Achieving Online Discussion

A previous briefing paper dealt with setting up online discussion groups in such a way that solid foundations were laid on which to build a working online community. This Briefing Paper goes beyond structures and rules to the thing which is much more difficult to achieve – true and dynamic interaction.

The problem of how to get students to talk, and moreover, talk animatedly amongst themselves about the subject, is one faced in real life seminars no less than online, but the tutor's influence online is limited in some ways, enhanced in others. Students may find it easier to 'lurk' because they cannot see you, and you cannot encourage them to contribute simply through eye contact. On the other hand, it is very easy to communicate with quiet students through private email (off-list) and encourage them that way.

The challenge consists of two steps: first of motivating students to visit the discussion forum regularly, and secondly of encouraging them to participate actively in the discussion while they are there. This Briefing Paper tries to offer some tips for achieving both.

Encouraging attendance

Let students determine what they want to discuss

If at all possible, use the first face-to-face session, or the first few days of online interaction, to agree the discussion topics for future weeks with your students. This will go some way towards ensuring their interest, and the negotiations involved will help the group get used to each other.

Allow social content

For the same reason, it is advisable to allow social content on the academic discussion list. As long as the social element is subsidiary, and off-topic personal mails are marked as such, there is no reason to segregate private talk. Having a mix of registers and topics will help students remember that they are communicating with real people, and counteract feelings of isolation; it will also give them more reasons for checking the discussion every so often.

Announce and disseminate

Some lecturers use the discussion forum to post information in advance of disseminating it through other channels. This means that students will come to recognise the forum as a useful stopping point, as a hub for that particular course. Soliciting comments about the course via the forum is also a useful practice, and the more adventurous lecturer can use various online polls to provide some interactivity while at the same time getting informative feedback.

Publicise the online forum

There is no point in setting up a discussion forum when the only thing that directs students to it is the course handbook. A good way to remind students to visit the forum is to mention it during the lecture – if possible, with a teaser ("Was X right or wrong? Debate it in the discussion forum."). If you are running online discussion for modules in which you are not the main lecturer, ask your colleague to publicise the forum for you. If you are maintaining a module website, link to the discussion forum from it and consider writing a brief teaser for each week's main discussion topic.

Encouraging discussion

Model contributions and online behaviour

Although it is generally advisable for the tutor to stay out of the discussion as much as possible, it helps if at the early stages you post some contributions which give your students a model of acceptable posts. This could make it clear that posts don't necessarily have to be long and that they don't have to look like essays. On the whole, it is advisable to establish a standard of short messages rather than long, since this will encourage more students to post.

Post early, post often

Initial posts are the most difficult ones. It is a good idea to use 'carrots' to encourage students to send their first contribution. One lecturer told students that as soon as they posted their first mail to the forum, they would get an early copy of mock exam questions for the module. To make the process easy, you might ask for their first post to be about themselves and the reason for attending the class. Sending one of these yourself may break the ice a little, and will give you more of an online 'personality'.

Kick off with an emotive subject

Most subject areas in History or Classics, and quite a few in Archaeology, have their controversial, mysterious or sensationalist issues. Tired as you may be of them, they may be useful to get students interacting on that important first session. Bring out the crackpot ideas, the novelisations and Hollywood movies, brainstorm inconsistencies and errors, and gently lead the discussion towards more thoughtful analysis.

Integrate with face-to-face seminars

Face-to-face seminars should refer to points made by students in online discussion. This has two useful results: it validates the contributions made online, and it integrates the two platforms with each other, making them interdependent and each as relevant as the other. If students see that familiarity with the online content will be assumed, they are more likely to visit the discussion forum. Seeing that the face-to-face seminar is either continuation of, or preparation for, online discussion, will raise the status of the online forum in their minds.

Some tutors, if approached outside a seminar session by a student with a question regarding the module subject, will encourage them to post the question to the forum. ("This is a very good question. Why don't you throw that open to the entire group?") This will of course depend on both the nature of the question and the willingness of the student, but it is a useful possibility to bear in mind.

Think of good questions to ask to initiate discussion

Try to have a small bank of good questions and material to bring out in case discussion flags. These could be:

❖ questions which solicit personal opinion (these tend to elicit by far the most lively responses and the energised discussion can then be redirected).

❖ requests for quite basic factual information relevant to the course. This will allow less secure students to post with confidence since they can check the facts before posting.

- requests for summaries of previous on-list discussion, lectures, journal articles, or of earlier seminars. These could be formalised: each week a different student could be responsible for kicking off discussion by posting a (brief) summary.

- posting a link to a relevant website and inviting critique and comments on the site.

- brief quotes from two contradictory 'expert' publications, inviting students to take a side and explain why they did so.

- positing a scenario and asking how students would approach it.

- controversial or provocative questions which may have no true answer but which will allow students to put into words their personal insights without fear of being wrong.

Think of good questions to ask to encourage further discussion

Good questions for promoting ongoing discussion are ones that probe for more information. Some suggestions could be:

- What are your reasons for saying this?

- How would you define this term, what do you mean by the expression you used?

- Could you clarify your comment?

- What does your remark imply, what could the possible consequences be?

Once students in the group have become used to each other, useful questions can also include:

- Could it be that you and this other student are contradicting each other?

- Does anyone see any alternatives to this students' view?

Invite guest 'speakers'

One way to make students appreciate the value of a virtual discussion forum and to pique their interest is to invite a well-known expert in the field to join the discussion for a week. Because of the nature of the medium, this could be a person from anywhere in the world.

Group Activities

Stimulate peer interaction

It should be made clear at the outset that students are expected to respond to questions asked, or points made, by their peers. As far as possible, the tutor should remain in the background and manage the flow of discussion unobtrusively. If a question is asked in the discussion forum, it is wise for the tutor to wait and see whether another student will respond to it, before replying themselves.

Make individuals responsible for a week's discussion

Just like some tutors make students reponsible for leading their own seminar sessions, some delegate responsibility for online discussion to a different student each week. This may work better with students who are already experienced, or particularly motivated, but it can have impressive results.

Use learning teams

If your online group is greater than five students, you can subdivide it into teams, similar to groupwork in a traditional seminar. These teams can be required to compile a report on a topic amongst themselves, which will then be posted to the entire forum and provide a useful starting point for discussion for everybody.

The swan thing ...

The great benefit of asynchronous online discussion is the way it facilitates peer collaboration and enables students to construct knowledge together. However, this should not obscure the fact that the role of the tutor is crucially important in stimulating, furthering, and guiding online discussion, and it is arguably because this importance is not recognised that some online discussion ventures fail.

Acknowledge contributions

It is vitally important that substantial individual contributions are acknowledged, especially at the beginning. Ideally, this should happen through responses from other students, but if posts receive no peer feedback at all, it is advisable for the tutor to send a brief comment either on- or off-list. It is easy for forum members to get discouraged if they feel that they are posting into a void.

Reply fast

It is also quite likely that a small number of less secure students will mail you off-list with requests for information and clarification. If they have to wait too long for a response, they will lose motivation and feel abandoned. Especially at the beginning, ensure that you respond as quickly as you can, ideally within 24 hours.

Deal with unacceptable behaviour

Inevitably, some student will at some point post something that offends another, whether intentionally or not. It is important to monitor contributions for elements which might cause trouble or discourage expression from other students. The 'offender' should be contacted offlist and a resolution negotiated – this might involve a voluntary on-list apology. An advantage of the virtual medium is that this can be done at any time (without needing to catch the student in person) in an unobtrusive way. Criticising a student's behaviour on-list will almost never be necessary and should be a last resort.

In an online environment, the tutor cannot see or be seen, and can therefore not employ the accustomed mechanisms for guiding and controling a class. Honing the new skills for dealing with this new situation takes time, and it would be unwise to expect everything to work perfectly from the start. However, it may have become obvious that many techniques that are useful in face-to-face seminars are relevant to online discussion. In either medium, students have to become comfortable with each other and the situation before learning can occur, and the mechanisms for promoting this are closely related. The difference in the medium itself, considerable though it is, can serve to obscure the essential pedagogical similarities.

If you are considering setting up an online discussion group for your module and would like to further discuss any aspect of this, please do not hesitate to contact me at s.cameron@arts.gla.ac.uk ❖

References and further reading:

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S Cameron, 'Online Discussions: how to set them up', Subject Centre Briefing Paper, http://hca.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/Briefing_Papers/bp8.php (as on 15/10/02)

See the Subject Centre website for further recommendations http://hca.ltsn.ac.uk/ict/ictfaq/cmclit.php

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