Online Learning: Facilitating Discussion

Kristin DeAngelis
J. Garvey Pyke, Ed.D.

Question:

In a traditional classroom, many instructors rely upon student discussions to promote interaction with course material, a feeling of community, and higher level thinking. What are the best ways to promote effective discussions?

Answer:

Just like in a traditional classroom discussion, online asynchronous discussions need to incorporate an active facilitator as well as clear expectations and guidelines.

Proof:

• Aviv, Erlich, and Ravid (2005) studied online conversations to assess students’ involvement and roles in the conversation. They looked at both formal, well-structured conversations and informal, non-structured conversations. Students took on more responsibility and achieved a greater level of critical thinking in the structured conversations, while the instructor was the dominating force in the unstructured ones.

• Beaudin (1999) asked 135 online instructors to rank the effectiveness of thirteen distinct methods for keeping online discussions on topic. The four most effective methods for keeping online discussions on topic were 1) designing clear, focused questions, 2) providing guidelines to help students create relevant responses, 3) rewording the original question when responses were straying, and 4) regularly providing discussion summaries. Instructor experience and training did have a statistically significant effect on their ability to keep discussions on track.

• Kumari (2001) invited each of three guest teachers run a weeklong discussion group in her online graduate education course at Rice University. They presented information and then monitored and facilitated the ensuing discussion. Having an instructional leader was the key: the three weeks with a guest host generated more student responses and involvement than the weeks with student initiated discussions.

• Pelz (2007) counted participation in online student led discussions as 50% of students’ grades in his courses at Herkimer County Community College. Each student was responsible for leading a discussion based on the course text. The student was awarded points for his initial question based on relevance, importance, originality, timeliness, and whether it provokes higher level thought. Students also received points for quality and depth of responses to other students’ posts. This format promoted student involvement, student responsibility, and higher-level thinking by making students responsible for the discussion and providing a clear grading rubric that stresses critical and creative thinking.

• Washington State University had a voluntary Virtual Facilitator program in which a trained facilitator, at the instructor’s request, participated in online course discussions. The facilitator’s purpose was to promote conversation among students, promote conversation between students and the instructor, and act as a liaison between students and the instructor when necessary (Deuben 2006).

• Graham, Scarborough, and Goodwin (1999) analyzed data from an undergraduate online Economics course in an effort to determine effective practices for online learning. Students were divided into groups, and received both group and individual grades for their assignments. Each group worked closely with a tutor who was in charge of facilitating that group’s conversation. Tutors also encouraged non-posting students to contribute to the conversation, first in the group thread and then by private email or phone call if the student did not respond.

• Rossman (1999) examined over 3000 online course evaluations in order to compile a list of effective practices for promoting online course discussion. Among the tips that he suggests are posting a weekly discussion summary so that
students have a review of the key ideas that they covered throughout the week, keeping the forum positive by sending negative feedback and constructive criticism through private mail as opposed to a public thread, and keeping reference notes on each student’s interests in order to make the experience more personal.

- Prestera and Moller (2001) examined the functions that an online instructor needs to perform, and found that an online instructor needs to fill six different roles: instructor as a guide, instructor as a mentor, instructor as a catalyst, instructor as a coach, instructor as an assessment giver, and instructor as a resource provider.

- Gilbert and Dabbagh (2005) examined transcripts from twelve online discussions among 87 students and found that there were three structural elements that played a key role in the quantity and quality of online asynchronous discussions within a classroom: facilitator guidelines, evaluation rubrics, and post protocols. Facilitator guidelines resulted in a greater number and type of responses and evaluation rubrics led to higher quality responses. Post protocols, such as word count restrictions and citation requirements, let to a decrease in responses.

- Caspi, Gorsky, and Chajut (2003) studied voluntary asynchronous group conversations in 47 courses from the Open University of Israel to determine the effects of group size. They concluded that only a small percentage of students participate in nonmandatory online group discussions. They also found that as group size increased, there were more posts and interactions between students and less feedback from the instructor.

Further Reading:

- Educause seeks to advance of higher education through information technology through the reports from the Educause Center for Applied Research, Educause Learning Initiative, and Educause Connect, all of which provide current information about the uses of technology in education. http://www.educause.edu/

Sources:


About this Teaching Tip Sheet:

This Teaching Tip Sheet was prepared by Ms. Kris DeAngelis and Dr. Garvey Pyke at the Center for Teaching and Learning at UNC Charlotte. Please visit us online at teaching.uncc.edu for more professional development resources.