

# **Facilitating Online Asynchronous Discussions**

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## **Abstract**

The development of electronic tools to support teaching and learning includes the online asynchronous discussion board. This tool provides an environment in which learners are able to discuss issues, problems, or concepts with their peers and instructor at times and places that are convenient to them. The technology is available, learners and faculty are generally comfortable with the technology, and it seems as if these tools have value in supporting learning. However, instructors continue to struggle with the process of facilitating quality discussion that promotes high participation among learners. This paper concentrates on these issues and presents ideas and guidelines that have been successful in distance education courses facilitated by the author.

## **I. Introduction**

Many educators have considered the use of online asynchronous discussion tools to support learning. Online discussion tools are generally web-based and are accessed via standard web browsers. Asynchronous tools support discussion where members need not participate concurrently in or order to be a part of the dialogue. Since discussion with this type of tool is largely text-based and is often delayed, or less immediate, facilitators are left with additional concerns beyond those found in any discussion session. This paper provides an overview of the tools, issues and responses that may be employed for successful dialogue with an online discussion board.

## **II. Introduction to Online Asynchronous Discussion**

### **Characteristics of Online Asynchronous Discussions**

Web-based discussion boards are quite commonly found on the Internet and may be a part of a complex set of course tools or a simple 'guestbook' on a web site. These boards support conversations that do not require immediate reaction and feedback and members of the conversation may participate in the discussion at a time that is convenient for them. The higher level of accessibility and convenience makes this sort of tool very popular as a venue for discussions that include people from geographically disparate areas or for those who have difficulty scheduling specific times to participate. Asynchronous boards usually maintain sufficient storage space to maintain a record of conversation for later reference and they usually include the ability to use multimedia either as links or as a part of the posting text. Dialogue in these discussions is text-based, though more innovative participants may include other media.

### **Face to Face versus Distance Discussion Groups**

An asynchronous, distance-based discussion exhibits similar characteristics to a face-to-face, 'real-time' discussion. Things that discourage interaction in a face-to-face discussion group usually will discourage interaction in a distance discussion group. Similarly, approaches that aid in the facilitation of discussion in one venue will support discussion in another venue. For example, rude conduct, unfocused discussion, and extreme delays in response are all dialogue stoppers. Similarly, open questions, supportive affirmations and positive critical commentary all tend to support conversation. Thus, successful facilitation of an online discussion group is often easier if the moderator has experience with successful discussion moderation in face-to-face environments.

One significant difference between face-to-face and online distance dialogue is the reduction in signals participants receive regarding the intent of comments made by others. In a face-to-face discussion, members have the opportunity collect non-verbal hints or clues in voice inflection that aid in the interpretation and context of a statement. An online asynchronous discussion, on the other hand, is largely text based. Participants are left to analyze offerings based solely on this text, which provides more room for misinterpretation. Misunderstandings are more likely to occur simply because readers have fewer signals regarding intent and may impose their own feeling onto the

content. The moderator can reduce the impact of misunderstanding by modeling effective ways to provide more clues in text for the audience. Similarly, the facilitator can teach participants ways to interpret and discover the actual intent of material in the dialogue.

Another significant difference between face-to-face discussion and online asynchronous discussion is that participants feel a reduction in the sense of "immediacy" in the conversation. Commentary in a traditional conversation includes the gratification of nearly instantaneous response. In contrast, the very nature of the 'asynchronous' discussion is the ability for the topic to be pursued over an extended period without the requirement of immediate response. The strength of this approach is the ability of participants to reflect on what has been said before developing and presenting their own response. However, not all participants will adopt this period of reflection into their discussion process and many will express a greater need to receive the gratification of a speedy response. Some members will become disenfranchised as they realize that they must wait for response and deal with the possibility that no response will be received at all. It is the moderators task to support a pace that addresses these issues and to model reflective response techniques.

Participation levels for each individual will differ between online asynchronous discussions and face-to-face discussions, if only for the reason that some are more willing to contribute in one forum versus the other. Since each person has different preferences, it is usually best for an instructor to use multiple venues and techniques to encourage discussion. Regardless, the facilitator must recognize that there are varying levels of comfort by participants based on the topic, discussion structure, number of participants, and the relationship each person has with the other participants. Preferences for typed versus verbal contributions and reading versus hearing responses are just another factor that influence tendencies in a dialogue. The facilitator must be prepared to provide support for those who need it and must exercise authority in order to develop a safe and productive environment for conversation.

### **Common Results and Issues in Online Asynchronous Discussions**

Online asynchronous discussions can be extremely successful or a dismal failure. This is certainly no different from dialogue in any other venue. However, failure for an online asynchronous discussion is often much more obvious and perhaps more frequent than failure in more traditional discussions. In some respects, failed discussions may seem worse simply because the failure is chronicled for all members to see. Even worse, this record has the effect of providing a place to relive the events, which can be quite demoralizing to the facilitator. On the other hand, this record is a valuable learning tool for all participants. The evidence of a difficult or failed conversation can provide fuel for different moderation and participation approaches that increase the likelihood of successful dialogues in the future.

At their best, online asynchronous discussions provide a positive and diverse forum that supports collaboration and interaction beyond a time-limited synchronous discussion. Ideally, all members of an online asynchronous discussion participate and add value to the discussion. Each individual contributes diverse experiences and knowledge to the discussion, which provides valuable breadth and depth to the topic area. The collaboration between individuals distributes effort in topic exploration and which results in an increase in the depth of coverage for each member. Participants

are able to reference older posts and reflect on what others have said before adding their response. When they respond, the content has the effect of moving the discussion forward and adding value to the discussion. In this ideal situation, the facilitator usually has very little to do other than simply participating in and enjoying the conversation.

Most online asynchronous discussions that are directed by an experienced facilitator realize the results illustrated in the ideal to varying degrees. It is rare that all members will participate equally and it is common to have misunderstandings. Some individuals will not take the time to reflect before responding and not every contribution will have value. Even so, the skilled facilitator realizes that each group has its own set of needs. The moderator can work towards building a positive learning environment by building a cohesive learning group.

### **III. Selecting Tools and Approaches**

#### **Board Organization**

Asynchronous discussion boards can be configured several ways. One of the most common variances is in whether topics are 'threaded' or not. Threading provides a method of keeping related posts together under a common topic area. Some boards provide the capability to expand and contract threads and may support subthreads. Replies to posts in a given thread will generally be placed within the thread that the original post was found. Unthreaded boards are usually chronological in nature and rely entirely on participants 'calling out' individuals or topics so that everyone understands how the new post relates to past discussion. Unthreaded boards work fine for discussion that is less formal and more open in nature. Threaded boards support directed discussion by providing tools to organize by topic rather than by the time of contribution.

Some discussion facilities support folder structures that provide an additional level of organization for discussion support. Folders may contain threads, files with reference material and areas for informal discussion. Careful use of a folder hierarchy is used by many electronic distance education providers to create a 'virtual classroom' environment. The advantage of this approach is the increased sense of the group having a 'space' that is theirs. This provides an increased sense of belonging for members of the group. There are more possibilities for the implementation of security and for protecting participants from outside interference. Additionally, folders provide an excellent storage and distribution platform for course materials.

#### **Multimedia and Post Formatting**

Discussion boards provide varying levels of support for the formatting of posts and the inclusion of multimedia attachments. In some cases, the board supports html tags, including links, images and other formatting. Some discussion boards provide tools to upload and attach files. Advanced discussion board tools may include formatting support that does not require knowledge of html or any other markup language. These tools often provide point and click editing support similar to common word processors. While these tools are nice, they are not necessary for successful discussion unless the topic requires this sort of support. Similarly, some discussion topics might

benefit from less, rather than more support. For example, a simple board that supports html tags might be an appropriate place to discuss and practice html code.

### **Access Issues**

It is important that the discussion tool is easily accessible to all members of the group. An asynchronous board that is located on school machines with only 'on-campus' access will not support commuting learners or individuals who are off-campus during discussion. The moderator must be aware of the needs of those who must have access to the board and then must be certain to provide that access. However, unless the discussion is intended to be open to any individual who happens upon the board, the facilitator must secure the discussion area from unwanted intrusion. A common solution is to provide password access to the discussion board. Frequently, such access is limited to posting only, which allows anyone to view content. However, password access to the discussion area feels more secure for participants, since they know who will be viewing their comments. The level and type of access protection is a function of the level of dedication a discussion area has for a particular group.

The lowest common denominator of technological capability for the intended participants will influence tool selection since some choices may fail to provide access to all members of the group. Tools that require newer and more expensive hardware and software may exclude a number of participants. Tools that require greater bandwidth for successful and convenient use will exclude those who do not have high-speed connections. In some cases, individuals may feel insecure with the technology or may have inadequate experience to participate freely. For that matter, use of electronic based discussions may simply exclude persons who cannot afford or easily access the Internet. Instructors who hope to use these tools must ascertain that all members can acquire access in a reasonable manner and should be open to discussion with those who may have difficulties acquiring access. If comfort with the technology is an issue, the moderator should provide appropriate instruction to enable a that person to participate.

### **Discussion Organization Approaches**

There are several different methods of successfully organizing and facilitating an online asynchronous discussion. Organization decisions should be made based on knowledge of the discussion topic, the discussion's intent and the participants. It should be expected that the structure of the online tool may tend to support some approaches more readily than others. However, most discussion tools are flexible enough to support the permutations discussed here.

### **Open versus Directed**

Open discussions usually serve the purpose as a 'question and answer' forum or as a 'share and tell' forum. In both cases, a general theme brings participants together in the discussion area. However, rather than directing discussion with specific questions, limited times and/or subtopics, the facilitator/instructor simply provides the discussion board as a supplementary forum for discussion pertaining to anything related to the course. Participation is largely driven by the learner participant who has a specific need rather than by structured discussion requirements. Use of this sort of

discussion board is a convenience rather than a requirement for the learner, but it may add responsibilities for the instructor. Usually the facilitator checks for postings on a semi-regular basis and responds to questions or postings as required. Additional duties for the moderator include mediation of conflict on the board and encouragement for those who seek to make the board an extension of their learning community.

In rare cases, this sort of board (an open board) develops into a supportive peer-learning community. However, most course-long discussion boards fail to evolve to this level. In fact, most open boards are rarely used and have minimal participation. This does not necessarily imply that the discussion board is a failure or that it is of no use as a supplementary tool for the classroom. It is supplied as an additional tool for learning and is successful if even one learner finds it to be useful.

Instructors/facilitators should not expect great amounts of interaction and may defeat the purpose if they 'require' appearances by class members. Once appearances are required, the 'open' board is no longer open and must have a level of direction added in order to justify the requirement. In short, if the intent is to supply an open board, then direction should be minimal and use should not be required.

Discussion becomes 'directed' as soon as the facilitator/instructor provides any sort of instruction that requires participation in a specific format, by a certain time, or on a particular subtopic. The level of direction can vary dramatically. In some cases, specific questions are posed by the facilitators and discussion is left to the participants. In others, time frames, subtopics, questions, groups, etc are all carefully planned and maintained by the facilitator. These decisions are very specific to the intent of the discussion, the topic and the organization of the discussion group.

In general, discussion groups tend to be more successful if there is more direction by the facilitator early in the development of the learning group. As members become familiar with the process and expectations, the moderator may appear less often. In fact, if the facilitator is the instructor of the class, it is better if they model good discussion early and gradually remove themselves from dialogue as it progresses so that learners can be free to explore without feeling as if they are 'performing.' Better facilitators find that they are needed less frequently as the discussion group matures. At the least, moderators find that they can explain processes and topics far more efficiently as participants become used to the environment.

The level of direction can be a function of time-based restrictions. For example, each topic may be given a ten-day discussion period. After ten days, a new thread or topic is introduced. Time restrictions tend to encourage development of discussion on the thread and combat the tendency to procrastinate. Further, the deadlines provide boundaries to encourage those who may suffer from the lack of immediacy that asynchronous communication exhibits. At the very least, discussions related to a given course will have the artificial time restriction that is inherent to the duration of the class itself.

There exists a balance between open and directed discussion that is optimal for every group. Usually, this balance is found by providing a sound, clearly explained subtopic and discussion organization at the beginning of each discussion period. This provides all participants with a familiar point of reference from which they can begin interacting on the subject. The facilitator can

then judge from the level and type of participation how they might adjust to encourage better discussion quality. For example, if posts seem unfocused and uncertain, it is likely that the subtopic is not clear, or that participants need additional direction regarding expectations. In this case, the topic could be refined or an example could be posted by the facilitator to model expected behavior. If discussion seems limited and shallow, the topic may be too narrow or it may have been introduced with leading questions. Restating questions or introducing better open-ended questions can redirect conversations in these cases.

### **Mandatory versus Voluntary**

By nature, a voluntary discussion group is an open (or undirected) discussion group. In this case, the facilitator/instructor is providing a forum or additional tool for interaction, which may be used as the learners see fit. A mandatory discussion group should be directed in some fashion to encourage quality participation. A requirement to participate without direction will be interpreted as 'busy work' by many and results in poor discussion quality and a fair amount of confusion and frustration. Mandatory discussion groups should have a very strong purpose that is clear to the learner. The instructor should be able to justify use of the discussion tool and must be able to convey this clearly. With a clear purpose and intent in mind, the facilitator will find it easier to motivate learners to participate and to convince these persons that their participation is valuable.

A variation that includes aspects of voluntary and mandatory approaches is one where learner groups are required to do group work or discussion, but are given the freedom to choose how they go about collaborating. In this case, an online asynchronous board could be a valuable asset to these learner groups. The facilitator's role is to support learners as they work to find ways to optimize their use of those tools available to them. The purpose of discussion is directed and collaboration is mandatory, but the use of the discussion board is open and voluntary. Learners tend to be very appreciative of the availability of any tool that supports their efforts and they tend to embrace online asynchronous boards as a tool that enhances interaction with their team members and the instructor.

### **Large Group versus Small Group**

In general, large group discussion is best for topic breadth exploration and as a way to build class learning group identity. A large group in an online discussion tends to consist of six or more people, though numbers can be more comfortably increased in an open group versus a directed group. However, directed group sizes do not become excessively unwieldy until they approach ten or more individuals. Large group discussions provide an opportunity for all participants in the class to get to know other members without interference by the facilitator. Such discussion usually will include a great deal of breadth, but very little depth, simply because so many individuals are attempting to be a part of the discussion. Thus, large group discussion can be an excellent overview or brainstorming tool that can help to identify interests, sub topics and interesting questions. The facilitator should pay attention to the content of these posts so that they are more responsive to the interests, needs and strengths of the participants. The volume of posts and material can often become overwhelming, requiring effort by the facilitator to encourage posting etiquette to reduce frivolous or redundant posts. Some members will be intimidated by the volume of postings and may need to be encouraged to participate in a fashion that includes selective reading.

Smaller group discussions tend to promote participation by each individual in the group and increase detailed interaction. Each member tends to feel as if they are an important part of the discussion group and is much more likely to participate. It is easier to respond in detail to each member's contributions and it is less likely that an individual's posts will be missed accidentally. On the other hand, breadth of coverage (and even depth of coverage) is very dependent on the commitment and abilities of a smaller set of individuals. As a result, the facilitator may find it necessary to encourage exploration of the topic in directions the group may be missing. Isolation and a lack of immediacy may also be emphasized if members of the smaller group are less diligent in reading and responding to their peers. Thus, moderators must be prepared to model responses and to encourage timely interaction for the group.

A common approach for online discussion is to provide general discussion topics for the entire class and subtopics for smaller groups within the class. This addresses the shortcomings of each approach by providing a mixed environment for interaction. Learners looking for more immediacy and interaction can find it in the larger group with other members that are more active. Those who are overwhelmed by the volume of material in the large group may find voice in the smaller group. The facilitator should arrange to have both approaches at his/her disposal to be used when needed.

### **Other Discussion Approaches Used Online**

Asynchronous online discussions can support a number of classroom innovations, such as teams, PEGs, focus groups and jigsaw methods, by providing a tool that records and supports distance communication. Team projects may find an online discussion area to be especially valuable when time pressures and incompatible schedules impede progress. Peer Evaluation Groups (PEGs) can use the discussion area to provide a forum for written feedback and discussion on writings and design. A discussion board maintains a central location for all related material posted by each participant. These boards can provide links to important files and illustrations, which may be downloaded by each participant as they feel the need to do so. In short, a discussion board provides a better tool for group dialogue, which contrasts with the power of email to provide personal communication.

Online asynchronous discussion boards provide an additional communication tool for those who are willing to use it. It should be used when there is a legitimate purpose and benefit, rather than being used for the sake of the tool. There are times when face-to-face meetings are far more valuable and appropriate. Similarly, there are times when time is critical and a synchronous environment is necessary. However, online asynchronous discussion boards can provide a flexible and useful learning environment that will supplement the classroom or provide a forum for a virtual classroom.

## **IV. Setting the Table for Discussion**

### **Ground Rules**

Prior to the onset of discussion, the facilitator should make the etiquette of the discussion area clear to all participants. This should include reminders about accepted posting procedures, posting



formats and clarifications regarding appropriate content. It should be understood by all participants that the facilitator is interested in maintaining an environment in which all members can be involved without fear of threat or inappropriate dialogue. Participants should be reminded that text-based conversations are prone to misinterpretation and that the author of comments should be given benefit of the doubt if comments appear to be overly aggressive or offensive.

A sample set of ground rules might look something like this:

This discussion area is intended to provide our learning group with a safe and effective environment where we can explore topics of interest. Please take the time to consider how your comments may be interpreted by others before you post them. Each person is responsible for their own comments and all persons are expected to show respect for others in the discussion group. You are encouraged to participate freely and regularly, but we ask that you follow these guidelines in order to make this discussion a more inviting place for all members:

1. Please place posts that are not topic related in the general chat folder/thread
2. Take the time to check spelling and proof read your posts to avoid confusion or unintended conflict.
3. Give the individual who posted comments the benefit of the doubt. Most of the time, no offense is intended. Remember that typing what you really mean to say is not easy for all persons.
4. Try to avoid using words, abbreviations, symbols or languages that other members of the board will not understand. If you wish to use these, introduce the group to them on first use.
5. Make each post on a given topic or thread count. Don't waste bandwidth with numerous replies that simply say "I agree" or "okay."
6. If you wish to make short responses to several different people, make one post, using bold to indicate the person you are responding to at the beginning of the content you are directing to them.
7. When replying, place your new material BEFORE anything you are replying to. It is your new content that interests us.
8. When replying, only include the text from prior posts that is critical to the context of your post.
9. Contact the facilitator if you feel strong discomfort with the posts by other individuals first. This can help to prevent 'flame wars' (angry and unproductive online discussion).

## **Expectations**

Expectations for discussions should be made as concise as possible without getting too attached to measurements that are specific to numbers of posts, frequency of visits or average length of text per post. Obviously, expectations are tied to the level of direction and the emphasis the asynchronous discussion is to be given with respect to the overall course. If discussion is to be graded in any fashion, learners must be given guidelines that illustrate how the instructor/facilitator will determine success. If the discussion is a means to a particular end (e.g. - an area to support project development), then that must be made clear to all participants.

If an instructor has expectations for a vital and useful discussion group, then it is imperative that the purpose and goals be impressed upon those who will participate. An instructor/facilitator who does nothing to promote the discussion will find that participation will be thin. In many cases, it may be necessary to include an evaluation component for which learners receive grades or marks for their

participation. This provides a measure of accountability that makes it clear to members that their effort is important.

### **Topic/Subtopic Selection**

The selection of the topics, subtopics or questions by the facilitator is a non-trivial task. While it is possible to provide examples and give suggestions for better topic selection in this paper, better selection is largely a function of facilitator experience. Things that work for one group of people, or one class, may not work well for another. It pays to be flexible and to use one's experience as a moderator to recognize when a change is needed. Nonetheless, here are some general guidelines for topic selection:

1. Open-ended questions are far better than close-ended questions.
2. For broader topics, give examples of the type of coverage you are looking for by asking sub-questions.
3. Separate process and content. Don't allow process instructions to become confused with the topic or content.
4. Choose topics or questions that are open to interpretation based on experience, opinion or interest OR are open to a variety of solutions.
5. Topics that encourage shared exploration and collaboration by participants help to build a positive learning group.

The final point could be expanded to provide an opportunity for discussion of topics or questions that are more close-ended or less open to interpretation. For example, questions pertaining to C++ coding for given exercises do not lend themselves well to discussion when all participants are asked to work with the same problem. However, if a problem set is distributed among individuals and the solutions are shared with the larger group, one can encourage breadth in exploration of the topic and allow for individual discovery.

### **Eliciting Initial Responses**

The initial response is an opportunity for each participant to make their thoughts known without having to work within the context of someone else's opinions and ideas. The larger a discussion group is, the harder it is for each individual to have their say without referencing comments that have come before. While many individuals do not need this opportunity to explore their own thoughts before viewing others, it is important that the opportunity exist. The facilitator can encourage members of the group to post initial responses early in the time period for the discussion, reducing the chance that a great deal of discussion will already have occurred prior to their post. Similarly, each individual could be encouraged to write out their reactions prior to viewing any postings on the topic, then using copy-paste to post their ideas.

The facilitator needs to realize that each participant learns differently. Many learners learn better if they get their thoughts together before participating in dialogue. Others prefer to see what others say and will then synthesize their own thoughts with what they have seen others express. Neither approach is necessarily preferred over the other for quality learning. However, it is sometimes necessary for assessment purposes or for discussion structure purposes to encourage an initial response that is self-formulated. Similarly, it is often important to encourage all members to synthesize, summarize and react to what has been said in discussion. It is the facilitator's duty to

discern when learners will benefit most from each approach and find a way to support the appropriate method.

### **Encouraging Follow up Dialogue**

The interaction between participants in follow-up dialogue is often the basis for the deeper learning in a discussion. However, it can be difficult to make the effort to read, reflect and respond to the opinions and ideas expressed by other individuals. In order to encourage this interaction, it must be made clear that it is expected of participants. If certain members show a propensity for successfully following up on the topic, the facilitator should express satisfaction with their efforts and ask for their help in getting others to join. Other members who seem reluctant to join in may need direct invitations either in the form of direct questions in the discussion thread or by direct coercion by the facilitator or a peer. In many cases, the facilitator must model the concept of quality dialogue by simply participating in the discussion as an equal. Leading by example early in the process can set a tone for successful interaction later in the process with minimal interference by the facilitator.

### **Constructive Criticism & Positive Conflict**

Homogeneous discussion groups can be stale and unproductive; it is preferable to have a group that expresses different ideas and opinions. In other words, a group of people with the same opinion will rarely explore a topic satisfactorily. Fortunately, careful topic selection with open-ended questions tends to prevent total agreement for nearly any group of individuals. The problem for the facilitator is how individuals should be encouraged to express dissent in a fashion that is productive and non-threatening. The moderator should be alert for examples of positive conflict and constructive criticism in the discussion and should alert the group to the positives of that type of dialogue. If debate is a little too heated or is of inferior quality, the instructor can point out the positives and make suggestions as to how the discussion can progress more positively. The implication, of course, is that the facilitator must pay attention to the dialogue and be prepared to use her/his experience to intervene, encourage and direct whenever it seems necessary.

### **Modeling**

Frequently, participants will not have much experience working in discussion groups. This is especially true in Computer Science students, who may not have experienced courses in other fields that rely strongly on discussion for learning. Thus, learners may not have a good idea of how to provide constructive criticism, or what constitutes a posting that adds value to a conversation. The simplest way to clarify expectations is for the facilitator to model acceptable discussion tactics for the participants. If members are expected to give critical evaluations of peer work or comments, the instructor/facilitator should give examples of a good critical evaluation (preferably using an example relevant to the class). The moderator may choose to give selective praise for contributions that most closely approximate the qualities desired in discussion.

The facilitator should have a stronger presence early in the group so that those learners who need it will have a strong role model as they develop a comfort level in the online discussion. As the discussion progresses, the facilitator (especially if the person is an instructor) should divest

themselves from the interaction gradually, giving the learners more freedom to explore as a group and less opportunity to rely on the facilitator for content.

### **Developing a Learning Group**

The facilitator needs to judge early in the process how much experience exists within the group. This can easily be assessed by a 'get to know you' exercise that includes questions about background, comfort in groups, and whether the individual sees themselves as introverted, extroverted, a leader or a follower. These introductions give participants some background to work from and a chance to familiarize themselves with the tool and the process before content becomes the primary focus of the discussion board. Material provided in the introductory exercise gives the moderator an idea of what level of modeling might be needed and may suggest ways that members of the group could be paired to match strengths and weaknesses of participants.

The facilitator should promote the concept of a learning group during the initial exercise in order to encourage cooperation to enhance the learning of all members of the group. Members of the group need to realize that they are a team and that they are not competing against each other in discussion. The facilitator should encourage the concept of collaboration and sharing effort to explore. Effort should be made to de-emphasize competition and promote the value of helping for personal learning. The principle advantage of this for the facilitator is the increased likelihood that peers will take responsibility for clarification of tasks, questions, content and critical review. This reduces the bottleneck that exists when all learners wait for the instructor to provide all content and clarification.

### **Promoting Exploration**

Instructors and facilitators should be careful not to impose their own agenda too strongly on any discussion group. Strict adherence to the pre-conceived notions of the facilitator limits exploration and may disenfranchise participants from the process entirely. The facilitator should be prepared to direct discussion when it is needed, but he/she should not limit paths of exploration proposed by learners as long as they are within reach of the original topic. Even if they are not entirely germane to the topic, discussion could be encouraged to continue as a 'sidebar' in a newly created thread. The interaction encouraged in a topic proposed by participants helps to invest them in the process and tends to promote participation in the originally proposed topic areas as well.

One successful method of encouraging exploration is to structure discussion so that each member is responsible for reporting on a particular subtopic or resource as it relates to the overall topic. This encourages breadth of coverage that might not be possible for an individual learner and promotes investigation by using group responsibility to motivate participants. Many people are more willing to expend greater effort when they realize that a group is relying on their contribution.

Facilitators can encourage exploration by providing a folder or thread where links, references and other resources found during discussion can be placed for review. If the discussion group is able to see the growing resource list that they have built, they are more likely to continue to build on and use that pool of resources. In many cases, these 'libraries' become a source of pride for participants. In some cases, this sort of tool is merely a perceived 'showcase' for a couple of motivated individuals.

When this happens, the facilitator can privately intervene and suggest that certain learners withhold some of their sharing until less aggressive members have a chance. A well-phrased note is usually very well received by these people when it expresses satisfaction with their efforts and appeals to their leadership skills to help the facilitator involve others. One successful method of encouraging others to participate in the exploration is to enlist a more aggressive member in recruiting a passive individual to team up in exploration.

### **Expressing Support and Redirecting Focus**

The observation of online discussion for behavior and tendencies is a skill that is a skill acquired by moderators as they gain experience facilitating groups. Such observations can provide insight for the promotion of successful dialogue from both a group and an individual perspective. As discussion progresses, it usually becomes obvious to the attentive facilitator what the tendencies of each participant is in the discussion. Polite and respectful dialogue via private (email, face to face, phone, etc) methods can promote a level of trust between each participant and the facilitator and can also give further insight towards the actions of the individual in discussion. The author has found that a small notebook is an excellent way to keep track of specific insights as they apply to each individual. The effort to become familiar with each participant informs and directs the actions of the facilitator as they work to enable each person for discussion.

The moderator will work visibly (in the discussion area) and invisibly (via private communication) to direct the discussion. The public area is the proper arena for clarification of content and process. The private arena is appropriate for dealing with personal issues, such as effort (or lack thereof), tone of posts, and a person's role in the group. It is not usually advisable for a facilitator to deal with individual consequences and issues in the public forum. Private conversation can be used to clarify expectations, check on a participant's well-being, encourage leadership or mentoring roles, handle personal conflict and/or use an individual to help change the direction of the discussion.

## **V. Pitfalls and Responses**

### **Thread Degradation**

Whether a board is organized by thread or not, degradation of the 'thread' of discussion is a natural occurrence. At some point, participants find that they do not have the energy or desire to add further to the discussion. The result is that posts or comments become peripheral to the topic or are little more than affirmations such as "I agree" or "that sounds good." Such degradation is much more pronounced in asynchronous board discussions simply because one can go back and review the progress of the discussion itself. Comments that might be 'filler' in a face-to-face conversation (or that might encourage more response) end up being 'stoppers' in a text board discussion. The challenge for the facilitator is to recognize the maturity of a given thread. If the thread is mature and further discussion in the topic thread would not be beneficial, the facilitator should to move the group to new topics or subtopics. If there is more in the thread that must be covered, the facilitator must take steps to encourage more exploration and dialogue.

Rather than focus on natural degradation and closure for a thread that is mature and merely needs closing, this section will focus on threads that prematurely 'age' and require rejuvenation by the facilitator. Two types of posts that quickly inhibit discussion in a thread are 'peripheral' posts and 'me too' posts. Providing an 'open' thread for general discussion provides learners with an area to discuss things outside of the topic. This tends to reduce the peripheral posts in topic-driven threads. The 'me too' post is intended to voice agreement, but usually does nothing to add substantial support to the thoughts that were so agreeable to the author. Such postings can be pre-empted with early instructions explaining that these are not useful additions and by suggesting that they will do nothing to improve assessment marks for discussion. However, if learners insist on including material that fail to add to the thread's dialogue, the moderator may need to discuss this directly with them.

Sometimes a thread becomes too 'broad' and participants lack direction to explore any particular area in depth. In this case, the thread may, in fact, be mature for its current iteration. Instead of encouraging more discussion on the thread as it stands, it makes sense to break the thread into sub-threads and redirect dialogue to more depth in areas that had been only superficially covered up to that point.

A thread may degrade more rapidly than usual when a small number of the group participate in a posting 'flurry.' In this case, it may not necessarily be the issue that posts are not valuable or appropriate. Instead, members who are not online at the time may find themselves out of the discussion and unable to join in because material has gone beyond the stage that encourages inclusion. It is difficult for a participant to feel like a part of the dialogue when they feel that everything they wanted to say is already put into words by others. Similarly, it is difficult to give an initial response to the question if discussion has already moved beyond that question.

The moderator would make a mistake if he/she indicated that those who joined discussion early should wait for others before posting reactions. This only serves to inhibit those who have embraced the discussion with enthusiasm. Instead, the facilitator may react by splitting the overall group into small group discussions. If the conversationalists are given the status of 'discussion leader,' it is possible that this enthusiasm could be used to encourage participation from those with less energy for discussion. Another possible solution is to provide multiple threads of conversation and give different persons in the group the responsibility of providing initial responses. Any member may respond to any of the initial response, which allows exchanges at varying paces. These are but two of many possible actions that might be taken to successfully address this situation.

'One and out' degradation occurs when learners are not adequately prepared or encouraged to maintain a presence in the dialogue. A single initial response by each member of the group to each thread topic does not make a dialogue. At best, it may serve as a chance for others to view peer opinions. At worst, it is simply viewed as 'busy work' with no real learning purpose. The moderator may have to model expected dialogue behavior by providing responses to initial posts. This is a process that is recommended early in the development of any discussion group, regardless of topic or type of group. It is also possible that some participants may be goaded into reaction by leading questions or a post that takes an opposing view. The facilitator must determine which of these approaches will work best for the individuals involved in the discussion.

Of course, a very difficult situation arises when participants get the feeling that their contributions are not being viewed and responses are not being given for their efforts. This can contribute to thread degradation when members with motivation make postings to the thread and become impatient with a lack of response. Often, these people will lose patience with the process and remove themselves from the dialogue. Absence of members in a discussion tends to promote thread degradation since the breadth of opinion is generally lessened. Responses to the issue of keeping members involved may be found in the next two sections of this article.

### **Survival of the 'Keyboardist'**

One of the goals of asynchronous discussion is to encourage all members of a discussion to participate. In fact, many persons who would be silent in a face to face discussion will be much more 'vocal' with an asynchronous discussion board format. Because the medium spreads the discussion out over a longer period of time, the opportunity for contributions may be higher than it is for synchronous discussions. However, there are numerous issues that crop up as a result of the characteristics of the medium. Many of these problems have to do with the sheer volume of material that can be posted and the stress of reading and replying to that material.

It is important to realize that this sort of discussion is text based, which implies that a great deal of reading and typing must occur for each participant in an active discussion. Persons who have reading disabilities or who are not visual learners may not benefit from this sort of tool. Instructors must not fail their learners by relying on this approach for discussion and interaction unless it is the only method available to them (as in an online distance education course). Those who are poor typists or who have physical disabilities that impact their typing, reading and participation may also find themselves struggling with this environment. Efforts must be made to address these issues in order to provide a positive learning environment for all learners.

Regardless of physical capabilities or learning preferences, asynchronous board dialogue can show an exponential growth of postings on a topic that may daunt even the staunchest online 'chatter.' Supposedly, one of the strengths of an asynchronous chat is that one can attend when they have time and catch up on the conversation that has gone on before. However, absence for even a couple of days could lead to a sizable amount of reading that may discourage the participant. Sometimes, the exuberant participation of some members will prevent others from participating simply because of the volume of reading required in order to 'catch up' to the conversation. Thus, there must be a balance between enthusiastic participation and control that encourages all members to participate.

Usually, a large number of new contributions to a topic will discourage a person from reading the thread. In order to encourage strong participation without overloading the topic with posts, it may be necessary to enforce or encourage rules of posting. For example, you may suggest that participants post once with responses to multiple posts, rather than 'replying' to each post that interests them. If the latter is allowed to run unchecked, the number of posts on a topic can show exponential growth with just a few participants responding to each other's posts.

The main issue in these cases may be a matter of personal 'pacing' for each member of the group. Late arriving members should be encouraged to arrive earlier in the next iteration of discussion. The

facilitator may also find it necessary to remind participants that it is much easier to take a small amount of time each day to read new posts than it is to take two days off before reading any of the material. It is possible that individuals could be encouraged to employ 'selective reading' or skimming techniques in order to catch up to discussion when they fall behind. Moderators may also find it necessary to split the group into smaller discussion groups in order to address the issues brought about by the numbers of posts in threads. In general, the goal is to maintain enthusiastic participation without excluding members who may not be able to read as quickly or attend regularly.

### **Immediacy Lost/Immediacy Found**

The advantage of an asynchronous conversation is its ability to take place over an extended period without the requirement of concurrent attendance by participants. This is also the very thing that is one of this approach's strongest disadvantages. Participants will often feel the loss of immediacy in conversation and will place greater emphasis on when and whether each of their contributions receives response from others in the group. If they fail to find a timely response, the participant may cease to invest themselves in the process.

Each discussion topic should be given a specific start and end time so that each individual may plan how they will be involved. Discussion periods of 7 to 10 days are usually best. Longer periods should be broken into subtopics with smaller discussion periods to avoid stagnation. The facilitator should make it clear that each individual should be prepared to check the discussion on a regular basis (often daily or every other day). With less experienced members, the facilitator may also want to place specific contribution expectations on the group. For example, initial responses might be required by the end of day two and responses to at least two peers by day four. If ground rules are set to promote consistent participation, the feeling of lost immediacy will be decreased.

The facilitator must observe the energy levels and be able to ascertain what is needed to support the learning group with regards to maintaining a good pace. If the group is having difficulty getting started, the facilitator may want to actively participate in discussion. This rewards early contributors with responses, providing them with some immediacy. If the facilitator makes certain to provide summary posts of what has gone on so far, latecomers will have the opportunity to join in without having to be daunted by the volume of posts or reading confronting them. The facilitator must be aware of when topics are maturing early or if the topic seems to be causing participants difficulties as it is presented. The facilitator is most successful when the energy level and participation level of a discussion is maintained from the beginning to the end of each subtopic discussion.

### **Board Abuse**

The facilitator should place him/herself into the position of mediator should there be disagreement or conflict between participants. Any conflict that is not seen as a positive piece of dialogue should be conducted in private discussion and the facilitator should work to protect the learning environment by responding to offensive or overly aggressive posts quickly by addressing the individual. Unless a posting is blatantly detrimental, it should not be unilaterally removed by the facilitator until contact is made with the person who posted that material. In many cases, the individual will agree to having the post removed. Further, that individual will have a greater respect for the facilitator and may be



more agreeable to modifying behavior. In all cases, the facilitator must maintain a professional and respectful demeanor and should operate first under the presumption that the offender(s) did not intend harm.

## **VI. Conclusion**

The online asynchronous board is an excellent tool for providing an environment that encourages in depth discussion without the requirement of concurrent attendance. This tool provides an opportunity for participants to reflect on prior posts and compose thoughtful responses without the time pressures inherent in real-time discussion. Material is recorded for later discussion and most discussion boards include organizational tools that allow for structured dialogue. Careful facilitation of an online asynchronous discussion can influence discussion pace and encourage breadth and depth in discussion. A skillfully moderated discussion group using an online asynchronous board is a positive learning tool in both traditional and distance education environments.