Online Teaching Strategies: Module 3

Instructor Led Discussions

Motivation and Purpose

Teaching presence has been defined as the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile outcomes (Anderson et al., 2001). In the online classroom instructor facilitation discussions is considered a critical indicator of teaching presence. Research into how people learn suggests that learning takes place when interactions occur. The discussion forum has assumed a significant role in creating and maintaining interaction within the virtual classroom.

Why Instructor-led?

When making a transition from teaching face-to-face to online, one of the more readily portable aspects of many courses is the class discussion. While generally undervalued and ungraded in face-to-face teaching, in-class discussions often perform a very important function in the physical classroom. The same is true in the online classroom.

In an online discussion you assume many of the same roles you performed in the face-to-face classroom. You are the leader, and the final word on the value and accuracy of information.

Students too are often most comfortable with you in this role. Student perception of course quality and learning is directly tied to teaching presence in the virtual classroom and the discussion forum is one of the easiest and most comfortable ways to establish this presence in a meaningful and instructional valuable manner. If an online class is to be a community of inquiry, you as the instructor provide the academic gravitas that allows students to realize the activity's value in their learning process.

Your Role

In a well-conceived and executed instructor-led discussion, you perform four main roles;

1. Organizational: In this role you set the agenda for the discussion, define objectives, and establish the criteria for posting and interacting within the forums.
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2. Social: In this role you reinforce acceptable and expected behaviors via welcome messages, prompt feedback and professional tone.

3. Intellectual: The role most instructors feel is the most important, in this role you encourage student participation by asking questions, synthesizing key points, and nurturing a climate of inquiry.

4. Technical: Critical to online discussion, in this role you provide primary guidance on the use of the tools and techniques for successful participation in class activities (discussions).

The Process

There are three phases to conducting successful online discussions;

1. Introduction  
   a. Establishing ground rules

2. Engagement  
   a. Giving opinions.  
   b. Sharing experiences.  
   c. Questioning.  
   d. Showing appreciation.

3. Monitoring  
   a. Suggesting a new direction.  
   b. Summarizing.  
   c. Personally inviting people to contribute.

Establishing ground rules and setting expectations are critical to good online discussions. Students must know what you expect and why. They must know what you mean when you describe ‘netiquette’ or network etiquette.

Fostering engagement is the critical piece during the discussion itself. If students are to be engaged in the process of discussion you must be engaged as well. Your students must be aware of your presence in the class discussions just as they were when you stood at the lectern.

Most of your engagement in the online discussion comes in the form of monitoring activities. You suggest a new direction for a discussion, or cut off a line of inquiry that is taking the class too far afield. You summarize to bring the discussion to a close, and you invite people, especially the reticent, to engage and share their voice and experiences with their peers.