

SHORT COMMUNICATION: FROM THE TRENCHES

Stimulating Collaboration and Discussion in Online Learning Environments

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Abstract

It is my belief from years as both a student and instructor, that Online Learning Environments (OLEs) provide many advantages over conventional classrooms. The OLE software makes distance education possible for students who cannot attend or choose not to attend typical face-to-face classes and has many advantages to both the instructor and the student. OLEs are not without new challenges. One of the most difficult problems to overcome in this environment is the silent, uncooperative class. Collaboration and discussion are advantageous in OLEs because they make the student more central to the learning process. In this paper, the author presents methods to stimulate collaboration and discussion in online learning environments.

Keywords

Online Learning Environments, OLE, Distance Learning, Distance Education, Online Education.

1. Introduction

As a preliminary step in describing methods of stimulating collaboration and discussion in online learning environments (OLEs), definitions of the terms and a short justification of the desirability of such actions is appropriate. Dringus and Terrell (1999) define an OLE as a distinct, pedagogically meaningful and comprehensive online learning environment by which learners and faculty can participate in the learning and instructional process at anytime and any place. To facilitate learning in an OLE, asynchronicity, many-to-many information exchanges, and location independence are necessary (Harasim, Calvert, & Groeneboer, 1997). Discussion can be defined for the purposes of this paper as a series of related contributions between two or more members of a class in an OLE. Hiltz (1997) defines collaborative learning as a learning process that emphasizes groups of cooperative efforts among faculty and students. Collaborative learning stresses active participation and interaction on the part of both students and instructors (Hiltz, 1997).

2. Value of Collaboration and Discussion to the Learning Process

There have been several studies on how students learn. Discussion and collaboration are commonly cited methods of encouraging learning in OLEs (Cifuentes, Murphy, Segur, & Kodali, 1997; Hiltz, 1997; Poole, 2000). Although passive learning without student to student interaction is possible, active learning through interaction with other students including faculty acting as peers, guides, and moderators is generally considered more effective and well suited to OLEs. This knowledge transfer method is fundamentally different from the instructor lecture method of education (Harasim, 1990). Encouraging discussion and collaboration in education increases student involvement, engages

students more in the learning process, and has been shown in traditional classrooms to promote student achievement and satisfaction (Hiltz, 1998; Johnson, 1981).

Although the student and instructor remain, few other similarities exist between the traditional classroom and the OLE. In the OLE, classes run 24 hours a day from the beginning to the end of the course. Discussion forums have replaced the casual conversations in the classroom and have a permanent written log. Discussions are no longer rapid and experimental. Students have ample time to read other student's comments, do research, and formulate a detailed response. Secret student dialogues are easy during the class with no possibility of the instructor catching the students communicating. Students may participate at any time of the day that suits them from work, home, or while traveling. The discipline imposed by traditional fixed meeting times and places with reminders of due dates is replaced by the requirement that the students self-motivate and maintain control of their contributions and deadlines. This last item is a very difficult accomplishment for many freshman college students. Finally, the camaraderie that is almost automatic in the traditional face-to-face classroom is more difficult in the OLE. Although it has been shown to be possible and desirable, this bonding requires encouragement by the instructor and planned activities to foster student communications (Hiltz, 1997).

3. Facilitating Discussion

One of the greatest aids to facilitating discussion is setting the stage properly. This includes providing detailed information about how to use the system, contact information for the technical support people and the instructor, and an overview of the course. An instruction to print this information and keep it as a reference in case the system is down is also a good idea. Setting the stage also includes laying down ground rules for what is to be discussed, defining what is acceptable online behavior, and stating what the deadlines for discussions will be. Providing guidelines for online activity was rated the second most important criteria in keeping online discussions on topic in a recent study (Beaudin, 1999). For example, an online course may involve researching and commenting on a new topic each week. Without an instruction not to work ahead, some students will ignore the current week as soon as they make their posting and begin work on the next week, possibly finishing what they perceive to be their discussion position of the course well in advance and ignoring questions about their comments and without participating in the weekly discussion. Another good idea is to require several responses to postings during the discussion period. This effectively requires students to read all the other postings until they find several they feel they can reply to, either in agreement or disagreement, and therefore facilitates learning and discussion. Specifications on discussion item lengths and formats are also good ideas. Otherwise, some students will post “I disagree” and expect to get discussion credit for it. Carefully designing the discussion topics is critical to the learning process. A good topic is one that most students will have to research before submitting their text and one that may cause students to differ in opinion. Topics should not be so controversial or strongly held that they cause classmates to have heated or hostile debates. For example, sexual, cultural, and religious related questions can cause

extreme reactions from students. Providing good questions was ranked the number one method to keep online discussions on topic by a group of instructors (Beaudin, 1999).

Another method to facilitate discussion is informing the students that the discussion participation is a significant part of their grade and providing a grading rubric explaining the process. For example, an online instructor might state that the student is expected to make a 500-word contribution by 5 PM EST each Wednesday and three 200 word replies to other contributions by Sunday 5 PM EST, and that this will count for 30 percent of their grade. Policies should be clearly stated for late submissions. I deduct 10 percent per day date based upon the server timestamp of the contribution and clearly explain that 5:01 PM EST on the posting date is considered one day late, 5:01 the next day is two days late, and so on. I also state that failing to complete an assignment will result in a failing grade for the course, even if by the time it is submitted the individual assignment's late point reduction has reached 100 percent. Finally, I clearly state that emergencies happen and that I will consider extensions, but only when the request is made before the deadline.

Research has indicated that students submit more discussion comments and are more likely to learn in online environments when they are encouraged to be active learners. A method to encourage this is for the instructor to assume a facilitator role instead of a lecturer and controller role (Harasim, Hiltz, Teles, & Turoff, 1995). For example, in my online courses, I always include an administrative details section that contains a statement similar to the following.

Online Discussion Topics and Questions: Online courses work best when all the students work together, answering each other's questions, agreeing or disagreeing (in a friendly way) with each other, and the instructor facilitates this without controlling it. What that means is that I will encourage you to comment on each others statements, discuss ideas you have in common, and I may answer your question with an invitation for the class to try to answer it. This in no way means that I am not answering you, and if no one responds I will answer the question. If you need the answer sooner or prefer to bypass the discussion, you can always Email me.

To keep an online class running smoothly, reaction by the instructor to student problems and encouragement needs to occur quickly. To facilitate this, I check my online classes several times a day and make sure I inform students when I will be unavailable for more than 24 hours. It is also important that students frequently read the new material or they become overwhelmed by the number of discussion comments and may miss assignment deadlines. I maintain a policy that my students check in at least every third day. Any student that does not check in for two weeks is automatically dropped.

A discussion area for introductions is a recommended starting point for online classes (Turoff, 2000). These introductions act as a resource to the instructor on the background and expectations of the students, as well as a resource to the students of each other's

talents. Most importantly, this area can be used to facilitate initial bonding between the students and with the instructor. To encourage this, I ask each student to reply to several other student's introduction postings, and I try to reply to every student. Another technique is to find something all the students have in common and start a discussion on it, even if it does not directly relate to the class material. My favorite topic is connection method, speed, and problems. In an online course, every student must have a connection to the Internet, and the different connection types often yield interesting conversations.

Another technique is giving the students more control of the way the class proceeds through discussions and voting. An example would be asking the student's to post a comment to determine if the next week will be spent on a quiz or on general study. They might be asked to post a comment with subject quiz or study, and a short explanation of why they prefer that choice.

An opening comment and a summary of the discussion at the end have been shown to facilitate learning and encourage discussion (Gustafson & Gibbs, 2000). One student can be designated to post an initial comment in the discussion area outlining the issue and prompting discussion. Another can be designated to summarize the postings at the end of the discussion. These roles can be rotated through the class or made available to volunteers for extra credit.

There are some dangers and pitfalls in online learning environments. Without the instant feedback and visual cues as well as the group dynamics that face-to-face discussion

permits, it is easy to inadvertently offend or overreact. Hostile comments are sometimes referred to as flames and the process as flaming. One method to avoid this is to plan ahead by posting a carefully thought-out no flaming policy. I delete unacceptable comments as soon as I find them and mail them back to the author explaining why they are inappropriate. I also Email students to advise caution when a conversation seems to be getting too heated or personal.

4. Facilitating Collaboration

Where discussion involves individuals presenting information, collaboration involves groups of people working toward a common goal. This is significantly more difficult in an environment where the group does not physically meet in a fixed place at a fixed time. There are several methods to facilitate collaboration and plan for the problems that may occur. One is careful planning and clear policies about what is expected of the individual students and the group. This should include the method that will be used to grade the group and the individual members, as well as a method to handle members that do not meet their obligations to the group. One example is giving the group the ability to lower a member's grade one letter if they feel that the member did not participate fully. It does need to be stressed that just as in the workplace, the group is expected to accomplish their goal regardless of the performance on any single member, and that not completing the project will cause the entire group to suffer, not just the individual that failed to participate.

Each group should be given a separate workspace when possible that they can use for their discussions and in building their project. Ideally, this workspace should be private from the other groups. Projects should be assigned in such a manner that they can be broken down by the group into manageable, well-defined chunks that can be distributed to individuals and then assembled into a coherent whole. When possible, rotating the responsibility for the assembly is an effective technique.

Debates can be an effective method to stimulate collaboration. A controversial topic is stated. Students or groups then express their opinions and reply to others, trying to convince the group of their opinion. At the end a vote can be taken to see which idea achieved the score. Role-play can also be an effective method to stimulate collaboration. A student could pretend to have a problem and the remainder of the class could collaborate as instructors to solve the problem. The group created story is another method that can be used. Guidelines and an introductory paragraph are given to the students. The students then rotate submitting a paragraph each to complete a story. A separate discussion area can be used for the students to discuss where they see the story going and how they will get it there. Optionally, the students can choose their own order of contributions or rewrite sections.

One of my favorite methods to stimulate collaboration is a group list. I was originally exposed to this while working with Dr. Murray Turoff at NJIT in the late 1970's. For example, a group is going on an expedition to the Antarctic. Each member will carry an identical pack containing no more than 50 pounds of gear. (Food, water, clothing, and air

are provided for separately.) The students all contribute items for the equipment list along with the items weight and purpose. Each item is discussed and the group prioritizes the items, eventually selecting the items to bring.

Structured controversy is an effective method of stimulating collaboration. A controversial topic is chosen and two groups are formed, each taking a side. The groups work together to research the issue and present statements defending their view. Then the groups switch sides and repeat the process. At the end each group has defended each side of the issue, and a vote can then determine which viewpoint achieved the highest consensus.

5. Summary

Evidence and experience seem to indicate that students learn more and enjoy the learning process more when they actively interact with each other. Instructors in online learning environments should make efforts to facilitate interaction through discussion and collaboration. Well-defined rules and guidelines can be a great aid to this process, as can encouragement through positive responses to students and carefully designed projects and topics.

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