Designing and Orchestrating Online Discussions

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Abstract

This author's position is that asynchronous online discussions face an array of resolvable pedagogical and course management challenges. Online discussions can transform mere course chatter into a cyber forum of student-centered learning through meticulous planning, designing and orchestrating. After introducing common issues, a literature review summarizes the contributions that online discussions bring to distance learning. The author then addresses pedagogical and managerial issues that plague online discussions with strategies that instructors may readily employ. In the pedagogical realm, these include insights on organizing online discussions, using groups to facilitate interactions, establishing discussion parameters, and ensuring that the course syllabus introduces online discussion details. In the managerial realm, approaches are offered regarding overseeing discussion windows, using icebreakers, assessing student performance, ongoing communications, maintaining an online presence, netiquette, and a variety of other online discussion tips. In support of online instructors, the article weaves in relevant literature with the hard learned lessons from the author's ongoing attempts to improve online discussions. It concludes by urging instructors to cultivate improvement continuously through candid self-critique supplemented by student feedback.

Keywords: Asynchronous learning; distance learning, online pedagogy, online groups; online discussions; and discussion assessment.

Introduction

Asynchronous online discussions face an array of pedagogical and managerial challenges. In the pedagogical realm, instructors must come to grips with the strategic course purpose they are aiming for by including online discussion. Then, course design can advance that purpose. It can incorporate discussion forums, determine the types of comments most useful, and address placement and pacing. Next, instructors must ruminate over the role the syllabus plays in introducing and communicating discussion structure. To facilitate online interactions, instructors need techniques that promote student cohesion and interdependence. This permits construction of group knowledge beyond individual study and stimulates ongoing engagement.

In the managerial realm, instructors assume the responsibility for running the discussions. Like traditional classes, they must plan how to push interactions forward. Their online presence needs to foster a safe learning environment. The management role also entails the rigors of discussion assessment and documentation. Instructors must maintain constant communication throughout an online course, especially with a steady diet of discussions. This continuing link mandates multiple means of contact. As online discussions unfold, instructors may observe what works and what requires discarding or further refinements. The next section highlights the literature concerning the value of online discussions before tackling a host of course design issues.

Literature Review

Online education is here to stay. More than 5.6 million students were enrolled in an online course in the United States during the fall 2009 term (Allen & Seaman, 2010). This represents a leap of nearly one million students compared to 2008. Online learning offers virtual classes the freedom from traditional

constraints. Students do not have to be physically present and scheduled for a particular place and time. Still, they do need the self-discipline to handle this freedom, work within the course guidelines, and turn out timely deliverables. While enjoying the convenience of distance learning, many students choose online courses over traditional classes because they learn more and at a higher qualitative level (Hannay & Newvine, 2006).

Online discussions benefit distance learning. Similar to regular classrooms, student discussions serve as a learning activity that supports overall teaching goals (Wojnar, 2002). They supply a significant predictor of exam grades and course completion rates (Wolff & Dosdall, 2010). Discussions facilitate group construction of knowledge as well as individual assimilation and retention (De Wever, Van Keer, Schellens, & Valcke, 2010). A supplemental benefit is that group knowledge and examples are memorialized for student access and reflection asynchronously (Berge, 2000).

Online discussions reinforce the learning experience. They serve a critical role by providing student to student and student to instructor interaction (Xin & Feenberg, 2006). This social interaction among participants affects the learning process positively (Abedin, Daneshgur, & D'Ambra, 2010; Sadera, Robertson, Song, & Midon, 2009). Wrestling with how to express yourself to others promotes learning (Rourke & Anderson, 2002) while communication skills evolve as learners refine and clarify their ideas (Timm & Stead, 1996). Furthermore, students cannot overdo online discussions. There is no evidence that suggests discussion participation negatively influences learning (Wolff & Dosdall, 2010). Virtual classes enable socialization and connections with peers (Al-Shalchi, 2009). These associations are sometimes stronger than those in traditional classrooms (Maurino, 2006).

Berge (1995) asserts there are four different roles that moderators and instructors play in facilitating computer mediated discussions: pedagogical, social, managerial, and technical. The roles conceptualize a theoretical framework for reviewing the different hats that instructors wear in orchestrating online discussions. Pedagogically, online instructors serve as a computer mediated facilitator of learning. Socially, teachers need to nurture a virtual discussion venue conducive to productive discourse. Managerially, the instructor identifies discussion topics, establishes a format, develops an assessment instrument, and orchestrates the process. Technically, the educator leads the way in introducing the enabling technology and trouble-shooting glitches until the class achieves satisfactory competency. This article addresses certain pedagogical and managerial aspects of online discussions. The social and technical dimensions fall beyond the scope of this analysis.

Pedagogical Role

Organizing Online Discussions

Organizing instructor-moderated online discussions is vital (Berge, 1995) and demanding (Heuer & King, 2004). Heuer and King contend that the educational facilitation role of online teaching is multidimensional. Instructors are expected "to act as planner, a role model, a coach, a facilitator, and, above all, a communicator" (p. 6). As a planner, expectation clarity and support through technical snafus are important. Discussion participants look to the instructor as a model of organization and a guide through the course. In the coaching role, participants seek challenge, encouragement, and support if they are struggling. Instructors, as facilitators, must steer the process while becoming co-learners who model the sharing of group knowledge. Heuer and King's study finds the communicator role as the key to online discussion success. Timeliness and tone create a close bond that serves the learning environment well.

Many instructors fall short of Heuer and King's (2004) educational facilitation role. They fail to invest in adequate discussion planning at the front end of the course. Later, they are devastated by the chaos and frustration everyone feels in a threaded discourse free-for-all involving dozens of students. The eternal scrolling encountered in monitoring and in assessing poorly planned exchanges convinces some to swear-off online discussions. Yet, there is a better way. Comprehensive pre-course planning promotes efficient and enhanced interaction which facilitates learning for everyone.

Pedagogically, the author finds that instructors must determine the strategic purpose for including online discussions. Next, they must decide tactically how each discussion session fits into the course. They must ensure that the contemplated function links to learning objectives. The most common discussion purpose involves student-centered efforts to engage course material interactively with others while checking comprehension. Discussions encourage affiliation and socialization of course participants. Both foster

community while creating individual comfort in a virtual class. Further, online conversations add an asynchronous experience while students learn from others. Such exchanges also serve as a means of assessing student progress.

Instructors must ponder the placement, pacing and extent of discussions. Some use online discussion participation sparingly. Others may use it regularly but plan strategic discussion breaks. For example, instructors may exclude online discussions immediately before an exam to allow concentration on other course material. Similarly, instructors must decide on the volume of student interchanges. Experience suggests two to four challenging questions per discussion session anchor key points well. Different topics may call for more or less interaction.

The nature of the actual questions requires consideration once placement and pacing are determined. Online discussion questions should buttress the overall course purpose while advancing specific learning objectives. Berge (2008) suggests questions should target concepts and principles even as they encourage skill development. They should be content based, open ended, and constructed to reveal comprehension while inducing critical thinking. The author observes that engaging questions allow students to introduce their own experiences. This socially stimulates the participants.

The reality of anytime, anywhere distance learning encourages culturally heterogeneous participants. Concurrently, online courses reduce discussion cues. Thus, online discussion pedagogy must be finely tuned to exhibit cultural awareness. Culture in learning refers to "different expectations, worldviews, assumptions, emotions, and comfort zones" (Hai-Jew, 2008, p. 96). The literature addressing culturally relevant pedagogy suggests that online discussions demonstrate sensitivity and an inclusive orientation to the differing backgrounds of participants (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011).

Groups Facilitate Online Interaction

Online discussions pose troublesome navigational issues. The participants and the instructor may run into an overwhelming amount of verbiage. The number of postings and the length of each posting may bog down the discussion (Hara, Bonk, & Angeli, 2000; Ross, Kukulska-Hulme, Chappel, & Joyce, 2004) and detract from learning (Chen & Hung, 2002). Additionally, there is the chore of sorting out each particular student's participation for individual assessment.

Online discussions require precise planning and painstaking organization (Al-Shalchi, 2009; Wolff & Dosdall, 2010). From a pedagogical perspective, the author sees dividing the class into groups as facilitating learning. Students have fewer acquaintances to make and fewer participants with which to interact. Instructors find it easier to track threads, contribute comments, give guidance, and evaluate effort. Groups may be reorganized as necessary.

Small groups make sense. Groups of five to seven are workable while injecting sufficient diversity to keep topics interesting and dialogue lively. This size also makes it difficult for students to socially loaf. "Social loafing" refers to the practice of holding back, minimizing one's involvement in groups (Williams & Karau, 1991). "Free riding" is related closely to social loafing. It reflects a student avoiding a proportional responsibility for a group effort yet obtaining the benefits of group membership (Albanese & Van Fleet, 1985; Jones, 1984). Mandatory discussion requirements can promote participative behavior and penalize social loafing and free riding.

Discussion Parameters

Pedagogically, through trial and error, the author discovered that online discussion windows require parameters. Part of the overall teaching role involves figuring out the placement and pacing of discussion sessions and how they relate to other course elements. Universal benefits from online classes include the flexibility and the freedom to participate at the tempo that fits an individual's needs, capabilities, and schedule. Nevertheless, discussion boundaries move the course along. For instance, a course may follow a modular design with each section covering one week or some other fixed time period. While students may work ahead, discussion sessions need a definite beginning and ending. Discussions may have a rhythm, or pattern, with progress checkpoints, or due dates, for particular aspects. Each student may be required to research, reflect, and remark upon discussion questions. There is room to think, agree, disagree, clarify, and extend the discourse. Students learn from the shared experiences and insights of others while shaping their own views going forward.

Defining differing types of comments introduces structural support and clarifies expectations for small group discussions. The author uses guideposts for group discussions. For example, "substantive" and "responsive" comments may require definition as discussion benchmarks. Some instructors may find it useful to refer to a "substantive comment" as a well-constructed, thoughtful, independent comment of one full paragraph or more. Beyond qualitative elements, a "C" grade level comment could consist of a minimum of 125 words. A "responsive comment" is a well-constructed, thoughtful, independent but shorter comment to the substantive comment of another discussant. Beyond qualitative elements, a "C" grade level comment could consist of a minimum of 40 words. Later, under the managerial role, an example of various gradations of these definitions will be provided through a grading rubric.

Syllabus Introduction of Online Discussions

The course syllabus serves as the pedagogical roadmap to learning outcomes. It should disclose the discussion window parameters and expectations. The syllabus should explain how much of the overall course grade rests on discussion participation in comparison to other student assessment components. While the online discussion purpose drives the weight given in compiling the final course grade, instructors commonly assign a weight of 10-25% (significantly large enough to motivate student effort but not overwhelming and grade determining). The course syllabus also should tell students how thoroughly online discussion postings will be assessed. It must explain what happens to late postings and to what extent quality matters.

Instructors can reinforce a grading rubric. They can advise students that depending on the nature of the questions, higher quality comments likely will have references (to the text, electronic lectures, guest speakers, or other sources). Students can be informed whether the instructor values examples, metaphors, stories, and humor in their commentary. To simply agree or disagree with other group members may not be sufficient for many instructors. Discussants may be expected to elaborate on why they do or do not agree with another participant's perspective. The more managerial aspects of online discussions are reviewed in the next section although they require coverage in the syllabus as well.

Managerial Role

Managing Discussion Windows

Unmanaged discussion windows invite chaos. The author learned the hard way and gradually built a variety of techniques to established discussion boundaries. Imagine a course discussion that has a specific beginning and ending time. The first time the instructor makes a timing exception others are tempted to take liberties with the discussion window. After all, someone else was allowed to previously. It is only "fair," right? Taken to the extreme, some students may fall behind in their course work feeling that the discussion windows are "flexible." They represent an activity that they can catch-up on later. Careful assessment of online discussions chews up considerable instructor time even when everyone follows the ground rules precisely. Making exceptions only makes assessment more troublesome and less efficient.

Instructors should enforce the discussion windows rigorously. Timely postings should be the expectation and operational norm. Teachers can advise students that late postings are not assessed and earn zero points. Instructors may consider the option of a documented excuse. But whatever an instructor sets as the standard needs to be fairly applied for those in a similar situation.

Use "Icebreakers"

Designing dynamic discussions demands some peer level, group leadership. While the decision to use groups is a pedagogical issue, the author evaluates how groups operate as a managerial task. To out maneuver discussion reticence (the "nobody wants to start the discussion" syndrome), instructors can designate a rotating "icebreaker" role within each group. The icebreaker is responsible for getting the discussion going, breaking the proverbial ice. During the term of the course each student can serve in the icebreaker role. The icebreaker launches the discussion timely with their substantive comments. Distinct deadlines for the icebreaker as well as other discussants create specific targets to reach for full credit consideration. To curtail lagging responsive comments, a time target may be set for the initial responsive postings as well.

The author realizes that some students need shepherding through discussion windows. Students can be encouraged to post their substantive comments as soon as possible but no later than a specific day and

time. They also may be advised of a "not later than" day and time for their first responsive comment. This provides guideposts while minimizing the frantic flurry of postings sliding through as the window closes. Without such structure, it is tempting for students to post near gibberish to meet minimal participation standards as they struggle to beat the clock. Students still retain much flexibility while held accountable for time critical deliverables. This models the performance requirements for many professional careers.

The author discovered that some students find it useful to review a discussion timeline more visually. This reinforces expectations. Table 1 presents an example of a more visual timeline with a descriptive key and related instruction.

Table 1: *Example of Online Discussion Timeline*

Initiator	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Icebreakers			SC		1st RC		RCC
Participants				SC		1st RC	RCC

Key: *"SC" refers to substantive comments.*

                 "1st RC" refers to the first responsive comments.

                 "RCC" refers to the remaining responsive comments.

Instructions: *1. Discussion window opens Sundays, 6:00 a.m.*

                 2. All icebreaker substantive comments due Tuesdays, 11:00 p.m.

                 3. All participant substantive comments due Wednesdays, 11:00 p.m.

                 4. All icebreaker first responsive comments due Thursdays, 11:00 p.m.

                 5. All participant first responsive comments due Fridays, 11:00 p.m.

                 6. All remaining responsive comments due Saturdays, 11:00 p.m.

                 7. Discussion window closes Saturdays, 11:00 p.m.

Discussion Assessment

Instructors usually create some mechanism for assessment of online discussions. An assessment criterion, or rubric, favorably influences the discussion quality (Black, 2005; Gilbert & Dabbagh, 2005). Mertler (2001) refers to a rubric as a rating scale with pre-established performance criteria. Generally, rubrics fall into two camps: holistic and analytic (Popham, 2010). Holistic scoring assigns a grade on the whole as opposed to individual aspects (Harzari, 2004). Analytic scoring involves grading individual parts of an effort and then adding scores to reach an overall evaluation (Nitko, 2010).

The author employs an analytic rubric to online discussion assessment. It provides an appraisal of substantive and responsive comments that combine to provide evaluation feedback. It translates the hierarchical gradations between points and letter grades used in evaluating discussion participation. An analytic rubric may take many forms with varying degrees of explanatory material. The course syllabus provides the logical place for teachers to convey the discussion standards. Critical components include relative measures of quantitative minimums, qualitative evaluation, grammar, timeliness, netiquette, research, and connection to other postings. Table 2 illustrates the author's online discussion rubric based on 10 points per discussion window.

Instructors should enforce their assessment standards conscientiously once their grading rubric is established. Otherwise, students develop bad habits. This trend is compounded when an instructor also fails to present candid feedback speedily. Understandably, students righteously feel surprise and anger if standards are communicated and applied belatedly.

Table 2: *Example of Grading Rubric for Online Discussions*

Grade	Assessment of Performance Level	Point Range
A	Icebreaker or participant timely contributes to the discussion without trying to dominate it, makes thoughtful contributions, shows interest in and respects the views of others, responds linking to other concepts, and participates actively demonstrating conventional netiquette. Substantive comments reflect exceptionally written, exceptionally thoughtful, independent commentary with research or germane references that equal or exceed 125 words (each). Responsive comments reflect exceptionally written, exceptionally thoughtful, independent, commentary with research or germane references that equal or exceed 40 words (each).	10.0-9.0
B	Icebreaker or participant timely makes thoughtful comments, contributes occasionally, usually shows interest in and respect for the views of others, and participates relatively actively while usually demonstrating conventional netiquette. This score also might be given to a participant whose contributions are less developed, or less cogent, than a student who receives an "A." Substantive comments reflect well-written, thoughtful, independent commentary usually supported with research or germane references that equal or exceed 125 words (each). Responsive comments reflect well written, thoughtful, independent commentary usually supported with research or germane references that equal or exceed 40 words (each).	8.5-8.0
C	Icebreaker or participant timely participates in discussion, but in a limited way. Participant sometimes shows interest in and respect for the views of others, and sometimes contributes actively while demonstrating conventional netiquette. The participant may respond less thoughtfully, make rambling or off topic statements, which do not link to the ideas of others. Substantive comments reflect satisfactorily written, only occasionally thoughtful, somewhat independent commentary only occasionally supported with research or germane references that equal or exceed 125 words (each). Responsive comments reflect satisfactorily written, only occasionally thoughtful, somewhat independent commentary only occasionally supported with research or germane references that equal or exceed 40 words (each).	7.5-7.0
D	Icebreaker or participant timely contributes in the discussion but usually gives only minimal replies. Participant demonstrates insufficient regard for the contributions and views of others and seldom makes satisfactory linkages to the concepts or only seldom demonstrates conventional netiquette. Substantive comments reflect inadequately written, shallow, unoriginal commentary seldom supported by research or germane references less than 125 words (each). Responsive comments reflect inadequately written, shallow, unoriginal commentary seldom supported with research or germane references of less than 40 words (each).	6.5-6.0
F	Icebreaker or participant untimely or infrequently participates in the discussion or dominates or makes inappropriate or off topic comments that very seldom links to other concepts, and participation is inconsistent with conventional netiquette. Failure to comment timely during the discussion window receives the grade of "F" and zero points on a question by question basis. Substantive comments reflect poorly written, ill conceived, unoriginal commentary supported by no research or germane references significantly less than 125 words (each). Responsive comments reflect poorly written, ill-conceived, unoriginal commentary supported by no research or germane references significantly less than 40 words (each).	≤ 5.5

The author documents online discussion assessments promptly. Deferring this task to save time in the short-run often leads to consuming far more time in the long-run. Over time, the instructor's recollection grows fuzzy about a specific individual's participation, in a particular discussion, among several discussion groups. Thorough assessment documentation as a discussion concludes minimizes efforts later. Likewise, the relative freshness of the evaluation sharpens the appraisal for better feedback.

Students question assessment of their work. That is good. Through challenging and discussing the grading they clarify and comprehend more fully the expectations. Additionally, student questions aid them to see how they may achieve the learning outcomes more successfully. However, instructors should consider a cut-off point for explanations. For instance, an instructor might entertain assessment explanations up to five calendar days after the discussion grade is posted. This blocks the uncomfortable appeal late in a course as a student argues for extra points for a discussion that occurred weeks ago. Figure 1 illustrates an example of the online discussion form that the author uses for documentation.

Student: _____   Group No. _____   Module No. _____   Date: _____

Reference	Comment	Assessment Notes	Score

Figure 1: *Example of Online Discussion Documentation*

Notes:

      a. "Reference" provides the exact location of the question under assessment (e.g., Module 1, Question 1).

      b. "Comment" allows identifying whether a posting is either a substantive or responsive comment.

      c. Assessment Notes" supplies a place to record notes regarding timeliness, length, tone, critical thinking demonstrated, relevance, and the interactive dimension of the postings.

      d. Score" permits notation of the points awarded based on the course grading rubric. These points form the basis to determine an overall score.

Online Discussion Communication

Cultivating a durable teacher/student linkage in support of online discussions demands constant communication (Keengwe & Kidd, 2010). Assessment feedback should be "timely, clear, thorough, consistent, equitable, and professional" (Eliason & Holmes, 2010, p. 460). Just like coaching a sports team to perform outstandingly, frequent huddles are necessary through different modalities. Indeed, interactivity with a variety of quick feedback mechanisms is one of the major advantages of online discussions (Hazari & Schnorr, 1999). This ongoing commentary about the online conversation substitutes for the visual and audio cues that instructors spontaneously provide in face-to-face discussions (Smith & Ferguson, 2002).

Beyond the course syllabus, the author uses several communication routes. First, the bulletin feature of course management software can provide general class feedback regularly after each discussion. This allows teachers to address the class as a whole very efficiently. In this venue, instructors can report how well the discussion went, emphasizing positive points and identifying where improvement is needed. They can draw upon their assessment documentation and refer to their grading rubric to ensure comprehensiveness.

Second, course management systems (i.e., Blackboard, Desire2Learn, Moodle, WebCT, etc.) include a "grade book" feature. Punctual discussion assessment allows speedy grade entry. This by itself gives immediate feedback to students. Often it preempts questions and relieves student apprehension regarding their performance.

Third, class e-mails may notify students of time sensitive information. Sometimes an instructor may post the information on the bulletin feature and send a class e-mail as well. This redundancy may ensure that students are informed of urgent information as soon as possible. For example, if an instructor has some reason why a completed discussion cannot be assessed promptly, dual communication channels may be helpful to announce the delay.

Fourth, an issue might warrant an individual e-mail. A student may have a question, need a resource, or want to argue about a discussion grade. The individual e-mail keeps the matter confidential. Additionally, individual e-mails permit communication to schedule an office meeting or request an appointment during the instructor's virtual office hours.

Fifth, and finally, virtual office time provides another venue for consultation. The author's view is that an important feature of face-to-face instruction involves connecting with students to make learning human, real, and fun. Substitutes for face-to-face interchanges are available in the online environment. Helpful connections may be made in several ways. The instructor may request the student to call at a particular time. In other cases, a phone number where, and times when, the student is reachable may make more sense. Virtual office hours can establish regular times when a student may telephone an instructor. Alternatively, videoconferencing or Internet phone chat (e.g., Adobe Connect, Skype, TeamSpeak, etc.) can be used resolve a discussion concern.

Maintaining Online Presence

Instructors should keep the discussion on track throughout the course (Keengwe & Kidd, 2010). The failure to guide discussions can result in less student learning, poor performance on other course elements, and risks a downward spiral of frustration. The author cautions that unmonitored exchanges can meander, lose purpose, and deteriorate into text messaging informality that attacks personalities rather than the discussion topic. In such instances, instructors surely will see student aggravation and disappointment when teaching evaluations knock the course and the instructor as well.

Attentive instructors keep the discussion vibrant through a variety of techniques. Keengwe and Kidd (2010) recommend supporting the comments of others by acknowledging and encouraging their thinking. Instructors can extend the conversation by shoring-up participant analysis with additional arguments that bolster an observation or opinion. They can compliment a participant for a statement or persuade the more reserve discussants to weigh in on an issue early.

Similar to a traditional class, students are not always clear when they make comments. Neither are instructors. In the classroom, teachers coax the unclear to be more explicit and unambiguous to promote understanding. Concurrently, they may clarify their own remarks or a point from an earlier lecture that is causing confusion. Online discussions require parallel treatment. They should be interactive and comprehensible with scaffolding—assistance to students when needed but with less aid as competencies increase (Pata, Sarapuu, & Lehtinen, 2005).

Monitoring and quickly replying to student e-mails concerning online discussions maintains a resilient relationship with students. A 12 to 24 hour turnaround for online course e-mails shows you are reachable and responsive. The author's experience is that students appreciate quick responses from instructors simply to say when he/she is able to respond more fully. They also appreciate an instructor's advance notification when an advertised e-mail service level (i.e., a 12 to 24 hour turnaround) will not be available. For example, "I will be traveling to a conference on Thursday and not answering e-mail again until Friday."

Netiquette

"Netiquette," or online etiquette, is essential in managing online discussions. "Disruptive and impolite behaviors . . . can occur at anytime," (Mintu-Wimsatt, Kernek, & Lozada, 2010, p. 264). Syllabus ground rules should support everyone to get "from" the material while leading everyone to get "through" the material. Rudeness and unprofessional conduct have to be monitored and restrained. While intervening

sparingly keeps the discussion groups student-centered, it is the instructor's responsibility to maintain a safe albeit challenging learning environment. Indeed, research documents that qualitative online participation increases with netiquette (Schallert, Chiang, Park, Jordan, Lee, Cheng, Chu, Lee, Kim, & Song, 2009). Mintu-Wimsatt et al. (2010) offer several student netiquette guidelines worth including in every syllabus: (1) Avoid dominating discussions, offensive words, and criticism of others, (2) Use plain English and flawless spelling and writing mechanics, (3) Consider alternative perspectives while expressing your own opinion, (4) Share insights while seeking the views of others, (5) Follow the institution's student code of conduct, and (6) Clarify important points with the instructor and review carefully any communications before sending.

Dealing with Laggards and Clashing Personalities

The author has learned that students not keeping up with online discussions require immediate attention. If a student is not participating, or performing poorly with only minimal discussion points, why should an instructor expect anything differently later? Confidential discussion assessment scores by individual student nudges poor performers to evaluate how they are doing in the course. Instructors may advise non-starters and poor performers to drop the course. Gently, but firmly, push them out. Otherwise, weak participants pull down the discourse and others wonder or experiment with how far they can stray from the course expectations.

Coaching student success also necessitates reassigning clashing personalities. Nip problems in the bud if behavioral issues bog learning down and provide cover for poor work. Online discussions entail sufficient challenges that instructors must minimize distracting conflicts within groups immediately. Instant remedial action also honors the commitment to a safe learning environment.

Continuous Improvement in Online Discussions

The author suggests a "continuous improvement" approach to addressing online discussion issues. Continuous improvement is a strategy popularized by Deming (2000) in business settings to nurture innovation. Improvements may evolve incrementally or through abrupt, radical change. As the notion is applied here, instructors are encouraged to monitor actively all aspects of online discussions. The dual objectives are to address problems as they arise and to initiate improvements over time. As teaching skills and knowledge evolve through training and experience, continuous effort is needed to harvest the bountiful benefits of online discussions. Tinkering with pedagogical and managerial strategies while considering class feedback and carefully observing student interactions are important. They can enhance the beneficial yield of quality online discussions.

Continuous improvement in online discussions is possible through conscientiously monitoring and adapting pedagogical and managerial roles. Instructors need to review relentlessly what they are doing, how is it working, and whether they are realizing the intended results. They can examine course progress weekly and jot down follow-up notes. After course grades are recorded but while the course experience is still fresh, instructors can consider what worked well and bears repeating. What ought to be modified? Such introspection also should include student suggestions and criticisms regarding instructional improvements (Nasser-Abu Alhija & Fresko, 2009).

There is no substitute for detailed, advanced planning and preparation for any course. The author's position is that this is doubly true for designing and orchestrating effective online discussions. Through such effort many of the pedagogical and managerial challenges arising from online discussions may be resolved. Indeed, the attentive instructor may hone the contributions these discussions bring to online learning. Furthermore, a candid self-critique at the conclusion of a course, supplemented by student reactions and recommendations, will pay dividends. Using these appraisals, pedagogical and managerial approaches may be revisited and redesigned to enhance online discussions continuously.

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