

Teaching Tips to Enhance the use of Discussion Forums

by Dawn Lorraine McBride

Dawn Lorraine McBride, Faculty of Education, University of Lethbridge, is an Associate Professor and registered psychologist teaching in a graduate-level blended-delivery counsellor education-training program. Her areas of research include online learning, ethics, and trauma as well as family violence.

Overview

In this paper I describe a variety of teaching strategies to encourage active student participation in online discussion forums while being cognizant of not increasing the workload for instructors. Three prominent themes emerge that include the need to establish a well-organized, supportive online learning environment within

the first two weeks of the course; to empower the students to design, elicit, and monitor their discussion forum postings; and to ensure instructors have an active online presence, facilitating rather than leading the forum discussions, whenever possible.

A common e-learning resource is a web-based discussion forum (DF) where class discussion occurs online with the stated expectation that everyone participates, often asynchronously, in a predefined period of time. In addition, students may earn grades for the frequency and quality of their posts by answering a set of questions and replying to their peers' answers. The success of online dialogue is often dependent on ample student participation and the instructor's active online presence (Salmon, 2002). To this end, I will describe a variety of generic introductory activities that may be used in a variety of scholarly disciplines to foster an online community of engaged learners and to help students gain confidence and competence when participating in discussion forums. The activities can be easily incorporated into lesson plans. If desired, the instructor could adapt the relevant warm-up activities into a series of mini-assignments where students earn a course participation grade.

Overall, the focus in the first half of the paper is on how to prepare students for working online while the remainder of the paper contains descriptions of multiple strategies to promote online interaction. Many of these ideas come from having taught online for over 10 years (see McBride & Davis, 2009).

The First Two Weeks of the Course

The following five themed activities, which occur ideally in the first two weeks of the course, introduce students to using discussion forums and to the expectations for their posts. These activities are mainly ungraded or may be used as ways for students to gain participation points. They are not specific to online learning and can be used in other learning formats such as face-to-face, videoconferences, or independent study. As they are not labour-intensive to set up, there is more time available for the instructor to facilitate the online discussions.

Present and Discuss

For students to gain an appreciation of the ebb and flow of online discussions, offer them an excerpt, in PDF format, of a completed DF from a past course (seek permission from the past online participants to share their posts). To help

students understand the asynchronous nature of a forum, highlight the various times when posts were made. In addition, draw the students' attention to how discussion threads work and the types of posts students make. These include but are not limited to (a) questions, (b) core replies to an instructor's question (the student's direct answer), (c) replies to fellow students, and (d) cheerleading posts consisting of supportive comments that reinforce participation but lack substance such as "good point you made, thanks." Further, to show students how forums can be active tools in their learning process include an additional handout that describes the course's community-building forums such as (a) a forum where students introduce themselves; (b) a forum, known as the water cooler, to post noncourse material that promotes social connections among classmates such as a movie review, requests for a study partner, and so forth; (c) a Q & A forum, that the instructor monitors daily, for questions related to the course and assignments; and (d) an announcement forum that lists all of the course's updates, refinements, and changes.

Another highly successful introductory activity that helps students gain competence in posting online is to invite them to analyze a few mock posts that are of poor quality—for example, they are long and rambling, have meaningless subject headings, contain grammar and spelling errors, contain plagiarized material, or have an arrogant style. As a group assignment, I ask students to identify the weaknesses in these posts, to explain the consequences of making a weak post (e.g., poor grade, the author of the post feeling ignored as it is skipped over by classmates), and to suggest how to make the posts more engaging to read and of higher quality. Once the students see the disadvantages of making poor quality posts, it is productive to introduce, or review, the expectations for forum participation including the quality and quantity of posts (Brooke, 2006; McBride & Davis, 2009).

One of my favourite activities for students taking a blended learning course, and who are new to online learning, is to host a live, synchronous, informal online discussion forum in the classroom for a brief period (e.g., 15 minutes). This portion of the class is conducted in silence, except to ask technology-related questions, since this task represents a typical online experience. During this time, each student makes a core post that answers the main question, replies to a classmate's core post, and makes one cheerleading post. Afterward, I debrief with the students about what worked well and what needs to happen when they start using the forums.

Nurture the Social Presence

To promote interaction among students in a course, I recommend instructors spend time building peer visibility and promoting social

connections among the students during the first two weeks. Building an online learning community serves as an incentive for students to log onto the course more often. Also, students may feel supported by their peers, thereby allowing them to take learning risks in their posts. Furthermore, these activities reduce the perceived social distance between instructors and students, which research has repeatedly shown to be related to students making more posts (Ng, Cheung, & Hew, 2012) and strongly correlated to course satisfaction (Andresen, 2009).

Some of these strategies include using fun *e-tivities* (Salmon, 2002) and hosting a “who are you?” forum where students introduce themselves. In terms of the latter, I supply a list of 10 introductory-type questions and ask students to post their answers to two or more questions of their choice. I direct students to make their posts engaging for others to read (e.g., use an informative subject line, use headings, effective colours, be succinct). To nurture the online community, I regularly encourage students to update their introductions throughout the course with pictures and announcements (e.g., engagements, births).

Be Online Daily, Coaching

Early in the course, instructors would be wise to adhere to the well-known belief that immediate, respectful, and constructive feedback maintains on-task behaviour and increases the quality of output. Thus, it is important to offer students early and ample reinforcement for authoring good quality posts. As a result, in the initial weeks I will make daily posts highlighting what worked well in the forums for that day and offering a generic suggestion to enhance the quality of the posts. I will also publicly thank, in the beginning, those who are contributing to developing an engaging learning community by being involved in the optional forums and offering supportive comments to their peers. I also like to acknowledge the first student to post in each new forum week, as this means to me that this person likely has good time-management skills to be prepared to post an answer before anyone else. For instance, I might write “Peter, it is great to have you start us off this week by making a post that is between 100-200 words and ends with a question to engage others. I am curious to see who joins the debate you initiated.” As the students become more engaged with their online classmates and display more critical thinking about the course material, I gradually reduce my coaching role.

Check-In

During the critical first weeks, I recommend instructors pay close attention to those students who appear to be struggling with meeting the quality or quantity requirements for posting. I advise against publicly posting corrective

feedback to such students to protect them from feeling any sense of humiliation or fear associated with being corrected in front of their peers. Instead, contact these students privately by phone or by e-mail. During these check-in contacts, I often discover students who are struggling with the technology or are overwhelmed with trying to manage the online course demands and their other life responsibilities. In this scenario, this brief student-to-instructor contact, with some mentoring and referrals, can assist in reducing the student’s stressors and increase the possibility the student will not withdraw early from the course (for more information about managing student stress in an online forum, please see Gerlock & McBride, 2013).

Provide Graded Feedback

Another instructor action to help students meet the expectations associated with the quantity and quality of posts is to provide them with individualized feedback on their first two weeks of posts. To make the process efficient, I highlight on our program’s rubric (see McBride & Shepard, 2010) what expectations the student met. Each post is not marked but rather the overall performance is evaluated for quantity and quality. For example, to score well for quantity students must demonstrate that their: (a) core posts were made by midweek; (b) two reply posts, at minimum, were made over a three-day period; (c) posts were limited to 200 words; (d) posts adhered to APA standard for writing, and (e) posts included cheerleading and/or information-sharing themed posts. In terms of the quality, students must author posts where core constructs from the lesson are accurately described and evaluated.

After this period of intense marking, I initiate the student self-evaluation process. Students submit, for grading, a two-page assessment of their weekly posting performance that includes (a) tracking their frequency of cheerleading posts, core posts, and replies to their peers; (b) sharing a post they are proudest of and why; (c) briefly noting a posting goal they have to maintain or increase their quality and quantity of online participation; and (d) describing what they like and find challenging so far in the course. I also ask them to note if they are having any technology problems. I like reading these graded reflections as it helps me to stay tuned to the students’ needs, interests, and concerns given I lack face-to-face interaction in an online learning environment. To make the marking efficient, I often create a customized template for the self-evaluation (e.g., fill in the blank sentences, text boxes that limit the number of words permitted). I aim to return these student-authored assessments within 48 hours so the students can apply the feedback immediately to their current postings. With seasoned e-students, for example those who are regularly meeting the forum expectations, I will phase

out the use of this weekly self-reflection and, instead, randomly select a handful of remaining weeks for self-assessment (the students do not know these weeks in advance). However, I will always mark the first two weeks of posts so the students, no matter how experienced they are in forum work, will quickly become accustomed to the expectations for participating in my online courses.

Post Good DF Questions

To promote frequent student interaction within the DFs and to build knowledge, it is vital that instructors generate questions that require reflective responses containing critical analysis and that promote an exchange of ideas rather than posting questions to which students can post a single factual, correct, or obvious answer (University of Alaska, Academic Technology Services, 2003). In our program, instructors usually ask three forum questions per week related to the three- to six-hour self-directed online lesson. The work of Gunawardena, Lowe, and Anderson (1997) described a five-phase model that instructors can use to design meaningful online questions based on the rate students are demonstrating knowledge development. Brooke (2006) and Andresen (2009) offered additional pedagogical insights when constructing forum questions.

Some of the generic questions I tend to build upon in my forums include: (a) What are two things that most stood out for you in the reading? Why?, (b) What theme in the reading had the most impact on x? Why?, (c) If this research occurred in x (years ago, a different setting, etc.) how might the results differ?, and (d) Analyze one theme in the reading from the perspective of a certain theorist (e.g., Freud) or person (e.g., a person of minority).

Promote Interactions

Use Structuring Skills

Instructors can specify when certain posts need to be made to prevent *cluster posting*, that is, a student making all the required posts in one day, usually on the last day, which limits the amount of dialogue that may occur in the forum. In the program in which I teach, instructors require all students to make their core replies for each question by the third day of the posting week (i.e., Wednesdays to Sundays). The reply posts, a minimum of two per online question, contain at least one reply posted on the weekend. Cheerleading posts are welcome anytime during the posting week. In addition, to encourage a variety of answers, it can be useful to specify that one cannot repeat a classmate’s answer. This structuring tactic serves as an incentive to post early in the week to lessen the chance a student has the same answer and requires students to

read the posts made before they craft their answers.

It is very useful to ask students to end their core answer with a comment or question designed to spark discussion with one or more classmates. This helps the forums to fill quickly with a variety of debates and discussions. It also teaches students how to ask good forum questions, as poorly worded questions may fail to get a peer reply. In order to encourage a more interactive atmosphere, instruct students to respond to a peer's unanswered question rather than adding another response to a question that has already been answered.

Teach Facilitation Skills

To ask students to interact with their peers requires a set of communication skills that may be new or underdeveloped. Online instructors are in a prime position to model and teach numerous facilitation skills, such as those described by Ng, Cheung, and Hew (2012). These skills can be embedded in the discussion forum rubric or listed as an expectation for a particular posting week. For example, the instructor might ask the students to write a post that respectfully challenges a classmate's opinion by offering an alternative viewpoint or identifying a discrepancy.

Offer a Variety of Tasks

To continue to promote the students' responsibility for their learning and to break the momentum of instructor-authored online questions, I often invite students to become the leader of the week. For this activity, students in this role do not answer the required questions, though they are still expected to study the material. Instead, they assume the responsibility to (a) create the DF questions (which are approved by the instructor in advance), (b) be active in the forums every day by reinforcing good posts and asking follow-up questions when the forum lags, (c) respectfully remind late posters via e-mail to post (with a cc to the instructor), and (d) post the integrative summary for each question at the closing of the forum. It has been my experience that the leader of the week role is a welcome opportunity for most students despite the extra work of monitoring and facilitating the forums. A variation on this exercise is to have students each adopt one of the previously mentioned responsibilities, or to rotate the roles among a

small group of students for a week. For example, after a class presentation (online or face-to-face), the presenters host a debriefing forum assuming one or more of the aforementioned facilitator roles.

As a change from the traditional Q & A format in DFs, and to renew the student energy that may lag midterm, I orchestrate de Bono's (1999) six-hat activity. Students are assigned or choose one of the six perspectives (hats) and focus their posts from their assigned perspective. For example, the student with the yellow hat needs to write posts that highlight the strengths and value of the studied concept whereas the student assigned the black hat argues the opposite perspective. Options to facilitate this activity including subgrouping the hats (e.g., same colour, selected mix colours together). A concluding activity is to ask the students to reflect on how their hat limited or enhanced their learning and what hat would they want to wear in future analyses of course material. For more information on how to use the six-hat approach in a classroom (which can be easily adapted to online learning), please refer to Rizvi, Bilal, Ghaffar, and Asdaque (2011).

To continue to promote interaction when working online, I will occasionally, perhaps once per term, host the Talk Don't Text for a Week! forum. In this activity, students do not type their post but rather make their posts verbally using voice board software. It seems to work best if the verbal posts are less than 30 seconds to keep the listener interested, and the same posting criteria are followed. I tend to use this strategy near the end of the 13-week term when students are finding online learning a bit monotonous.

My last suggested activity that is focused on increasing interaction among e-students is structured around having students analyze case studies in a variety of ways, as described by Brooke (2006). Options for instructors include hosting a mock trial, creating debate teams, or presenting scenarios that require students to demonstrate decision-making and problem-solving skills. This activity, as are others mentioned in this section, is heavily dependent on peer facilitation, which can reduce the workload for instructors. Peer facilitation can be very successful if instructors adhere to the recommendations in this article, around posting expectations and building community online, and follow the peer facilitation techniques recommendations offered by Ng et al. (2012).

Conclusion

I have repeatedly discovered that the more time I invest in creating an engaging online learning space, clearly outlining what I expect in terms of participation, and providing frequent strength-

based feedback early in the course, the more often the number of posts in my courses far exceeds the minimum number required and the higher the grades are for quality posts. Teaching the students how to enhance their own posts as well as to elicit and amplify their classmates' answers and ideas allows me, as the instructor, to become an attentive facilitator and invites students to self-direct their own learning.

References

- Andresen, M. (2009). Asynchronous discussion forums: Success factors, outcomes, assessments, and limitations. *Educational Technology & Society, 12*, 249-257.
- Brooke, S. (2006). Using the case method to teach online classes: Promoting Socratic dialogue and critical thinking skills. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 18*, 142-149.
- de Bono, E. (1999). *Six thinking hats*. Boston: Little Brown.
- Gerlock, J., & McBride, D. (2013). Managing online discussion forums: Building community by avoiding the drama triangle. *College Teaching, 61*, 23-29. doi:10.1080/87567555.2012.713042
- Gunawardena, C., Lowe, C., & Anderson, T. (1997). Analysis of a global on-line debate and the development of an interaction analysis model for examining social construction of knowledge in computer conferencing. *Journal of Educational Computing Research, 17*, 395-429.
- McBride, D., & Shepard, B. (2010). *Discussion forum expectations and grading criteria*. Unpublished manuscript, Faculty of Education, Master of Counselling Program, University of Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada.
- McBride, D., & Davis, L. (2009). Utilizing web technologies in a master of counselling program. *Journal of Educational Technology, 5*(4), 32-38.
- Ng, C., Cheung, W., & Hew, K. (2012). Interaction in asynchronous discussion forums: Peer facilitation techniques. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning, 28*, 280-294.
- Rizvi, A., Bilal, M., Ghaffar, A., & Asdaque, M. (2011). Application of six thinking hats in education. *International Journal of Academic Research, 3*, 775-779.
- Salmon, G. (2002). *E-tivities: The key to active online learning*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- University of Alaska, Academic Technology Services (2003). *Facilitating successful online discussions*. Retrieved from olsresources.wikispaces.com/file/view/discussions.do