DESIGNING AND MANAGING EFFECTIVE ONLINE DISCUSSIONS

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The explosive growth of the Web and of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) like WebCT has brought easy access for teachers to online communication tools. Many academics are now grappling with how best to use them in their teaching. There are several advantages that may be gained by having discussions online. Online 'discussion' by its nature creates a written artefact that documents both process and product. Students have flexibility to contribute to the discussion at a time and place that suits them. They also gain time to reflect on their contributions and those of others. Although the basic principles and many of the techniques of managing group discussions are essentially the same online as those for face-to-face discussions, there are important differences.

Teachers new to online conferencing often confront questions like, 'How do I get the students involved in an online discussion?' and 'How do I keep them engaged?' Even more important, especially for teachers of on-campus modules, is 'When and for what is an online discussion useful and appropriate?' Time is an important issue in online conferencing. Questions arise like 'How long should an online discussion go on for?' and 'What is an acceptable delay before someone replies to a question?' The tempo of an online discussion is different from that of a face-to-face one and it may take some time for a beginner to get used to it. Teachers and students may both be rightfully concerned at the impact of online conferences on their time. Poorly designed conferences inexpertly moderated can be enormous 'time sinks'. Following some simple guidelines can prevent this.

Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) has been used in some form in higher education for two decades or more. There is by now a fairly substantial body of research literature on the educational use of CMC. What follows are some snippets of advice based on the research literature and informed practice. This paper concentrates on asynchronous conferencing (also called threaded discussion) rather than synchronous (real-time 'chats'), because this is the most widely used form, especially with oncampus students. A very short list of some useful resources on the topic for teachers in Higher Education is provided at the end of this paper.

TEACHER/TUTOR AS FACILITATOR

The simplest and most common form of online communication is email. Email discussion lists, or 'listservs', were an early form of asynchronous discussion tool that are still used for academic and professional purposes. These have largely been superseded for educational purposes by more functional web-based bulletin or discussion boards. There are functional differences between conferencing using web-based bulletin boards and email. Email is an example of 'push' technology, where a message is delivered only to those to whom it was addressed. The recipient is usually notified when they receive new messages, and they will likely read them right away. Conferencing requires the members to actively go to their web-based conference and search for new postings. Individuals will likely be involved in more than one conference, so they will have to open each one in turn to read their new messages and respond if they want to. Moreover, every

message posted to a conference is public to all other members of the conference.

Teachers who begin using online communication tools must be prepared for a shift of the locus of control in the discussions, away from the teacher/lecturer, towards the students. Rather than using physical presence and/or personality to influence a discussion, the e-moderator must rely on their ability to persuade. Phrases like 'from a sage on the stage to a guide on the side' and 'teacher as a facilitator' are commonly used to describe this change in the teacher's role. But it should be noted that a good 'facilitator' does not imply a passive one. The 'emoderator' must actively work to ensure online discussions engage students and lead to high quality educational outcomes.

TAKE THE TIME TO INDUCT STUDENTS IN CMC

Before students can independently use online discussion tools to construct knowledge, they must become comfortable and proficient using the environment. Salmon (2000) offers a five-step model of teaching and learning online that emphasises the importance of online socialisation and familiarisation with the environment.

At a very basic level, this means that students need to be taught how to reply to messages, create new discussion threads, how to customise their online discussion environment, and so on. At a more complex level, they may need to overcome an initial reluctance to 'expose themselves' and their ideas to scrutiny in the relatively more permanent (than spoken discussion) environment of an online discussion. The e-moderator must be able to create and foster an environment in which participants feel 'safe' to voice their opinions and are respected for their views.

To begin with, those new to online discussions may prefer to 'lurk', or be non-contributory browsers. This is very normal. New e-moderators often worry about their 'lurkers', but these concerns are misplaced. Such students are probably learning, just doing it 'quietly'. Some will take longer than others to 'speak up'. The e-moderator needs to ensure that there are a variety of activities for students to do that encourage active engagement of all them. As with any classroom, there will be quiet ones and ostentatious ones. The important thing is to ensure that everyone in the classroom/conference has equal opportunity to learn.

Techniques for managing 'dominant' students or supporting reticent ones in online discussions are similar to those used face-to-face. Email may take the place of the 'private chat', but the most important things are careful organisation of groups, and where necessary their re-organisation, and a tutor's watchful eye and timely interventions to guide the discussions and set the standards.

STRIVE TO HUMANISE THE ENVIRONMENT

The absence of all the sensory cues normally present in face-to-face communications can reduce a webbased learning environment to a cold, sterile place. It is very important to emphasise being personal in online communications. Students should be encouraged to use personal forms of address (Murray, 2000b), and to add clear comments as to how certain remarks should be taken if there is room for ambiguity. (Sarcasm, for instance, does not convey well online. Some jokes may appear particularly heavy-handed and distinctly un-funny when offered in written form.) The best way of teaching this is to model it by doing it yourself, making explicit to the students that you are doing it and why.

We often forget just how important is the social chitchat that occurs in our classes and lectures until it is removed (or it interferes with the educational goals of the session). For this reason it is useful to provide students with a discussion topic or conference specifically designated to be for social, non-academic discourse. This allows and encourages social communication and also provides a place for it to occur without confusing or distracting from the goals of the learning activities.

Whether online or face-to-face, new groups in which the members don't know each other need 'icebreakers' to help get them working together. Perhaps an 'introductions' topic, to which all add a brief 'bio' by way of introduction, preferably with a photo (that 'humanising' element). This is a useful activity that helps participants learn to use the discussion tools and allows them to put 'faces/characters' to the names they will see listed beside the discussion postings. Games may be played to add fun. For example, rather than an 'introductions' conference, you can set up a conference of anonymous postings, in which members contribute a short 'story' about themselves that does not identify who they are. Everyone then engages in a '20 questions-style' exercise, anonymously asking questions of the others, with only 'yes/no' answers allowed, that aim to identify the contributors of all the original postings. A prize is awarded to the first correct (or most correct as there may not be time to complete it) list posted. Be sure to guess how long such activities may take. Keep them short and snappy.

ESTABLISH CLEAR GUIDELINES FOR CONDUCT OF THE DISCUSSION

The 'e-moderator' needs to set clear, explicit protocols or guidelines for the conduct of the discussion (Murray, 2000a). Protocols for online discussions vary widely according to mode synchronous/asynchronous), purpose ('informal' discussion, debate, role play, group project, problem solving exercise, review of academic papers, etc.), level of course (graduate/undergraduate/continuing professional development) and, of course, the personal 'style' of the individual teacher/tutor/academic who will moderate the discussion.

Guidelines should include things like:

- how frequently or on which days students can expect tutors to read and respond to postings;

- the kinds of content that is or is not appropriate (eg, 'don't post technical queries, send them to the help desk', or 'use email rather than the discussion board for private communications', 'observe "netiquette" norms', etc);

- size and style of postings (eg, 'make your point in your posting, not in an attachment', 'keep postings brief, no more than two screens','spelling punctuation and grammar are irrelevant', etc).

For example, you may be looking for clarity of thought and vigorous exchange of views, and for the discussion to stay tightly focussed on one or two main themes. So you might 'ban' long-winded 'dissertation'-style contributions, say by setting a maximum line length, or a 'two screens maximum'. There will be discussions where a relatively high level of formality is required, for example in compilation of position papers or analysis and critiques of journal articles.

Many students will be nervous about whether their contribution will be similar to those of other students. Others will worry about whether they are 'saying' the 'right' thing. Some students will try to impress their teachers and all students need to know 'the bottom line'. So you have to make it very clear to them what it is that will impress you and what it is that won't. It gets in the way of learning if students have to figure this out by trial and error. The best way to do this is by making your guidelines quite explicit and modelling them yourself in your own postings.

ONLINE DISCUSSION SHOULD BE PURPOSEFUL AND COLLABORATIVE

The most active and effective online discussions are highly purposeful and task oriented. If students do not see an immediate educational and/or practical value in the exercise, then they will not be inclined to do it. Busy students will not offer up valuable time to post their thoughts and suggestions to other students for philanthropic reasons.

Discussions should focus on a task, and they should involve a 'product'. No matter how interesting a discussion topic may appear to be, students will seldom take the time and trouble to participate in an online discussion because of its inherent interest (at least at first). There is little point, for example, in asking students to 'discuss the use of capital punishment in Victorian Britain' for the next week. A tutor introducing a face-to-face seminar with such an instruction would likely be met with silence, some nervous giggles and possibly some tentative questions seeking information about what she/he wants to hear. The outcome is undefined and the students will be uncertain or confused about what they should do.

Care should be taken to ensure that participation in online discussions provides a useful advantage to students. Why, for example, would they not simply meet in the café if they are on-campus, or talk to each other on the phone if they are distance learners? The answer usually lies in the fact that the online 'conversation' provides a text-based digital record of thoughts, concepts, plans, answers, strategies, proposals and the like. This digital artefact may be compiled, edited and converted to various other forms.

The educational aims of the discussion of 'capital punishment in Victorian Britain' are probably to have students acquire political, social, historical, and/or ethical information about the topic beforehand, and analyse and evaluate the arguments presented based on a variety of criteria. As in a face-to-face seminar, the discussion is a means to an end: to engage students with the content on various levels. Like a face-to-face seminar, a good online discussion presupposes preparatory activity. For example, the students could be asked to research and prepare position papers on the issue as a prelude to debate. A difference and benefit of the online discussion over the face-to-face one is that this 'preparatory' activity (eg, research, reading, initial problem solving attempts, etc) can take place in tandem with the online discussion, which stretches out over a period of possibly weeks. New information can be continuously brought to bear on the online discussion, while face-to-face all the preparatory activity needs to have been completed before the discussion takes place.

STRUCTURING ONLINE DISCUSSIONS

The e-moderator needs to provide a structure for the discussion, for without structure students may group themselves into 'for' and 'against' camps

based on their existing beliefs and experience and never truly come to grips with the content. For them to want to 'discuss' the issue there needs to be clear reason for peer collaboration. Hence, the debate could be organised in teams, and the 'products' of these small group discussions would be their position papers/arguments. There may also be a team or teams of online adjudicators, who may create a product – a synthesis of the debate. As with classroom activities, the greater the scope for students to choose their topic, or the format of their report/presentation/solution, etc, the greater the likelihood of them animatedly expressing their diverse points of view and learning from each other as they do.

In general, to encourage students to 'talk' to each other they need to be set challenging tasks in which the sharing of their ideas, experiences, knowledge and skills is useful. Small (5–10) collaborative groups that prepare solutions to problems, or presentations, or reports to share with the larger group (as well as you, the tutor) are the best way to achieve this. The answer to a question asked by one student might be relevant to many, so post answers to an FAQ (frequently asked questions) conference/topic/forum where all can see. Such a forum can quite quickly build up into a valuable resource for current and future cohorts, and students will begin to add to it themselves if encouraged to do so.

It is much harder to make modifications 'on the fly' to online discussion than face-to-face discussions. The effect of a tutor's intervention into online discussions may take longer to be realised than in a face-to-face seminar. It takes more time to persuade online participants that the discussion is going off on a tangent than suddenly using a loud voice, or standing in the middle of the room clapping one's hands, for instance. On occasion, the tutor's intervention may be disregarded entirely. Amongst other things, this means that online discussions need to be carefully planned. Their intended outcomes must be absolutely clear. Good online discussions rarely happen spontaneously.

ONLINE DISCUSSIONS NEED DEADLINES

Discussions never work well if they have no clear beginning or end and participants enter and leave as they see fit. The attempt to make online courses highly flexible, so that students can 'work at their own pace', is fraught with difficulty at the best of times, providing busy students with a host of opportunities to procrastinate. Online discussion 'at their own pace' is doomed to failure. There is little value to you or me if you offer a solution to my problem of six months ago. I've already moved on and you've wasted your time. Moreover, scheduling conferences aids students

with their time management in general. If they know in advance when they will have to devote time to an online task, they can plan ahead.

Here are some tips from Gilly Salmon (2000 p44) to prevent conferences becoming 'time-sinks':

- clearly specify the expected time to be spent
- inexperienced online learners and e-moderators will need longer than experienced ones, so build in extra time for them
- make sure the online time is used for what it's good for (don't force-fit activities into CMC)
- reduce face-to-face activities by as much as online activities have been increased
- ask participants to do one or two important online activities in a time bounded way, within a time limit, until they gain experience at managing their online time
- set clear expectations of frequency of tutor 'visits' to the conferences.

Web-based discussion boards skilfully used can genuinely be time savers (or at least not time wasters) for teachers, even those of very large classes. But to be so, you must set tasks that require students to talk to each other. If they end up wanting to talk to you all the time you will be quickly overwhelmed by the sheer volume of responses you need to make. One of the chief advantages of web-based discussion boards over email is that you, the tutor, can 'talk' to everyone at once, much as you can in a classroom. If you find that you are engaging in multiple one-to-one conversations with students online, then you may need to reassess the design of your discussion activity.

ONLINE DISCUSSIONS NEED TUTOR FEEDBACK

Like good face-to-face discussions, online discussions require periodic and timely summaries. The emoderator has a critical role to play in identifying key issues remaining to be addressed, making explicit ideas or issues that have newly emerged, suggesting paths for further development, and so on. A good emoderator has to both stand back and let the participants have their say and also intervene to direct the discussion into useful channels. There is considerable value for learning in encouraging experienced online students to play this role, especially in collaborative group activity. But to do so they need to be taught, by the tutor first modelling how to do it and then making explicit the techniques they used.

Providing timely feedback is important. If student questions go unanswered for too long, they will tire of posting them (and eventually tire of logging

on at all). This imperative needs to be weighed against limitations on tutors' time. 'Timely' in this case depends on what expectations students have as to when they can expect replies to their queries. This is why you have to make these explicit from the outset; eg, 'I will respond to postings on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays', or 'you can generally expect a reply within 72 hours'.

What newcomers to online teaching often miss is that in general there is a need for more active offering of 'verbal' (in this case written) confirmation of student efforts online than there is face-to-face. For online students, 'no news' is not necessarily 'good news', in the way that it might be face-to-face. If you are circulating around the room watching students work, your approval of what students are doing may be inferred if you do not speak to them or intervene into their work. You are probably also offering non-verbal confirmation in various ways. Online there is no confirming eye-contact, approving smile or pat on the back. If students' online actions are not acknowledged, then they may be left with the impression that they were not noticed. Even the simplest online events, from the submission of an assignment, to the entry into a discussion of a previously reticent student, or the uneven contributions of members of a particular group, will need to be actively acknowledged in a way that is different to the face-to-face context.

Reassurance and praise go a long way. It is important to offer students plenty of positive feedback and encouragement, simply to indicate that you are paying attention and believe that their work is progressing as it should. Do not forget that you can also create expectations of high standards by calling attention to good postings or important observations.

ONLINE DISCUSSIONS SHOULD BE ASSESSED

Although some students may feel that a topic is inherently interesting, many will not and they will avoid participating unless compelled. To put it bluntly, there must to be a clear link between the time students invest in the online task(s) and their final grades. Like it or not, the bottom line for most students is 'what's it worth?' The answer has to be clear and explicit at the outset. Mandatory participation (a 'hurdle task') is not, by itself, the answer either. If all that is required of students is their 'participation' in a discussion forum, the level of contribution will probably be shallow and perfunctory.

How to assess, what to assess, when to assess? Complex decisions at the best of times. There is as big a range of answers for CMC as there is for

face-to-face discussions. Some give a nominal 'mark' for participation. Sometimes just certain contributions that students make to discussions are assessed. For instance, students may choose their 'best' three contributions for grading. Some use CMC to allow peer assessment of student projects or solutions. Davies (2001) describes a system in which individuals are graded on their justification for the 'marks' that they have awarded for their peers' work.

Essentially, they are assessed on how they assessed their peers' work. Alternatively, online discussions may simply facilitate the creation of artefacts that can be assessed in more traditional modes. Examples might be the production of collaborative papers like those in the capital punishment debate above, or annotated bibliographies, multimedia presentations, group projects and problem-solving reports. Individual portfolios documenting a student's reflection on and analysis of issues in a subject or topic can also be created, and submitted for assessment, by compiling selected contributions from the discussions. Whatever decisions you make regarding assessment, possibly the most critical element of all is that you make absolutely explicit, from the beginning, what will be assessed and the criteria for how it will be assessed.

Online conferencing does not suit all students. But then lectures, seminars, labs and so on are not for everyone either. If online discussions are learning activities clearly chosen by teachers to address key learning outcomes then students will appreciate them. Well-designed online discussions can offer a diverse range of students new modalities for learning. For on-campus teachers they can be a 'new tune' to add to their teaching repertoire offering different and sometimes better ways to engage students with the content in their subject. For distance learners and teachers they are a simply indispensable way of facilitating a sense of community and taking advantage of the opportunities for learning that collaborative activity can provide.

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