Facilitating online discussions effectively

Alfred P. Rovai *

School of Education, Regent University, 1000 Regent University Drive, Virginia Beach, Virginia 23464-9800, USA

Abstract

This article presents a synthesis of the theoretical and research literature on facilitating asynchronous online discussions effectively. Online courses need to be designed so that they provide motivation for students to engage in productive discussions and clearly describe what is expected, perhaps in the form of a discussion rubric. Additionally, instructors need to provide discussion forums for socio-emotional discussions that have the goal of nurturing a strong sense of community within the course as well as group discussion forums for content-and task-oriented discussions that center on authentic topics. In order to facilitate discussions effectively, instructors should generate a social presence in the virtual classroom, avoid becoming the center of all discussions by emphasizing student–student interactions, and attend to issues of social equity arising from use of different communication patterns by culturally diverse students [e.g., Garrison, D. R., Anderson, T., and Archer, W. (2001). Critical thinking, cognitive presence, and computer conferencing in distance education. *The American Journal of Distance Education, 15*(1), 7–23; Rovai, A. P. (2003). Strategies for grading online discussions: Effects on discussions and classroom community in Internet-based university courses. *Journal of Computing in Higher Education, 15*(1), 89–107].
© 2006 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Communication pattern; Computer-mediated communication; Distance education; Higher education; Social interaction; Social presence

1. Introduction

1.1. Purpose

Social learning theory focuses on learning that occurs within a social context and involves personal experiences, observations, and interactions with other individuals. This article addresses the roles of social interactions and computer-mediated communication (CMC) in learning and the barriers to fair and equitable discussions online instructors are likely to encounter in virtual classrooms. It provides a synthesis of relevant distance education research and the experiences of the author as an online instructor in higher education for over 10 years. It also provides readers with culturally-responsive strategies for designing and facilitating online discussions using mostly asynchronous e-learning management systems that rely on threaded text-based discussions and e-mail for the majority of communications between members of the learning community.

* Tel.: +1 757 226 4861; fax: +1 757 226 4857.
E-mail address: alfrrov@regent.edu.

1.2. Background

Social constructivists, such as Lev Vygotsky (2006), assert that students do not learn in isolation and cognitive psychology maintains that people naturally learn and work collaboratively. In this vein, Laurillard (2000) argues that higher education must go beyond access to information or content and include "engagement with others in the gradual development of their personal understanding" (p. 137). This engagement is developed through students interacting with each other and with their instructor. Therefore, an important goal of distance education is the creation of learning communities where members feel connected to and assist each other in their efforts to learn. Effective schools provide students with a supportive community (e.g., Tinto, 1993). Educators must re-conceptualize how sense of community can be stimulated in Internet-based virtual classrooms in order to promote social construction of knowledge and understanding via mostly written CMC.

CMC is the exchange of information between individuals by way of computer networks. E-learning management systems, e.g., Blackboard, WebCT, eCollege, and ANGEL, are used to deliver courses at a distance via the Internet. These systems include sub-systems that present content as well as facilitate student–student and student–instructor interactions via interactive telecommunication technologies. Computer conferencing such as synchronous chat and asynchronous e-mail and discussion boards are typically used by these systems to support online discussions. CMC is the primary mechanism through which community is built and sustained in online courses. The focus of this article is on the design and facilitation of asynchronous computer conferencing that makes use of e-mail and discussion boards that can be customized into multiple discussion forums.

The theoretical framework used in this article is that of creating and sustaining a constructivist online learning environment. Constructivism is a philosophy of learning based on the notion that individuals construct their own understandings through experience, maturation, and interaction with the environment, especially active interaction with other learners and the instructor (e.g., Bangert, 2004; Partlow & Gibbs, 2003; Rovai, 2004). Accordingly, the defining characteristic of an online constructivist learning environment is discourse, typically in the form of online discussions. Discussion provides learners with opportunities to write, and in doing so, reflect on course content and previous postings by members of the learning community (MacKnight, 2000). Lebow (1993) suggests a constructivist learning environment should possess the following minimum requirements:

- Provision for the knowledge construction process.
- Encouragement of self-awareness of the knowledge construction process.
- Provision for appreciation of multiple perspectives.
- Use of learning tasks that are relevant and authentic.
- Encouragement of ownership and voice in the learning process.
- Learning embedded in social experience.
- Encouragement of the development of multiple modes of representation.

Ashar and Skenes (1993) report learning needs are strong enough to attract adults to a higher education program, but not to retain them. Building sense of community can enhance student persistence (e.g., Tinto, 1993). Gunawardena and Zittle (1997) argue that one can build online communities using CMC by generating discussions and social presence. Moreover, Hirumi and Bermudez (1996) report that online courses can be more interactive than traditional courses, providing more personal and timely feedback to meet students' needs than is possible in many large face-to-face classes.

Although asynchronous CMC has its strengths, such as reflective versus spontaneous discussion, Mason and Lockwood (1994) identify several potential weaknesses of these computer conferencing systems, such as an overwhelming number of messages to read, frequent domination of discussions by a small number of students, increased chance of misunderstandings, and reduced student motivation to interact. However, skillful facilitation of online discussions by the instructor can minimize and even eliminate these weaknesses.

Walther (1996) suggests CMC may influence perceptions of one's online communication partners and the quality of his or her communication. Such perceptions can negatively influence trust and feelings of connectedness among members of the learning community, particularly in a multicultural context where cultural differences are not understood by all students and where cultural bias may exist. When teachers and majority culture students do not consider how students' cultural backgrounds affect their ways of communicating and working on a task, they