Using Discussions in Online Courses:
The Importance of Interactivity

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Students in online courses can often feel isolated and overwhelmed by the lack of face-to-face communication with their instructor and each other. "Without a feeling of community, people are on their own [and] likely to be anxious, defensive and unwilling to take the risks involved in learning" (Wegerif, 1998).

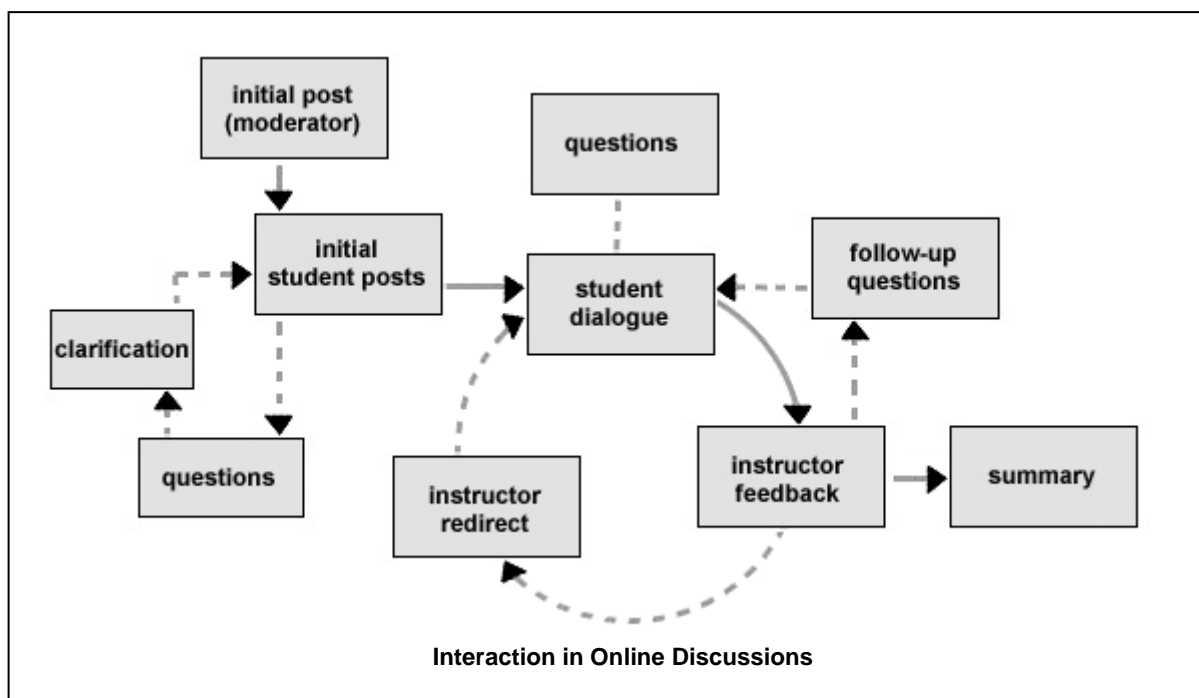Research suggests that three major reasons students fail to complete online courses are:

- Lack of student responsibility – time management, infrequent logons, and non-participation.
- Frustration due to technical difficulties – real or perceived problems and user error.
- Isolation – a feeling or belief that they are working alone without the help of their instructor or classmates.

Ensuring communication and interactivity can help to alleviate each of these issues by creating a "social presence" in the online learning environment (Gunawardena and Zittle, 1997).

Interactivity

Studies indicate that frequent, meaningful and "just in time" planned interactivity in an online course helps to keep students motivated and to make them feel like part of a learning community.   Communicating and learning together allows students to share with each other their questions, frustrations and ideas, and to receive help and feedback from a supportive peer group (Palloff & Pratt, 1999).

Research also shows that this sense of community enhances critical thinking, learning outcomes and student satisfaction by improving information flow, learning support, group commitment and collaboration (Dede, 1996; Wellman, 1999). The most common way to achieve interactivity in online courses is through the use of asynchronous discussions or conferences.

Interaction in Online Discussions

Asynchronous discussions often become the heart of an online course, as they allow for reflection time and critical thinking, often resulting in more student involvement than in a face to face classroom discussion. Even introverted students who rarely speak up in a traditional face-to-face class often lead exciting and thought provoking discussions online.

Facilitation of Online Discussions

The instructor's role in the online discussion is to encourage critical reflection and knowledge construction in a learning community (Palloff & Pratt, 1999) and according to Anderson and Kanuka (1997), the facilitator should "[guide] the discussion, [stimulate] participants and often [offer] intellectual leadership" to create a "supportive online learning environment."

The responsibilities of the discussion facilitator can be summarized as nine distinct roles, as identified by Berge (2000):

- **Faciltator** (posts initial questions or topics; keeps discussion "on track" and redirects as necessary; functions as group leader)
- **Manager** (organizes and archives posts and threads as needed; answers administrative questions)
- **Filter** (evaluates posts; deletes posts as necessary)
- **Expert** (answers content-related questions)
- **Editor** (functions as text editor; formats posts)
- **Promoter** (encourages "lurking" students to post)
- **Marketer** (promotes/explains discussion objectives)
- **Helper** (encourages students via private email if necessary)
- **Fireman** (provides rules of netiquette; removes "flames" or other negative posts)

In order to fulfill these roles, the successful online discussion facilitator:

- **Makes his/her presence felt but doesn't dominate the conversation.**
  Enter the discussion when a question is directed specifically to you, and make sure students understand how often you will respond to postings. Otherwise, enter the discussion only to redirect the conversation when information is incorrect or off-topic, to ask follow up questions or to summarize the discussion thread.

- **Encourages students to respond to each other.**
  If a posted question doesn't specifically ask for a response from you, let it "sit" for a day or so to encourage other students to reply first.

- **Immediately stops inappropriate, rude or hostile postings.**
  Negative posts can spark defensive and hostile responses from others. After deleting an inappropriate posting, immediately inform the student of what happened to his/her message and why via private email.

- **Promotes critical thinking with thought-provoking questions.**
  Post follow-up questions and introduce real-world applications of discussion topics whenever possible. Encourage students to provide feedback to their peers and to assess their own contribution to the discussion.

- **Makes expectations clear**.
  Detailed instructions are crucial in an online course. Carefully delineate each step of the discussion assignment, and provide your students with examples and an explanation of the types of postings you expect. Ask students who post exemplary responses if you can use them as examples in future classes.

- **Functions as a "gatekeeper".**
  Consider opening and closing discussion topics in a "just in time" manner to keep students' attention focused on the current topic. Encourage and motivate your students to participate by asking specific questions and addressing them by name, if necessary.

- **Makes objectives clear to students.**
  Knowing precisely what is to be accomplished in a discussion usually results in improved learning outcomes and greater satisfaction for both the students and the facilitator; students need to understand why and how to focus their posts, and how the assignment relates to the learning objectives of the course.

Effective Discussions

Effective online discussions share several characteristics. They support the learning objectives of the course through careful planning and presentation, and they generate and maintain student interest and motivation through the use of provocative questions that facilitate critical thinking, not "just the facts."

The material presented and discussed should be applied to everyday life or professional goals. Clear, explicit instructions must be provided, along with a clearly stated grading plan that reflects a percentage of the course grade that is appropriate, feasible, and significant. One effective method of grading discussions is the use of rubrics or other evaluation tool that details the evaluation process.

Using discussions appropriately in an online course by following these suggestions can greatly improve the online learning experience for your students, and improve the teaching experience for you.

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