
FACILITATOR'S GUIDE TO ONLINE CONFERENCING

September 2003

A COLLABORATION BETWEEN



UNIVERSITY OF
CALGARY

Office of CME
Faculty of Medicine



Memorial
University of Newfoundland

Office of Professional
Development
Faculty of Medicine

Funded by:
Health Canada, Office of Health and Information Highway

Acknowledgement

The Office of Professional Development, Memorial University of Newfoundland, acknowledges the work of Dale. E. Wright, BSP MSc MDE, Acting Rural Education Coordinator, Office of Continuing Medical Education and Professional Development, University of Calgary in writing and preparing this Guide.

The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the official policy of Health Canada or other noted sponsors.

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Facilitator's Guide to Online Conferencing

What is the purpose of this Guide?

The Internet is an excellent tool to support communication between groups of people who find it difficult to meet face-to-face. Increasingly it is being used to support learning by providing a medium through which learners and instructors can interact. There are many Internet tools that can be used to support communication for learning online, including e-mail. This document provides background and guidelines for new facilitators of online learning through text-based asynchronous conferencing systems.

1. BACKGROUND ON ASYNCHRONOUS CONFERENCING

What is online conferencing?

Online conferencing software allows text-based messages to be sent to groups of users via the Internet. Unlike e-mail, messages are organized by topic and stored on a central computer so that any authorized user can access the messages at any time. Because users do not have to be online at the same time to interact, it is called “**asynchronous**” conferencing (as opposed to “synchronous” or real-time interaction).

Some conferencing systems are accessed through Internet web sites using a standard web browser such as Internet Explorer or Netscape (e.g. WebCT, Blackboard). Other conferencing systems require each user to install special application software that is used to communicate with the host computer via the Internet (e.g. FirstClass). These conferencing systems tend to have more features than browser-accessed conferencing systems.

What does an online discussion look like?

In most conferencing systems, messages are usually organized by topic or “**thread**”. Replies are often “**nested**” – they appear indented below the message to which they belong (see Example 1, below). Most conferencing software allows the user to view the discussion messages as “**threaded**” (arranged by topic) or chronological (unthreaded). When there are multiple topic threads within a discussion, a threaded view gives the user a better idea of how the discussion on each topic is developing.

In Example 1 below, “**Question 1** 3. SMMSE Discussion Topic” is one topic or thread in this conference. Replies to this message are indented (e.g. Message 195 – Bruce Wright). Replies to replies (e.g. Message 196 – Ellen Anderson) are further indented. This creates an overall visual structure for the conference that provides some indication of the order in which the discussion is building. Typically, the conferencing software has a way of alerting a participant to new messages that he/she has not yet read (e.g. messages marked NEW below).

Example 1. Typical threaded discussion with nested replies

Question 1 3. SMMSE Discussion topic

- ❑ 12. [Instructor](#) (Dementia) Thu Dec 20, 2001 15:58
 - ❑ 195. [Bruce Wright](#) (bwright) Mon Jun 10, 2002 21:50
 - ❑ 196. [Ellen Anderson](#) (eanderson) Tue Jun 11, 2002 00:44
 - ❑ 197. [Bruce Wright](#) (bwright) Tue Jun 11, 2002 23:59
 - ❑ 216. [Ellen Anderson](#) (eanderson) Wed Jun 19, 2002 01:17 **NEW**
 - ❑ 198. [Bullock David](#) (dbullock) Wed Jun 12, 2002 13:59
 - ❑ 200. [Bruce Wright](#) (bwright) Fri Jun 14, 2002 18:02

Week 1, Question 1 2. Edward Discussion topic

- ❑ 37. [Instructor](#) (Dementia) Tue Jan 08, 2002 10:29
 - ❑ 175. [Ellen Anderson](#) (eanderson) Tue Jun 04, 2002 00:45
 - ❑ 179. [Nicole Ebert](#) (nebert) Tue Jun 04, 2002 01:44
 - ❑ 182. [Bullock David](#) (dbullock) Thu Jun 06, 2002 13:27
 - ❑ 187. [Bruce Wright](#) (bwright) Fri Jun 07, 2002 02:32
 - ❑ 192. [Bruce Wright](#) (bwright) Sat Jun 08, 2002 17:50
 - ❑ 193. [Bruce Wright](#) (bwright) Sat Jun 08, 2002 17:59 **NEW**
 - ❑ 204. [Joshua Becerra](#) (jbecerra1) Sat Jun 15, 2002 23:10 **NEW**
 - ❑ 209. [Bruce Wright](#) (bwright) Mon Jun 17, 2002 23:53 **NEW**

How do you add a message to a discussion?

Submitting a message to a discussion is called “**posting**”. Most conferencing systems allow you to either reply to an existing message, or post a new message within a discussion topic. Typically users type their message into a message composition box or screen (see Example 2, below). There is a chance to preview what the posting will look like in order to check for errors. Users can attach files or insert images or links to web pages into conference messages.

Example 2. Message composition box in a browser-accessible conferencing system.

Compose Discussion Message

Topic:

Subject:

Message:

Height of edit area: Don't wrap text Wrap text

What are some of the advantages of asynchronous conferencing?

Online text-based conferencing has developed into an important instructional medium that offers significant advantages over face-to-face discussions. In particular, professional groups striving for more egalitarian relationships in group discussions are well-served by online conferencing. Traditional hierarchies and relationships (e.g. between instructor and student) are difficult to maintain because social and contextual cues that influence group behaviour in face-to-face settings are lacking. Participants usually feel freer to express views and share experiences and thoughts as long as the conference environment is non-judgemental. Authority and control of the discussion can more readily shift to participants as they become more experienced and comfortable in the online environment.

- **Because the discussion is accessed through the Internet:**
 - experts can be brought into the discussion from anywhere in the world
 - links to Internet resources that extend learning can be embedded into discussion messages

- **The asynchronous nature of the discussion is advantageous because:**
 - there is no waiting to contribute to the discussion or ask questions
 - everyone has an equal chance to contribute
Participants who are shy or intimidated by the pace of face-to-face discussions find it easier to contribute to online discussions.
 - facilitator and participants have time to think before replying or contributing
This opportunity for reflection is considered a major strength of online communication
 - facilitator has time to choose a moderating strategy that will help discussion develop and avoid “knee-jerk” reactions to comments made during a verbal discussion

- **Text-based discussion is an advantage because:**
 - messages are “neutral”, providing no visual cues to potentially discriminatory features of participants (e.g. age, sex, race, physical disabilities)
 - participants usually take time to organize their thoughts before writing
Contributions tend to be more thoughtful and clear than spontaneous remarks made in the heat of a verbal discussion.
 - a transcript of the discussion is maintained
Participants can continually revisit and reflect on ideas presented. They can pick out threads of ideas emerging from the discussion and relate emerging themes in different ways to deepen understanding of the topic.
 - praise and constructive critique are public and thus more effective
 - it is difficult to hide nonparticipation or fake meaningful contributions to a discussion
 - topic-based organization of online conferences makes it easier to follow multiple conversations at once

What are some of the disadvantages of online conferencing?

Disadvantages to online conferencing can be overcome with skilful facilitation. More detailed guidelines to facilitation are provided later in this document.

- **Asynchronous nature of the discussion means:**
 - when participants log on infrequently, it can take a long time for a meaningful discussion to evolve (and to correct misunderstandings)
Facilitators need to be clear at the beginning about the level of participation expected.
- **Text-based discussion can be a problem because:**
 - lack of visual cues to meaning can lead to misunderstanding, especially with use of humour or sarcasm
It is best to avoid subtle humour or sarcasm, unless you can make it obvious what you are trying to do.
 - social and contextual cues that regulate and influence group behaviour are lacking
They must be created through the course structure and early dialogue. Also, lateness, rudeness or inconsistency in response to others, especially on the part of the facilitator, is less easily forgiven.
 - mistakes are public, which can inhibit free sharing of experience and ideas
It is important to remain supportive and non-judgemental to encourage participants to take the risk of committing their ideas to a written, semi-permanent format.
 - it is easy for participants to drop-out or leave a conference unseen
Facilitators need to follow-up promptly with participants who appear to have dropped out.
 - participants find it easy to “lurk” or “browse” – read messages without contributing to discussion
This is normal and may or may not need to be dealt with. As with face-to-face discussions, 1/3 of the participants will contribute most of the messages, 1/3 will contribute occasionally, and 1/3 will rarely contribute after their introductory message.

2. PREREQUISITE KNOWLEDGE/SKILLS FOR FACILITATORS

Do facilitators of online discussions need special skills?

First-time moderators mainly need interest and enthusiasm in their task, and a willingness to learn new skills associated with online conferencing. Here are a few things to think about:

- **Personal characteristics of successful moderators include:**
 - willingness to adapt existing facilitation skills and learn new skills associated with online conferencing
 - experience with facilitating learning through small group discussion is helpful but not essential
 - courteous, polite, respectful in online written communication (e.g. e-mail)

- ability to organize ideas for written or verbal communication is an asset
- **Advanced computer knowledge/skills are not necessary. It is helpful to have:**
 - some computer experience, including some Internet skills
 - reasonably good keyboarding skills because all communication is typed
 - reliable Internet access although high speed access is not required
 - experience and confidence with e-mail communication

What technical knowledge is needed?

First-time moderators should have an understanding of the basic structure of online conferencing (see above). They should also have some basic knowledge of the conferencing system used in the course.

- **Practise with the conferencing system before the course begins to gain experience and confidence. Know how to:**
 - log in
 - find the discussion board or conferencing area
 - select a discussion to review
 - read messages – old and new
 - reply to a message
 - post a new message
 - start a new thread
 - start a new discussion topic or conference
 - move between discussions
 - arrange/rearrange messages in a discussion (e.g. mark unread, view messages threaded or unthreaded)
 - insert images or Internet links into a message
 - delete or move messages posted by a participant into the wrong area (if allowed by the conferencing system)
 - monitor participant activity through the software

Do facilitators need to be experts in the topic under discussion?

Online facilitators do need not be recognized experts. However they should be confident in using content knowledge at the level presented in the course, and have experience in the topic area to share.

- **New facilitators should read through course materials prior to starting the course**
 - note how online discussions are intended to support learning through the course.
 - be familiar with the learning goals of each discussion
Develop a mental image or concept of what participant discussion should look like when the goals of the discussion have been achieved.

- Draft an opening or introductory message for each course discussion that provides guidance to learners about what is expected from that discussion.

3. FACILITATOR ROLE IN ONLINE CONFERENCING

What is the facilitator's role in an online discussion?

The facilitator has three main responsibilities or roles in an online discussion. Every facilitator contribution to the discussion should have a purpose that relates to one of these roles. Some facilitator postings will serve more than one purpose.

- **Social** – Like a face-to-face discussion, the social context of an online conference provides a framework for productive learning. By attending to social aspects of the conference, facilitators can build an environment where participants feel comfortable, respected, and willing to take risks to build new content knowledge.
 - Virtual counterparts to widely understood face-to-face social rituals such as greeting and chatting must be created through text-based dialogue.
 - Protocols for acceptable online communication are both modelled by the facilitator and made explicit through instructions to participants.
 - The social role is most evident at the early stages of a course or conference. However, it continues throughout the course to maintain a friendly, comfortable environment that invites participation.
 - An introductory activity that is more social than content-oriented should be included at the beginning of the course.
- **Managerial/Organizational** – Like a face-to-face discussion, the facilitator uses a variety of techniques throughout the conference to set a direction and timetable for the discussion, keep the discussion moving, and deal with problems that threaten group cohesiveness.
- **Intellectual** – In both face-to-face and online discussions, the role of a facilitator in small-group learning is to promote critical reflection and personal knowledge building by participants. This is most effectively accomplished using strategies that guide and encourage learners in their efforts to achieve course objectives. To achieve a balance between an instructor-centered and learner-centered teaching style, a facilitator:
 - encourages learners to actively explore course content and broaden and deepen their understanding through dialogue
 - uses participants' comments, ideas and insights to advance the discussion rather than interjecting with expert knowledge
 - tries to clarify and extend the thinking of others rather than giving the "right answers"
 - encourages interaction between participants, rather than through the facilitator

How does a facilitator decide what role to play?

Facilitators determine what is needed by the stage of the course and discussion, the frequency of postings, and the content of developing discussion relative to the goals of the activity. The main stages through which learners and discussions progress in the life of an online course are:

➤ **Stage 1: Getting Started**

- The learner is able to log into the course and has enough motivation and confidence to post an introductory message.
- This stage ends with each participant's first posting.
- The facilitator's role is mainly social – creating a welcoming, secure environment with sufficient motivation for participants to join the first discussion.
- An introductory activity that is primarily social is a low-risk way for learners to get started.

➤ **Stage 2: Socialization**

- Learners gain experience with the online environment and begin to develop a sense of community with the group mainly through social messaging.
- This stage is best accomplished through an introductory activity that is primarily social in nature.
- This stage ends with the first content-related postings.
- The facilitator's role is mainly social. Some organizational messaging is needed to create a transition to more content-focused discussion.
- It is helpful to include in the course an introductory activity to promote socialization

➤ **Stage 3: Information Exchange**

- In the early stage of content-related discussion, learners develop a sense of direction for the discussion. They begin to interact with course content and other learners.
- The facilitator continues to use social messaging strategies to maintain an open, friendly, inviting learning environment. Organizational strategies are used to keep content-related discussion moving.
- As the discussion progresses, the facilitator uses a variety of intellectual strategies to encourage participants to actively use course content to develop new knowledge.

➤ **Stage 4: Knowledge Construction**

- In the later stage of content-related discussion, learners integrate new content with existing knowledge, refine ideas, and widen their perspective. The goals of the discussion activity are largely achieved during this stage.
- The facilitator uses intellectual strategies to promote critical reflection and deep learning. Organizational strategies are used to keep the discussion on track, close unproductive discussions or open new discussion topics as needed, and summarize as discussion goals are reached. Problems that threaten productive discussion are managed using social strategies.
- Many participants and/or discussions will end at this stage.

➤ **Stage 5: Personal Development**

- This stage occurs towards the end of a course. Learners move beyond course material independently to further develop personal knowledge.
- Learners have little need of a facilitator at this point. However the facilitator can support this process by referring learners to other resources as necessary. This may include embedding links to Internet resources in their messages.
- Some learners will not make it to this stage during a course. This is normal.

4. SUGGESTED FACILITATOR ACTIVITIES AND TECHNIQUES

Before the course begins . . .

- **Gain prerequisite knowledge and skills (details above)**
 - review the course materials
 - practice using the conferencing software
- **Send an e-mail message to each registered participant**
 - welcome participants to the course (social)
 - remind learners of official course start date (managerial)
 - encourage learners to log on early after the course start date (managerial)
 - provide log-in instructions e.g. link to course web site, log-in procedure, passwords if necessary (managerial)
 - provide contact information for technical support including e-mail address and phone number (managerial)
 - encourage learners to print off log-in instructions, passwords, technical support contact information for future reference (managerial)
- **Post a welcoming message in an easy-to-find location in the course discussion area before learners are expected online**
 - the message creates a welcoming presence when participants start to arrive (social)
 - use a friendly, welcoming, personal tone that invites participation (social)
 - model good messaging technique to establish norms for the course (social)
 - use a subject heading that clearly reflects the content of your message
 - use a messaging style that is half-way between the informality of spoken language, and the formality of written communication
 - maximum one screen of information
 - be polite and respectful
 - offer support to those who need it – it is reassuring for learners to know that a feeling of insecurity at this stage regarding their ability to participate is common

e.g. "You might be feeling a bit uncomfortable at this stage – not sure exactly how to use the conferencing system or what to say. This is normal! The best way to get over this is to jump right in. If you encounter technical problems, contact the Help Desk at"

- encourage participation by indicating how they will benefit from the introductory activity (managerial)

e.g. "The first activity is an 'ice-breaker' discussion. This is your chance to meet other members of the group. It is also a good place to practice some of the messaging techniques you will use in the course – posting new messages, responding, maybe even embedding a link in your message (do you have a personal website you would like us to visit?)."

- offer guidance on what to do next (managerial)

e.g. "Open the Introductions discussion to meet me. Introduce yourself to the group by posting a message that tells us something about your work, but also share something personal e.g. interests, family/pets, an anecdote. Reply to someone else's introduction to keep the 'conversation' going."

- provide guidelines on what level of conferencing activity is expected in the course (managerial)

The optimal frequency of participation depends on the length of the course and/or individual discussion. The shorter the discussion period, the more frequently participants should be logging on. It is not unreasonable to expect participants to log-on at least every 2 days in a short timeline (e.g. 1-2 week) discussion.

e.g. "To create momentum in our discussions throughout the course, it is best if you log-in every (day, two days, etc.). If the discussion is really active, you might have to log-in more often to keep up."

➤ **Post a personal introduction in an “Ice-Breaker” or Introductions conference**

- an ice-breaker conference invites participants to make their first postings in a low-risk situation (social)
- share professional as well as personal information (e.g. interests, hobbies, family/pets, an interesting anecdote) to begin building a sense of community (social)

e.g. "By day I By night I'm a fitness junkie - walking, running, hiking, tennis, squash, cycling, sailing - you name it, I'll try it!"

- encourage participants to comment on or respond to the introductions posted by colleagues to immediately establish the expectation of interaction (social)

e.g. "As your colleagues begin to introduce themselves, let them know you are 'listening'. If you were milling about waiting for the course to start, how would you reply to their brief introduction?"

During the introductory activity . . .

- **Reply as soon as possible with a welcoming message after each participant's first post**
 - reassures the learner that someone is "listening" (social)
 - use the participant's first name in your reply to make a personal contact, keep the environment friendly, and signal a norm that will be used throughout the course (social)
 - respond to something shared in the participant posting to encourage further dialogue (social)
- **Post messages that encourage participants to "mingle" e.g.:**
 - create a message that invites conversation on a neutral, universal topic e.g. weather, vacations, sports rivalries (social)
 - create a message that links two or more participants through commonalities noted in their introductions (social)
- **Respond to technical questions or problems immediately**
 - technology problems, especially at an early stage, significantly impair motivation to participate
Refer the participant to the Help Desk or technical support if necessary. (managerial)
- **Review participant logs regularly**
 - try to identify participants who have either not logged on to the course, or those who have logged on but who have not contributed an introductory message (managerial)
- **Use private e-mail to contact participants who are not online or who have not posted a message by the time the introductions conference is more than half over**
 - the longer participants delay starting the course, the more difficult it is for them to feel a sense of community with the group (social)
 - support the participant who has a legitimate reason for not participating (e.g. may have lost their password, have computer problems, or be experiencing family or personal crisis) (social)
- **At the end of the introductory discussion post a message to create a transition to the first content-related discussion (managerial)**
 - invite further chat or social messaging to continue in a virtual "coffee break" discussion that is established for this purpose (social)

In the first content-related discussion . . .

- **Post an opening message that sets expectations for discussions throughout the course (managerial)**
 - explicitly state what your expectations are for content-related messaging (social):
 - always use a subject heading that reflects content of the message

- no more than one screen in length if possible - short and to-the-point is preferred to long and rambling
- discussion-like style somewhere between informal conversation and more formal written communication
- remind participants that they are expected to respond to messages posted by other members of the group (intellectual)
They should refer to colleagues by name and refer to their statements and ideas often.
- affirm your role as a "guide on the side" (intellectual)

e.g. "This course is about you developing your own personal understanding of . . . - not about me giving you the "right" answers. It will be your comments, your ideas, and your insights that will move the discussion ahead. I encourage you to find your way as a group - rely on the knowledge and experience of your colleagues, rather than looking for an 'expert' opinion."

At the beginning of a content-related discussion . . .

- **Post a message before participants are due to arrive that sets expectations for the discussion**
 - state the topic and desired outcomes of the discussion (managerial)
 - remind participants of any supporting coursework needed for the discussion (managerial)
 - remind participants of expectations regarding group discussion, if necessary (above) (intellectual)
 - pose an opening question or issue to stimulate discussion (intellectual)
This should be an open-ended question for which there is no set answer that can be gleaned directly from the readings. It should be an issue that will invoke different points of view or controversy. It should not be answerable with a single response from one participant.
- **Wait until two or three messages have been posted before responding. Respond with a message that acknowledges the previous contributions and invite further discussion.**
 - facilitator should contribute only 25 to 50% of the comments (managerial)
At the beginning of the discussion or course, the proportion will be higher to stimulate discussion. Towards the end of the discussion or course, the proportion should be much lower.
 - trust is established by affirming and confirming the value of each participant contribution without responding to each comment as it is made (social)
 - acknowledge individual contributions by naming names and citing phrases or ideas from the posts of different participants (social)
 - encourage learners to respond to each other by inviting response to a specific point(s) made by a participant(s) (social)

➤ **Use different messaging strategies to guide the discussion as necessary (intellectual)**

- focus the dialogue by listing key ideas and contributions from the discussion and commenting on the connection between them
- clarify the direction of the discussion by highlighting important ideas from participants and posing questions or raising issues that will move the discussion in the desired direction
- when multiple solutions to a problem are presented, help the group focus on the most important or valid ideas
Cite the participants' perceptions of relevance or importance if possible to avoid imposing an external "expert" view. (social)
- consider rephrasing and readdressing questions to the group questions that were posed to you as the "expert" (social)
- clarify concepts that have been omitted, misconstrued or overemphasized in the discussion (intellectual)
If possible, point to comments that have been made that have elements of the correct understanding as a basis for the clarification. (social)
- refer learners to course materials as necessary
- push participants to be more critically reflective of their practice through questions that encourage them to move beyond restating info from the readings

➤ **Maintain an atmosphere of trust (social)**

- model non-judgemental response to participant postings
Fear of ridicule or criticism will inhibit participation.
- reinforce desirable online protocols by publicly recognizing effective online behaviour and tactfully redirecting poor behaviours (e.g. language that is vulgar, condescending, hostile, inflammatory, racist or sexist; comments that are not respectful of others' opinions, beliefs, and values; critical or judgmental comments directed to an individual)
- use private e-mail to suggest a change in an individual's recurring poor online behaviour
- ask for clarification if the intent of a message isn't clear
Sarcasm and humour are difficult to use online and can be easily misinterpreted. Misunderstandings take a long time to fix online and can impair productive discussion.
- defuse potentially emotional situations by using a neutral tone to focus on the important ideas

➤ **Use "housekeeping" strategies as necessary to ensure messages remain on topic (managerial)**

- move misplaced contributions if allowed by the conferencing system
Inform participants about why the comment was moved.
- refer inappropriate digressions to another thread or guide participants back to the main topic
- start new topics or threads within a discussion as necessary, or initiate new discussions to deal with important ideas or issues that arise during the course

- **In fast-paced discussions, summarize often to keep participants on track and help them cope with the large number of messages (managerial)**

In a maturing content-related dialogue . . .

- **Be prepared to allow participants to control the discussion if it appears they are meeting the learning objectives**
- **Use different strategies to promote reflection and a deeper understanding of the topic (intellectual)**
 - encourage participants to clarify their reasoning
 - encourage participants to examine their beliefs, assumptions and potential biases or preconceptions that underlie their responses
 - question the relevance of certain ideas or issues to identify those worth discussing further
 - weave together seemingly unrelated ideas or thoughts that may suggest alternative valid interpretations or lines of thinking
 - identify lines of thought that do not deepen the discussion, but may serve as a source of comparison or alternative viewpoints later in the discussion
 - use participant insights as a bridge to the next level of understanding
 - encourage fresh approaches to a problem by identifying positions that have been taken and challenging participants to seek alternative interpretations or solutions
 - model reflection by highlighting or paraphrasing insightful comments made by participants then reflect on what those might mean
 - model personal reflection in the discussion by critically examining your own beliefs around central issues or dilemmas
 - redirect discussion away from defence of hardened positions toward acceptance of multiple perspectives
 - introduce alternative perspectives into the discussion by using stories or situations gleaned from personal experience
 - look for evidence of knowledge construction and acknowledge it

At the end of a content-related discussion . . .

- **Post a summarizing message to bring closure to the discussion (managerial)**
 - cite recent participant postings to illustrate how the learning goals of the discussion have been met (social)
 - include some bridging comments to move participants into the next discussion (managerial)

At the end of the course . . .

- **Post a final summarizing message to bring closure to the course (managerial)**
 - reflect positively on learning evident through the discussion activities
 - remind participants of any required post-course activities

5. STRATEGIES FOR IDENTIFYING AND MANAGING POTENTIAL PROBLEMS

Lurkers/browsers

Refers to learners who read messages but do not contribute. Because “lurking” has a pejorative connotation, “browsing” is often used as an alternative term.

- **Lurking is normal**
 - like face-to-face discussions, online 1/3 of the participants will contribute most of the messages, 1/3 will contribute occasionally, and 1/3 will rarely contribute after their introductory message
 - 3 types of lurkers
 1. lack skills or confidence to participate. This is common in early stages of the course or discussion.
 2. getting used to the norms and ways of communicating online. They will start to contribute when they feel comfortable.
 3. learning from the discussion and feel no need to participate. Other learners may feel resentful of those who are not actively participating.
- **Use the activity log to discover lurkers**
 - look for learners who are logging into the course and reading discussion messages, but who have not posted messages to the discussion
- **Suggested strategies for dealing with lurkers/browsers**
 - contact registered participants who have not posted their first message to determine if there are technical problems
Try private e-mail first. Phone contact may be necessary to identify participants who are having computer problems.
 - use private e-mail later in the course to follow-up on participants who have stopped contributing
Be non-judgemental – if they are satisfied with their learning that is all that is important.
 - give participants time to feel comfortable with the online conferencing environment.
 - give learners a reason to participate by ensuring the purpose of the discussion is clear and that it is a valuable, meaningful part of the course
 - give learners a reason to participate by opening up alternative directions for the discussion to take

- avoid lecturing
Learners will stop discussing if they know the instructor will give them all the answers.
- check all the discussion groups. A learner may be active in one but not all.
- critical mass of participants (usually 6 to 15) is needed to generate enough discussion to keep learners engaged.
- define a minimum level of participation required for successful completion of the course (e.g. one message per discussion that shows a thoughtful level of engagement with the course material)
This is controversial among both learners and instructors.

Drop-outs

Refers to learners who stop logging into the course.

- **Use the activity log to discover drop-outs**
 - Look for learners who have not logged-in to the course for an unusually long period
- **Suggested strategies for dealing with drop-outs**
 - use private e-mail to contact drop-outs and determine what is needed to get them back in the course
They may be experiencing technical problems, a family or personal crisis, be on vacation, or may have issues with the course that need to be addressed.

Late-comers

Refers to learners who join the course or discussion after it is well-established. Late-comers can be very disruptive because they are perceived as a “stranger”. Often they do not contribute at the same level as more experienced participants.

- **Acknowledge the late-comer's first posting publicly**
 - welcome the late-comer to the discussion
 - encourage the late-comer to post introductory comments in the appropriate conference, then encourage others to go there to “meet” the late-comer.
 - weave their comments into existing dialogue if possible
- **Use private e-mail to suggest to the late-comer strategies to catch up with progress in the course and/or discussion**
- **If the late-comer has missed a substantial portion of the course, it might be wiser to withdraw**
 - establishing minimum standards for successful completion of the course will make it easier to recommend withdrawal

Monopolizers

Occasionally one or two people may dominate a discussion. This can prevent others from participating and lead to feelings of resentment.

➤ **Suggested strategies for dealing with monopolizers**

- acknowledge contributions made by the monopolizer, then tactfully suggest giving others a chance to participate

e.g. "Let's hear from some of the others on this issue."

- Direct questions to specific members of the group who haven't been participating

*e.g. "What happens in your practice _____?"
"What is your experience with this _____?"*

- Resist using private e-mail to deal with monopolizers. They may be offended and stop contributing altogether.

6. ADDITIONAL TIPS AND TRICKS FOR ONLINE FACILITATORS

Time Management

Most facilitators find that online conferencing is much more time-consuming than facilitating the same discussion in a face-to-face seminar. Here are some suggestions to keep your time under control:

➤ **Make the course part of your regular routine**

Login at a consistent time each day.

➤ **Frequent short logins are recommended**

There will be fewer participant messages to scan and respond to.

➤ **Use a consistent approach each time you login**

For example, read all new messages in the active discussion first. Then check other discussion areas for new postings (e.g. Virtual Café, technical problems discussion, assignments discussion). Finally, check your private e-mail on the learning system (if you are using this feature).

➤ **In very active discussions, respond to groups of messages**

Read all new messages in an active discussion before responding. Look for commonalities in participant postings that can be responded to in one message and weave together the strands of the responses that are most pertinent to the question under discussion. Then pose a related question to encourage the next participant responses to explore a different facet of the issue(s).

➤ **If no one is responding, rephrase the question**

- Avoid letting the discussion languish. It is often difficult at first to find the “magic” question that will elicit the type of discussion that you are aiming for (see below).
- At the beginning of the course, encourage your learners to login early each week to ensure the discussions start in a timely manner.

Asking Questions That Stimulate Discussion

Asking questions in an online discussion is a bit different than in a face-to-face environment. In a face-to-face seminar the facilitator can immediately adjust his or her questioning strategies if the audience doesn't respond to the first question asked. In an asynchronous conference, the discussion can fizzle quickly if the right question isn't asked at the beginning. Here are some tips on asking questions to stimulate online discussion early:

- **Clarify the outcome objectives for the discussion**
The first question(s) should immediately start participants thinking about the important issues in the topic.
- **Limit the number of questions that are asked at the beginning of a discussion to one or at most two**
Participants will lose interest if they are expected to respond to too many issues in one discussion. If there are more than two aspects of the topic that need to be explored to meet the outcome objective for the discussion, give participants permission to respond only to one, or at most two, of the questions you have posed. Even better, ask questions later in the discussion that introduce different aspects of the topic that need to be considered.
- **Ask open-ended questions to which there can be more than one “correct” response**
 - Ask for participant opinions on a controversial aspect of the topic or invite participants to describe their experience relevant to the topic.
 - Avoid asking questions that can be answered directly from the readings or which can be answered completely by one keen respondent.

7. REFERENCES

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