

Understanding the Instructor's Role in Facilitating Online Discussions

By: Michelle Everson, PhD. in Asynchronous Learning and Trends

In my classroom-based courses I have always valued discussion as a powerful learning tool that provides students with opportunities to explain their reasoning and understanding, learn different perspectives and points of view, and re-think and possibly revise their own conceptions based on careful reflection of potentially disparate viewpoints. As I prepared to teach my first online course five years ago, it was only natural that discussion would be a part of it.

My use of online group discussion assignments led me to reflect on what I feel my role could and should be in the online course. Initially, I questioned whether I should be involved at all in online discussion. After all, in a classroom setting, although it was commonplace for me to walk around the room and listen to bits and pieces of different group discussions, I rarely jumped into these discussions, primarily because I was always afraid if I hovered around a group for too long, I might make some students feel uncomfortable, and this might then stifle discussion altogether.

I worried about similar things in the online setting. I was concerned that if I jumped into a discussion, I might change the dynamics of the group. Students might feel uneasy if they felt that I was going to critique every little thing they wrote, or they might begin to expect me to suddenly appear and give them the correct answer. I decided it would be better if I remained silent unless it was absolutely necessary for me to interject (e.g., if misconceptions were voiced that other students did not correct, if inappropriate behavior suddenly became an issue, etc.).

Changing the way I participate in online discussions

As I reviewed course evaluations after my first year of online teaching, an unexpected theme emerged: several students mentioned they wished I had been a bigger part of their discussions, primarily so they would know if they were on the right track. I naively assumed my silence during group discussion would be taken as evidence by students that their discussions were right on target, but this was not the case at all. Students needed more reassurance, especially since I was asking them to take very big risks in terms of explaining their understanding of a content area that was often new and challenging for them.

This feedback made me realize that instructor's presence is very important in online discussion forums, and I began to think about ways I could be involved in discussions in positive and proactive ways. I now make it a point to post at least one message in every group discussion room during every group assignment. Among other things, I make a point to:

- Cheer students on and let them know when they are on the right track
- Highlight important points made during discussion
- Question students about their understanding or ask them to clarify remarks they have made or expand on certain ideas
- Correct misconceptions/misunderstandings
- Provide direct instruction if students appear to be struggling to understand material

I also find myself focusing on the great opportunities I have in the online setting that I don't have in my classroom-based courses. In the online course, I am able to witness every group discussion from start to finish, and I am able to carefully review the contributions to discussion made by each student in the class. If students are struggling, I can reach out to those students and offer extra assistance. I am able to learn so much more than I ever could in a classroom setting about how students think through different problems and the hurdles they face along the way as they attempt to solve these problems. I hope that ultimately this will allow me to continually improve in my role as an instructor.

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