

Moderating Chats and Facilitating Discussions

1. **Determine how chats and discussions can assist the learners in achieving the overall course objectives.**
2. **Determine the integration of chats and discussions within the overall course design.**
3. **State chat and discussion expectations and guidelines in the course syllabus**
 - a. include policies on acceptable behavior,
 - b. inform learners of your expectations for how these approaches will be used as part of the course,
 - c. provide a weekly overview of agenda and requirements,
 - d. provide participation guidelines to students,
 - e. indicate participation grading policies and information about how students can succeed with reference to quality and quantity of chat and discussion posts,
 - f. provide expectations on timeliness of discussion posts (entering an asynchronous discussion after it is nearly over can be unproductive; though there are ways around this problem - such as asking a late student to summarize the discussion that has already occurred),
 - g. provide information about introductory discussion post (should be non-graded to keep anxiety low, ensure students have access and can successfully complete a posting).
4. **Design to keep communications focused.** Discussions (as well as Chats) can be unfocused unless the instructor exercises a strong guiding influence on the conversation with prompts, cues, and suggestions. Focus the discussion by carefully preparing questions in advance. Invite students to develop questions and responses in advance in another word processing document to then cut and paste into the discussion (or the chat) forum.
5. **Be encouraging, supportive, timely, and constructive in all chats and discussions.** Promote quality participation by publicly acknowledging it. Ask for more detail from students who submit incomplete or shallow comments, but do this in a constructive and supportive manner (Aggregated from open forum hosted by SUNY, 11/05).

Chat - synchronous (real-time) communication tools
Discussion Board - an asynchronous (not real-time) communication tool

Resources:

Collison, G., Elbaum, B. Haavind, S. & Tinker, R. (2000). Facilitating Online Learning: Effective Strategies for Moderators. Madison, WI: Atwood Publishing.

Hanna, D. E., Glowacki-Dudka, M. & Conceicao-Runlee, S. (2000). 147 Practical Tips for Teaching Online Groups: Essentials of Web-Based Education. Madison, WI: Atwood Publishing.

Hiltz, S. R. & Goldman, R. (2005). Learning Together Online. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.

Ko, S. & Rossen, S. (2001). Teaching Online: A Practical Guide. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Laboratory At Brown University. Electronic Collaboration: A Practical Guide for Educators, <http://www.alliance.brown.edu/pubs/collab/elec-collab.pdf>, Accessed 11/30/05.

Some Instructional Applications of Online Chats

Guest speakers--Invite an expert or author to participate in the course chat. This allows for the traditional geographical and philosophical boundaries to be extended. Collect questions in advance from students. Have a student moderate the session, coordinating introductions and inviting students to ask questions in an orderly way.

Office hours--Invite students to ask you questions using a prearranged chat time. You agree to be available in the chat room during specific times. Students can enter and ask questions during that period.

Other applications (Ko & Rossen, 2001) of chat are to:

- create a community of learners,
- provide reinforcement and immediate feedback
- use in conjunction with discussions for group project meetings

Tips for Moderating Chats

Chat Preparation

Scheduling Considerations--“Synchronous tools like chat rooms and whiteboards are particularly appropriate for your class if you have students living in the same time zone or logging on from campus locations. If your students live in separate time zones, careful schedule accommodation is required to make this a worthwhile and attainable learning experience” (Ko & Rossen, 2001, pp. 90-91).

Include a practice chat session at the beginning of the course to be sure all students understand how to participate and can gain access.

Consider the number of students that can be meaningfully involved in chat--Although this number will vary depending on the goal of the chat (to get to know each other or to have an in-depth discussion regarding a complex issue) and the skills of the participants, generally a chat with 10 or fewer participants can be effective.

Establish a system for granting turns to speak--“If your chat software includes a crowd-control function (the equivalent of raising hands to be recognized), then you should definitely make use of it. If your software doesn’t have such a built-in system, you can design one; for instance, a question mark, asterisk, or some other sign that, when typed, will appear next to the student’s name, allowing you to recognize him or her to speak” (Ko & Rossen, 2001, p. 229).

Prepare students for the chat by posting the topics or agenda, assigning readings or activities, or giving them questions to consider before the chat (Ko & Rossen, 2001)

Have a backup plan in place, in the event that you or some of the students lose Internet connection (Ko & Rossen, 2001)

Chat Session

Establish a protocol so that learners will know when another has completed their message (i.e. ask learners to add an asterisk * at the end of their sentence).

Whenever possible, preface your response with the name of the student to whom you are replying, or include bits of the question or comment to which you are responding (Ko & Rossen, 2001)

Break up long responses into two or three parts (Ko & Rossen, 2001)

Monitor the dialogue to keep it on topic, weave major themes together and engage learners who are not participating.

Allow some time at either the beginning or end of the chat for students to ask off-topic questions and to socialize (Ko & Rossen, 2001).

Summarize the major points at the end of the chat session

Post-Chat Activities

Be aware of those who tend not to participate--Is it due to a technological or skill problem? Some learners can type very quickly while others type quite slowly. This may affect the frequency of all learners' participation. If nonparticipation seems to be attributed to neither technological problems or typing skills, is there a way to draw them into the chat?

"If your software allows you to save whiteboard and chat sessions, and make them available to view later, this can be a major asset. This feature enables students to refer to and reflect on chat and whiteboard activities, thus considerably increasing their value to your class" (Ko & Rossen, 2001, p. 91).

Some Instructional Applications of Online Discussions

- To allow students the opportunity for reflection on a selected topic
- To facilitate the learning of new course materials
- To reinforce knowledge acquisition of instructional concepts
- To provide opportunities for learner collaboration on assignments, projects, exam review sessions, etc.
- To build a social environment and learning community
- To provide feedback for Frequently Asked Questions
- To share knowledge and expertise among various members of the class

Tips for Facilitating Discussions

Discussion Preparation

- **Narrow down topics**--A good discussion topic needs pruning and shaping; an overly broad topic will result in a fragmented discussion whereas a topic that is too specific might not go anywhere. "Allow students to digress, but if you think that the new direction in the conversation calls for an entirely new thread, you might create one or suggest that a student begin a new topic message to explore the subject further" (Ko & Rossen, 2001, p. 225).
- **Structure the discussion.** Topics should not be too open-ended or students may lose focus. One way to structure discussion is through debates. Assigning or asking students to choose a position in advance can be helpful. Other structuring devices include - problem solving, case studies, interviews, panels, brainstorming, summaries, etc (Aggregated from open forum hosted by SUNY, 11/05).
- **Make the discussion interesting.** Asking students to respond to "known answer" questions is unlikely to generate sustained involvement. Discussion questions should be open-ended, focused on learning objectives and likely to spur some controversy or interaction (Aggregated from open forum hosted by SUNY, 11/05).
- **Organize forums and threads to reflect the class chronology**--"The organization of discussion forums should complement the class structure but also provide some reminders of the course chronology and sequence. For example, if forums are the outer level of your discussion structure, creating one for each week or unit of the course helps students know at a glance where they should be looking for that week's activity" (Ko & Rossen, 2001, pp. 225-226).
- **Key the thread topics to appropriate activities**--"Keying thread topics to the assignments, readings, projects, and exercises for a particular week will help keep students on topic in their discussions and also provide an obvious place to discuss anything that occurs in the course during that week" (Ko & Rossen, 2001, p. 226).
- **Require a product which is based on or the result of discussion.** A "hand-in" assignment that is based on class discussion can help students to synthesize, integrate and apply what has been discussed (Aggregated from open forum hosted by SUNY, 11/05).
- **Have students lead the discussion.** Assign students to post focused, topic relevant discussion questions and lead the discussion. It may be necessary to model a few discussions in advance and/or assist the student to choose appropriate discussion questions in the early stages (Aggregated from open forum hosted by SUNY, 11/05).
- **Include ideas, and information generated in discussion on exams.** This serves two purposes. It reinforces the importance of student collaboration and makes "cheating" much more difficult. If students need to participate in class discussions to answer exam questions they will be unable to simply "copy" from outside sources (Aggregated from open forum hosted by SUNY, 11/05).
- **Form Small Groups or Learning Teams.** Assigning students to these (rather than allowing self selection) can help avoid logistical problems that inhibit productivity. If you do allow self selection, establish a deadline for this process (a week to ten days) and then default to

teacher assignment to the groups after the deadline. Small groups can (Aggregated from open forum hosted by SUNY, 11/05):

- **Develop group presentations**
- **Peer review each other's work**
- **Prepare for exams**
- **Analyze a case study**
- **Small groups are especially helpful for large classes**
- **Make sure discussions are of a long-enough duration to allow full and thoughtful participation.** Ten days to two weeks is often required to fully flesh out an online asynchronous discussion (Aggregated from open forum hosted by SUNY, 11/05)
- **Add standard discussion topics.** When designing your online course include discussion topics for technology questions and for general discussions. This will help organize bulletin postings and give students a clear avenue for communicating comments and concerns. Instructors may also include a section, "Electronic Reflections" for students to post comments regarding their experience taking an online course. These comments could then be referenced or even posted in future course offerings.
- **Make Corrections.** Correct spelling errors in subject lines. Move postings to incorrect threads to the correct threads.

Discussion Session

- **Begin the course with an introductory post to the discussion list--**Tell the students a bit about yourself and/or the course. Encourage students to do the same. Your use of the tool models the appropriate use and provides students with the initial prompt to begin a discussion. This exercise will also reveal if students are having difficulty understanding how to post or reply to a message.
- **Establish a pattern of frequent response--**"Students tend to follow instructor expectations for online participation, and these expectations are communicated not only by the declarations of the syllabus but also by the instructor's behavior" (Ko & Rossen, 2001, p. 226). If the class size allows, greet each student individually as they arrive and engage as many as possible in discussion. Then try to respond to different groups each week instead of the same group of individuals. "Think in terms of three to five short periods of logging on each week, rather than one or two sessions you may be used to in your on-campus courses. If you have only four hours to devote to the classroom in one week, spend an hour for each of four days in the classroom, rather than two hours twice a week. This will allow you to keep up with the flow of student discussions and will also reinforce the impression that you are responsive and on the scene" (Ko & Rossen, 2001, p. 227).
- **Facilitate and build on participation** "Don't try to respond to every posting in the classroom. Even in a class of 20, this will quickly overwhelm you. Also, you want to encourage students to interact with each other, not only with you. So make comments that address a whole train of thought—responding, for example, to five or six related messages in the thread rather than to each of the five individually. In this way you will do your part to encourage participation as well as interaction among students" (Ko & Rossen, 2001, p. 226). Think about joining the conversation at critical junctures and working as a facilitator to help the flow of the discussion going. Make your points when you feel it's appropriate similar to

how you would in a face-to-face environment. Contribute “comments that summarize what students have posted, as well as follow-up questions that stimulate further discussion” (Ko & Rossen, 2001, p. 228).

- **Participate wisely.** The key to discussion success is that it is learner-centered, driven by student inquiry and knowledge exploration. The instructor should not dominate the discussion, nor should she be absent. It is the instructor’s responsibility to guide and facilitate the discussion by providing prompts and explanations and encouraging learner discovery. Be mindful that students may interpret the instructor’s post as the “official answer” and discussion may become limited; therefore, stay focused on playing the role of a facilitator.
- **Promote student interaction with instructor.** Invite students to post answers to a question you pose. Ask students to comment on questions or responses others have posted.
- **Be aware of cultural patterns as well as differences in personal styles of discussion**
- **Deal with unacceptable behavior via private email** (Aggregated from open forum hosted by SUNY, 11/05).
- **Monitor the quality and regularity of the postings.** If learners appear to post late (when you have already gone on to another posting), not participate, or post non-substantive messages, communicate with that student privately.
- **Vary Participants' Amount of Contribution.** Encourage less active students to post more often. Follow up individually with students that are participating less to determine if there are any problems.
- **Monitor your e-Tone.** Always respond to student questions, complaints, and concerns by saying, “Thank you for asking about. . .” or “Thanks for letting me know of your concerns, [name]” or “Good question, [name].” Since tone over email is hard to convey, doing this will create some room for you to say what you need to say firmly and directly without being heard as being inconsiderate or lacking in understanding. Electronic communications are a prime environment for misunderstanding.

Post-Discussion Activities

- **Provide a summary of the discussion before moving on to a new thread.**
- **Instead of closing a discussion topic, consider locking it for further posts to allow students to revisit prior discussions.**
- **For grading purposes, aggregate individual student postings.**