Scaffolding Student Facilitation of Online Discussions

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One assignment that I require in several of my courses involves a student or a team of two-to-three students to facilitate an online discussion for a week. As part of the assignment, students are to author a summary of the week's discussion and to write a reflective

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"debrief statement" that shares how responsibilities were divided between co-facilitators and what they learned as a result of facilitating the week's discussion. I require the discussion facilitation assignment because I believe it is imperative that today's online students engage in determining the course of their own and their peers' learning, experience first-hand what it is like to be in charge of an online discussion (an activity they may be responsible for leading at some point professionally and/or personally), and examine the course content from different perspectives. In many ways, this assignment mirrors my constructivist (Duffy & Cunningham, 1996; Fosnot, 1989, 1996) educational philosophy.

For some students, facilitating (individually or in a team) a week's discussion can seem overwhelming because they are often uncomfortable with serving as leaders on topics new to them. And, it certainly can be very challenging, particularly if students are required to facilitate without any support. I assure my students that any feelings of unease are normal. Moreover, I actively participate in discussions to ensure that the discussions are going well and inaccurate information is addressed (if

facilitators do not catch such inaccuracies). However, I also emphasize that I am available to answer questions, as well as help them.

To scaffold the facilitation of online discussions, first I share guidelines (see Figure 1) and resources (see Figure 2) for facilitating the discussions. Second, I model how to facilitate discussions the first few weeks of class. Third, about a week before leading a discussion, I e-mail a draft of the lecture to the upcoming week's facilitators (see Figure 3). This allows them to read the lecture ahead of time, to ask questions about the material, to craft discussion questions, and to become more comfortable with facilitating. In some courses I supply the questions for discussion and in others I require students to create them; if so, I provide examples of questions that they may use, modify, or cut. The approach used depends primarily on the course objectives. Finally, if experienced facilitators (those who have taken other courses previously with this same assignment) are enrolled in the course, I pair them with students new to the program/course so that they learn from their more experienced peers.

Overall, I have found this assignment to be very rewarding; not only for students, but also for me. I have to admit that it is difficult to relinquish the direction of our course discussions sometimes, but this is part of the learning process where learning is in the hands of students—and not just their instructors. Anecdotally, the debrief statements, the reflections on how responsibilities were divided, and lessons learned, present a picture of student learning that is far richer than if I had led the discussions. Often, students describe their surprise at how much they have learned, as well as how much effort was involved in facilitating a discussion.

Engaging students in meaningful online discourse is a major responsibility for any distance educator. Another formidable task is to foster instruction in such a way that students experience ownership of the content and the learning process. Facilitation of online discussions provides students with the opportunity to gain first-hand experience managing online discussions, determining their own learning and that of their peers, and sharing their own expertise in a content area.

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1. **Read the lecture and questions for discussion** prior to your assigned week—A draft lecture is e-mailed to facilitators at least a week before the facilitation is to begin.
2. **Guide the discussions** by asking thought-provoking questions, expanding on the other students' viewpoints, offering help and feedback, and by sharing pertinent resources
3. **Promote politeness and courtesy** by being supportive and complimentary to those who provide good effort
4. **Be a responsive, engaged facilitator** by responding to many postings but not necessarily *every* posting! Keep in mind that facilitators are to foster and promote discussion. At times, a facilitator may wish to summarize or highlight an important point, and others s/he may wish to ask a question or request more information.
5. **Communicate your concerns** to your instructor and your shared responsibilities with your cofacilitator(s)—issues will arise so it is important to document and discuss your concerns. Any problems between facilitators should be communicated
6. **Summarize the week's discussion**—Part of your responsibility at the end of this week's discussion will be to bring the discussion to a close by synthesizing the week's discussion where you will also highlight salient and possibly even controversial points.

Figure 1.   Guidelines for facilitating online discussions.

1. Strategies for Promoting Discussion in Your Online Course: http://www.onlinelearning.net/InstructorCommunity/tips_oct2000.html?s=324.k080m7743.112e211310
2. The Moderators HomePage, http://www.emoderators.com/moderators.shtml, has resources online discussion in both academic and non-academic settings (although not updated, it has some good resources)
3. Academic Technology Center—Worcester Polytechnic Institute: Provides suggestions for grading online discussions: http://www.wpi.edu/Academics/ATC/Collaboratory/Idea/gradingdiscussions.html

Figure 2.   Resources for facilitating online discussions.

Attached is the **draft** of the week <insert #> lecture which will begin <insert day and date>. I am sending this draft early to give you time to read the lecture and ask questions. Please:

1. Review the attached DRAFT lecture of week <insert #>.
2. Communicate with your partner(s) to determine how you will share the responsibilities for cofacilitating the discussion, including writing up the summary.
3. Post three questions no later than 10 AM EST on <insert day and date>. Be sure to use "posting descriptors" in the subject line (e.g., Q1. Define Technology). NOTE: At the end of this e-mail are some suggested questions. It is up to you to use, modify, and/or craft open-ended, thought-provoking questions that will foster robust discussion (not dull, easy-to-answer questions in which your peers will simply regurgitate information that is already in the lecture, web links, and/or books).
4. Review guidelines and resources for facilitating online discussions especially:
   • Appendix A of Brescia and Miller (2005) to learn what you can **do** to do a better job at facilitating, and
   • http://pre2005.flexiblelearning.net.au/guides/facilitation.html
5. Contact me with any questions or concerns.
6. Post the team summary of the week's discussion and your individual "debrief" statement no later than <insert day and date> in the appropriate locations.

Figure 3.   Sample e-mail with instructions to facilitators.

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