is to think along multiple trains of thought and be able to steer the discussion in more productive directions.

Note: Don't forget to enable the chat log option in Telesis so that you and your students can go over the whole discussion and assess how it went. You can use the log both for follow-up exercises and grading.

Motivating Students to Participate in Online Discussions

Utilizing an online discussion board can deepen student learning and extend dialogue about core course concepts. Creating and facilitating effective online discussions requires just a bit of preparation and a few proven strategies. Motivating students to participate in online discussions is at the core of many frequently asked questions.

What Should I Do if Students Are Not Using the Discussion Forum?

Be clear about your purpose, first in your own mind and then in your instructions to students.

- If the discussion is voluntary and solely for your students' convenience and benefit then you have to accept that some may see the benefit and others not.
- If the dialogue is a required part of an assignment, make it clear how students will be evaluated.
- If the purpose is to reflect on a lecture, book, chapter or experience, give students guidance in the form of reflective prompts or a structure you want them to use or the choice of two or three questions you want them to answer.
- If the forum requires students to interact with each other and read and respond to other ideas, be specific on how many posts they should read and respond to.

Make your expectations explicit, to the extent that you have quality or quantity standards in mind.

- Be clear about length of a post (*a short paragraph, several paragraphs, one or two sentences*).
- Deadlines should be clearly outlined (*by noon on Tuesday, before the next class period*).
- Indicate how many postings students should read and reply to (*read all other posts and select two that are the most like/unlike yours to respond to, read at least five other student's posts and respond to all*).
- Define what constitutes an acceptable response (*one that identifies points from the text to support arguments, one that contributes a new line of thinking or a challenging question*).

Will Students Get More Involved if They Have More Responsibility?

Try assigning pairs of students to act as discussion facilitators for different forums. You should give them some guidance about what that means (*check the forum every day or twice during the week and post responses and questions*).

As in face-to-face classes, be aware of the pacing and timing of assignments and activities. Make sure you are giving them enough time to post and then go back to read and respond. Also monitor the discussion to determine when students have had enough dialogue and need to move on to a different activity.

Give Me an Example

Post two or three questions on the discussion board, each in a separate forum and ask students to respond to each question. Then ask students to select at least one discussion forum, read ten posts from fellow students, and respond to three of them.

You can then browse all forums and read or skim a number of postings in each forum, making note of key points made, questions raised and misconceptions revealed. Then send a class email with written reactions and comments. Alternatively, you can use the first fifteen minutes of the next class to discuss selected themes and issues from these notes.

Sample discussion questions:

- What do you see as the two key points made in the lecture and how do they relate to your own experience?
- What question lingers in your mind after the lecture?
- If you had to prioritize the three main points of the lecture, how would you rank them in terms of importance and why?
- What information or concept from the lecture helped you the most in terms of what you need to gain from this class? Explain.
- Select one of the lecture points and offer an alternative perspective in two or three sentences.

More Ideas

- Create a friendly, social environment in which learning is promoted.
- Make the activity interesting. Post challenging questions relevant to class activities.
- Require participation and include the online discussion in a participation grade.
- Use various learning options to stimulate learner participation and interaction. Activities to encourage participation include small group discussion, debates, polling activities, peer review, case studies and one-on-one message exchanges that recognize students' messages.
- Form learning teams or small groups that work together in a discussion forum.
- Require a hand-in assignment. Students can individually (or in small groups) submit a summary of or reflection on the posts in a particular discussion.
- Use peer grading or peer-feedback as part of the discussion experience.
- Model ways to support arguments in your own postings. Cite research studies or theories to back up your comments.
- Make the material relevant to students' lives. Develop questions and activities for learners that relate to the student experiences.
- Invite visiting experts to add to the discussion. Guest experts may join the conference to respond to posted contributions from students or to answer questions.

Other Considerations

A primary reason for lack of student participation in online discussions is that they do not see the relevance to class work or understand the importance of online discussions in their learning. It will help if you spend a few minutes during the first class meeting explaining why you believe online discussions are important and how they relate to other course activities and requirements. Finally, do not underestimate your impact as a model - demonstrate your enthusiasm for their exchange of ideas.

Where Can I Go for More Information?

1. The Role of the Instructor/Facilitator

Brief guide to facilitating online discussions. Lists roles of an online facilitator including pedagogical, social, managerial and technical functions, as well as guidelines for each type of role.

Derived from Berge, Z.L. (1995). Facilitating Computer Conferencing: Recommendations from the Field. *Educational Technology*, 35(1), 22-30.

http://www.emoderators.com/moderators/teach_online.html

2. Avoiding Online Discussion Pitfalls

Ten problems and possible solutions for avoiding problems with online discussions.

Murray, B. (2000, April). Reinventing class discussion online. *Monitor on Psychology*, 31, 54-56.

<http://online.sfsu.edu/faculty/pitfall.htm>

3. 8 Ways to Get Students More Engaged in Online Conferences

A one page Blackboard tip sheet.

Klemm, Dr. W. (August 1998). Material excerpted from 8 Ways to Get Students More Engaged in Online Conferences, *T.H.E. Journal*.

http://resources.blackboard.com/scholar/general/pages/ictraining/Eight_Ways_Engage_Conferences.pdf

4. The Moderators Homepage: Resources for Moderators and Facilitators of Online Discussion

Resources for new and experienced moderators concerning online discussion in both academic and non-academic settings.

Berge, Z.L. & Collins, M.P. (2000). Perceptions of e-moderators about their roles and functions in moderating electronic mailing lists. *Distance Education: An International Journal*, 21(1), 81-100.

<http://www.emoderators.com/moderators.shtml#mod>

always add or remove these at any time, but once they are place within the structure, it's impossible to move them up or down a level.

For details on building and creating the forums, refer to the built-in Scholar Help at <https://scholar.vt.edu/xsl-portal/help/main>.

Using Forum Topics and Threads

Clarify expectations for student participation

Netiquette

Include a section in your syllabus that outlines how students should behave in the Forum and how they are expected to complete forum activities. Provide clear instructions for internet etiquette (called “netiquette”) and remind them that their answers are archived and are seen by instructors and classmates.

Student Postings

Make it clear to students that they are to post their messages in the appropriate topic area. One best use of a forum is to create a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) forum and encourage students to post questions (and reply to each other with answers) within there. This will reduce repetitive emails of the same question and provides students opportunities to share knowledge. You can also reuse these questions for future iterations of the course.

To keep off-topic “chatter” from distracting others, create a “Student Lounge” forum. Encourage students to post non-class related questions or event announcements to that area. Doing this creates a feeling of community and makes it easier for you to grade forums, for others to follow and reply to discussions, and helps keep the commentary on-time and on-task.

Participation Expectations

Consider defining exactly how forums will affect their overall performance or grade in the class. State how often you expect them to read posts. How often do you expect them to post messages? How many discussions must they initiate? Must they reply to other students' posts? Do posts have to be a minimum (or under a maximum) length? Do they need to link to or include attachments of resources or articles they reference? Provide direction on how to criticize another person's ideas, but not the person. Do you require students to summarize the entire discussion by a certain day or time? How long will the forum topic be available? Is there a follow-up activity (such as a quiz, assignment, or class discussion) they need to complete after participating in the forum? The more specific you can be the fewer organization questions, confusion, and hesitation they will have in posting questions and responses.

Provide your participation estimations

Explain to your students your role and participation within the forums. Informing students of your participation makes them aware of your intent. This helps them feel involved and connected with you despite the physical and time difference that forums may create. State how many times you will read or respond to forum topics per day/week. Are you planning to

be online a lot via email, forums, chat room, or in some other manner? Will you be calling on people to answer, reply to, or clarify posts? What role will you be playing? Will you be the Devil's advocate or act as a facilitator for discussion? Will you be the moderator for a forum debate? Will you be an observer and will summarize the closing discussion forum to be discussed in class?

What's the next task?

After students have participated in forums, reiterate the learning objectives once more and perhaps mention the learning outcomes to follow. *Tell them what are they expected to do next.* Will you have them journal their thoughts about their classmates' discussions in the Blog tool? Do you want them to complete a quiz online or in class? Are they to use the wiki to begin drafting their group papers? Do you have readings or questions for them to complete? Will there be an in-class discussion summarizing the online discussion? Provide students with a clear direction of what and where to go upon finishing a particular topic discussion.

Summary

Provide clear learning objectives for students. What do you want your students to have learned upon completion of the discussion? Check for alignment between the learning objective you've set, the topic you propose they respond to, the activities or discussion they will do, and your desired learning outcomes. Modify the learning objectives or the topic or lesson as needed.

Reiterate specific participation expectations for each forum discussion. While you may have outlined these within your syllabus, providing it again within the topic itself reinforces the expectations and encourages higher-quality responses from all participants.

For each and every forum discussion:

1. Post a welcome message and an overview of the expected session.
2. Provide students with clear participation expectations. (See *Participation Expectations* above.)
3. Explain how you will participate in the sessions. (See *Provide your participation estimations* above.)
4. Outline the learning objectives. (What will students learn or be able to do upon completion of the discussion forum?)
5. Provide the forum question or discussion prompt.
6. Adhere to your outlined participation.
7. Monitor the discussions to keep students on track, to maintain student engagement, and to balance discussions by toning down dominant posters and prompting silent participants to post.
8. If you've chosen to provide commentary or regular feedback (which may or may not be graded), post questions, replies, or summaries to check for student understanding.

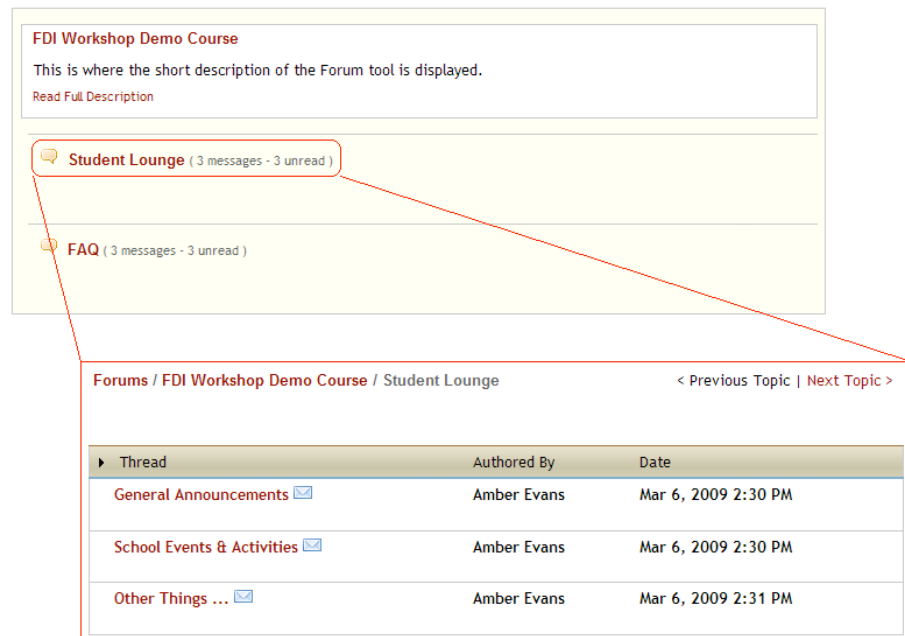
- Don't leave the discussion forum "hanging." Provide closure by asking students to summarize the entire discussion or by summarizing the discussion for them. Ask them to comment or clarify thoughts, if necessary.

Reviewing Participation Statistics

Scholar Forums offers a *Statistics* link that allows you to quickly and easily see who has authored posts, messages, or replies within discussion forums. You can also see how many postings they have read, how many of the posts are unread, and a percentage of read posts per individual student. This numbers alone cannot quantify the quality, breadth, or depth of an individual's postings, but can act as gauge of interaction between students.

General Tips and Tricks

- Post interesting, relevant, open-ended questions for the course/chapter/activity.
- Make the first Forum assignment be a low-risk, high-engagement activity: Have students create and post Autobiographies. Have each student create an autobiography with a photo of their choosing to share with the class.
- Select the best posting(s) within a topic and explain why it is a good posting.
- Pose a Pro/Con issue and have half the class post pro responses and the other half post con responses. Ask students to argue and defend their assigned position statements.
- Have students role-play and respond to questions from a particular perspective, character, or ideology. Ask them to state the perspective as part of their response, or consider having them respond and ask other students to guess that perspective (or character) the original poster had.
- Have students grade themselves by compiling their three best postings accompanied by their reflection or explanation as to how the postings support their selected grade.
- Create a Student Area so they can have conversations of their own. (See image.)



Welcome to eModerators®

The Role of the Online Instructor/Facilitator

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A modified draft of this article appears as: Berge, Z.L. (1995). Facilitating Computer Conferencing: Recommendations From the Field. Educational Technology. 35(1) 22-30. Please review and cite the Educational Technology article in any published work you author.

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Introduction

A prerequisite to the use of computer mediated communication (CMC) when facilitating online instruction is access to a high level of computing power and a reliable telecommunication infrastructure. After saying that, I want to emphasize in the strongest way that when developing and delivering *instruction*, whether online or not, the use of technology is secondary to well-designed learning goals and objectives. What distinguishes online instruction from entertainment or recreation is the purposefulness of the designers and developers in provoking certain intelligent responses to the learning materials, context, and environment.

This article will list the roles and functions of the online instructor in computer conferencing (CC). Simply stated, computer conferencing is "direct human-human communication, with the computer acting simply as a transaction router, or providing simple storage and retrieval functions" (Santoro, 1995, p. 14). Regardless of the level of technology used for CC--such as email, mailing lists, MOOs, MUDs, BBSs, computer conferencing systems, or the Web--certain instructional tasks must be performed for successful learning. It may not create the best learning environment to rely solely on CC. But used alone or in conjunction with other media, such as audioconferencing, classroom delivery or printed materials, CC can be used to provide an effective instructional system.

Types of Interaction in Learning

In essence, learning involves two types of interaction: interaction with content and interpersonal interaction, (i.e., interaction with other people). Both are critical in many types of learning. I think as an educator designs a course that is to promote higher order learning, such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, rather than rote memorization, it becomes important to provide an environment in which both kinds of interaction can occur. Technology available today, like CC, allows interaction with and about the content. In the past, while this interpersonal interaction has occurred almost solely between instructor and student in distance education, it is increasingly possible for students to interact with one another, even when geographically separated. Again, different channels of communication can hinder or facilitate interpersonal and interaction with content. It is a combination of technologies and media that provide an environment rich in various opportunities for interaction that the designer can use, provided the strengths and limitations of each are taken into consideration.

Interpersonal interaction doesn't necessarily require real-time (synchronous) communication. Therefore, interaction among instructor and students can be independent of time and place. Designers of online instruction need to be aware that the higher the content density of the materials to be learned, the more self-pacing is becomes the responsibility of the learner. High density content may be better delivered via recorded media such as printed text, video tape or on a Web site--all of which can be revisited by the learner at his/her convenience and individual pace.

The Role of the Instructor When Teaching in the CC Environment

Clearly the most important role of the online instructor is to model effective teaching and accept "the responsibility of keeping discussions track, contributing special knowledge and insights, weaving together various discussion threads and course components, and maintaining group harmony" (Rohfeld & Hiemstra, 1995, p. 91).

There are many necessary conditions for successful online tutoring, which I have categorized into the following four areas (Berge, 1995): pedagogical, social, managerial, and technical. Not all of these roles need to be carried out in their entirety by the same person. In fact, it may be rare that they are. A brief description of those roles follows (Feenberg, 1986; Gulley, 1968; Kerr, 1986; McCreary, 1990; McMann, 1994; Paulsen, 1995).

Pedagogical (intellectual; task)

Certainly, some of the most important roles of online discussion moderator/tutor revolves around their duties as an educational facilitator. The moderator uses questions and probes for student responses that focus discussions on critical concepts, principles and skills.

Social

Creating a friendly, social environment in which learning is promoted is also essential for successful moderating. This suggests "promoting human relationships, developing group cohesiveness, maintaining the group as a unit, and in other ways helping members to work together in a mutual cause," are all critical to success of any conferencing activities.

Managerial (organizational; procedural; administrative)

This role involves setting the agenda for the conference: the objectives of the discussion, the timetable, procedural rules and decision-making norms. Managing the interactions with strong leadership and direction is considered a sine qua non of successful conferencing.

Technical

The facilitator must make participants comfortable with the system and the software that the conference is using. The ultimate technical goal for the instructor is to make the technology transparent. When this is done, the learner may concentrate on the academic task at hand.

The following recommendations come from many sources and experiences. Besides the references, these sources are listed in the "For Further Reading" section below. Let me emphasize that I have categorized these arbitrarily. There is considerable overlap with some tasks. This is especially true of the issues more difficult to address effectively. It may well be because these issues cut across two or more areas that make them particularly challenging! For example, if I say that the mechanics of giving feedback on online student papers (as opposed to hardcopy) need to be devised, should this be under pedagogical, technical, administrative or interpersonal issues? I think a case could be made for each as being an appropriate category.

Pedagogical Recommendations

Have Clear Objectives. Participants must believe their online interactions is time well spent.

Maintain as Much Flexibility as You Can. Because of the individuality of the learners, courses need to remain flexible and the instructor needs to support this. Rather than presenting an elaborate seminar agenda at the outset and a complex process for students to fulfill, follow the flow of the conversation, while guiding it toward the subject.

Encourage Participation. The use of various learning options can stimulate learner participation and interaction--small group discussion, debates, polling activities, dyadic learning partnership exchanges, and one-on-one message exchanges recognizing students messages are some of the activities to use when encouraging participation.

Maintain a Non-authoritarian Style. It is usually better to avoid the "authority figure" role when teaching online, especially with adults.

Be Objective. Before generalizing to the conference about a contribution, consider such things as the tone and content of the posting, the author and his/her skills, knowledge and attitudes that you may know about from prior conference postings, and time of the posting in relation to the conference thread.

Don't Expect Too Much. Online instructors need to be content if two or three well articulated, major points are communicated in a particular thread of discussion.

Don't Rely on Offline Materials. Summarize the assigned readings online so that the discussion in the CC remains mostly self-contained.

Promote Private Conversations as well as Those in the CC. Design opportunities for private conversations among two or more people who you suspect have similar interests in the content.

Find Unifying Threads. Instructors can weave several strands of conversation into a summarization that may prompt people to pursue the topic further.

Use Simple Assignments. Group assignments are appropriate to this media, but an over-complicated design in them is not.

Make The Material Relevant. Develop questions and activities for learners that relate to the students' experiences.

Required Contributions. In credit courses especially, students can be required to sign on and contribute substantively a certain number of times. With some computer conferencing systems, it is possible and may be appropriate to require a participant to respond to the topic or question under discussion before he/she can access the answers posted by other participants.

Present Conflicting Opinions. Instructors can draw attention to opposing perspectives, different directions, or conflicting opinions that could lead to debates and peer critiques.

Invite Visiting Experts. Guest experts may join the conference with students to respond to posted contributions, or so students can ask questions of the visitor.

Don't Lecture. Experience strongly suggests that a long, elaborate, logically coherent sequence of comments yields silence. Instead, use open-ended remarks, examples, and weaving to elicit comment and other views.

Request Responses. The instructor may ask particular learners for comments on a topic or question, then give them time to respond, for instance "by tomorrow."

Social Recommendations

Be Accepting of Lurkers. Recognize that there will be "lurkers" in the conference and they may never participate with comments. Some people learn by listening to others so do not assume learning is not taking place. Both lurkers (or any latecomers to the class) must be acknowledged and welcomed.

Guard Against Fear in Your Conference. Fear of public ridicule often stifles participation in CC. Be gently accepting of students' comments and deal with exceptions off the list.

Watch the Use of Humor or Sarcasm. It may be wise not to use humor or sarcasm due to different cultural and ethnic backgrounds that may be represented on the CC. Using text-based communications, it is especially difficult to construe intent and tone from on-screen text, unless you know the student's very well.

Use Introductions. The facilitator should encourage the participants to introduce themselves, to help build the sense of community.

Facilitate Interactivity. A sense of interactive participation is often promoted by using special introductory techniques, dyadic partnering, and some assignments that facilitated informal discussion among learners.

Praise and Model the Discussant Behavior You Seek. Reinforcing and modeling good discussant behaviors, such as by saying, "Thank You" to students who respond effectively online, can be helpful to encourage courtesy and interaction..

Do Not Ignore Bad Discussant Behavior. Request change (privately) in poor discussant behaviors and have a written "netiquette" statement to refer to..

Expect That Flames May Occur. Participants may breach etiquette and respond with harsh or vulgar language. If this problem should occur, the tutor needs to react and remind people (privately) about computer etiquette.

Managerial Recommendations

Informality. Depending upon the instructional objectives of the course, the instructor may decide that informality should be encouraged. One way to stress the informality of this communications medium is to let people know that perfect grammar

and typing are much less important than making their meaning clear. It's simple to edit items that will become part of the group's report later.

Distribute a List of Participants. Distribute, or make available to all subscribers to the conference, a list of participants so that private messages can be addressed to individuals and not to the list.

Be Responsive. Respond quickly to each contribution. One way of doing this is by posting a personal message to the contributor or by referring to the author's comments in a post to the conference. In some conferences, it is not advisable to respond to each individual contribution, but better to respond to several at once by weaving them together. Experience with your content and students will need to guide the instructor--test different ways to see what works most effectively.

Providing for Administrative Responsibilities. Coordinating and providing information about activities for such things as registration, admissions, student counseling, normal bookstore activities and many other administrative functions often are questions which are unanticipated by the novice online instructor.

Be Patient. Messages sometimes are not acknowledged or responded to for days or weeks by conference participants. Contrast the last recommendation concerning responsiveness with this one: Be prepared to wait several days for comments and responses, and don't rush in to fill every silence with moderator contributions.

Request Comments on Metacommunications. Request metacommunications by inviting participants to tell how they feel about the course within the conference.

Synchronize and Resynchronize. As much as possible, ensure that all students begin in unison and in an organized fashion. Also, periodically design ways so that students can "restart" together.

Be Mindful of the Proportion of Instructor Contribution to the Conference. As a rule, instructors or moderators should generally contribute between one-quarter to one-half of the online material.

Procedural Leadership. The online tutor should initiate procedures and stifle frustrating procedural discussions. Change what isn't working, but don't allow the conference to be taken over by discussion of failed procedure rather than content or more useful discussion.

Use Private Email for Prompting as is Appropriate for Discussion. Using private messages the facilitator can urge participants to join in the discussion, to initiate debates, and to solicit suggestions.

Be Clear. Succinctly and clearly state the conference topic and the expectations for students within the conference. Clarify the topic and expectations throughout the conference proceedings.

Don't Overload. The instructor should pace the conference so that the equivalent of about one long post per day is made. If the participants have a lot to contribute, the moderator should contribute less so that the slower students can keep up.

Change Misplaced Subject Headings. Immediately change the subject line on a contribution posted under a wrong discussion heading to the more appropriate one.

Handle Tangents Appropriately. Return inappropriate digressions to the author or guide the participants back to the original topic.

Vary Participants' Amount of Contribution. If there is a participant who appears overly outspoken, ask that person (privately) to wait a few responses before contributing. Similarly, ask less outspoken individuals to participate more actively.

Student Leaders. It is perfectly reasonable to design elements of most online instruction so that students could take turns as assistant moderators and lead the discussion. This needs to be determined by the content of the class, and the skill, knowledge and attitude of the students. But again, one instructor does not necessarily need to solely execute *all* these roles and tasks.

Preparation Time. Instructors find that planning, developing and distributing course materials needs a substantially greater lead-time for preparation than may be anticipated at first.

End the Sessions. Decisively end to each discussion thread and the conference. Conclude discussions so that they don't drag on after they have served their purpose.

Have experienced instructors. Avoid having a first-time instructor also teach online the first time.

Technical Recommendations

Use Technical Support. Using face-to-face tutorials sessions for novice computer conference participants is recommended, but not always possible. If it is possible, it may be useful to have technical support people available at these sessions, and available to answer emailed or telephoned inquiries. Before the conference begins, the instructor should know who is available for technical support that is needed beyond his/her skills level.

Provide Feedback. Provide swift feedback, especially to technical problems.

Develop a Study Guide. A common reader, study guide or workbook that addresses both the content and any common technical concerns is important. These could serve as the basis for discussion, provide introductory information, description of course activities, resources materials, and other information about the course components or procedures.

Provide Time to Learn. Learners need support as they learn and use new software features. Provide adequate time for novice users to be comfortable with the technology before they must participate.

New Methods of Indicating Feedback. One needs to develop standards for online feedback to students' work, such as how corrections or notes to the author can be accomplished working online versus hardcopy.

Promote Peer learning. Encourage novice email or e-conference users to work with more experienced peers.

Avoid Lecturing. Single contributions should be limited to no more than two screens. Longer postings are hard to read on screen, become tedious, and impede discussion. If lecture is in order, it is better to send the lecture separately as a reading, either electronically to be downloaded, or by mail.

Giving Direction. It is important to not give too much direction. Learners will often rebel if the structural design of the conference is excessive.

Summary

Each computer conference, regardless of the technology that carries it, has a different "feel" about it and what may work in one setting with one group of people may not in another. Both the teacher and each student are challenged by new roles, functions, and tasks they need to perform. While instructors are asked to articulate more clearly their goals and methods to others in the development team, students are also asked to take more responsibility for their learning. It takes time for student and instructor to develop effective use of technologically mediated instruction, and it takes time for students to learn in this environment.

In many instructional situations, to be successful there often needs to be more discussion occurring among the students than the one way transmission of facts and information from teacher to student generally allows. Online instructors need to be aware that this can make some students and faculty profoundly uncomfortable and take positive steps to build both confidence and communicative competence in online instruction.

Computer conferencing usually should not be the only medium one uses to create the elements in a learning environment. If your instructional goals and objectives lend themselves to the instructor focusing on the right questions to ask, rather than the right answer to give, then computer conferencing should be given serious consideration as an effective medium for communication within the instructional system being designed.

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