



Strategies for moderating online discussions

Quick guide for instructors and teaching assistants

For Blackboard Vista 4.x

Online discussion moderators must fill three functions:

1. An **organisational role** to 'set the agenda', discussion objectives, timetable, procedural and decision making rules. It is important particularly at the beginning of the interaction that leadership and direction are strong.
2. A **social role** to create a friendly environment that will lead to a building of trust and motivation to contribute to discussion and activities. This is done by sending welcome messages at the beginning and encouraging participation throughout, providing lots of feedback on student input, and by using a friendly, personal tone.
3. An **educational facilitation role** to focus discussions, ask questions and probe responses encouraging students to expand on comments and ultimately to facilitate learning.

Every group will be different, with participants of differing backgrounds, personalities and learning styles so no standard approach can be used. The following are suggestions for possible action for each of the above roles.

Organisational facilitation

- Be patient, especially at the beginning. Wait for several days for comments to be posted so as not to pre-empt participants' thoughts.
- Encourage participation when it is slow.
- Require regular participation (e.g. log in at least twice a week).
- Refer inappropriate digressions to another discussion topic or guide participants back to the original topic.
- Use private communication to encourage shy participants or to suggest restraint to prolific participants.
- As the discussion progresses ask participants to take more control of discussions or perhaps assign roles to group members (e.g. moderator, summariser of discussion topics, critic etc).
- If the participants have much to offer, the moderator should contribute less.
- Don't lecture. Use open-ended remarks, examples and 'weaving'*.
- Prompt frequently and use private messages if necessary. Succinctly state the discussion topic and your expectations and continue to clarify the topic and the expectations as the discussion proceeds.
- Set up interaction with the participants addressing each other as well as the moderator.

* Weaving is linking comments from students to show the connection between the particular theme or topic being discussed; identifying and drawing attention to those parts of students' comments that directly relate to the main discussion.

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- Take the procedural initiative to avoid frustrating procedural discussions (e.g. when participants need to make a decision about allocating tasks or roles).

Social facilitation

- Social chat plays an important role at the start of a discussion group even for those who are familiar with this form of interaction.
- Reinforce good discussion behaviours. Provide a 'netiquette' list if participants are new to online communication.
- Tactfully request compliance with good discussion behaviours if necessary.
- Respond swiftly to all contributions and refer to participants by name.
- Invite comments from participants about how they feel about the course.

Educational facilitation

- Review participants' messages on a regular basis, or let them know if you will be away for a few days.
- Summarise the discussion, especially if the discussion is lengthy.
- Write weaving* comments as you respond to participants contributions.
- Present diverse or conflicting opinions to encourage discussion.
- Don't rely on offline materials. The discussion needs to be as self-contained as possible to succeed, so summarise assigned readings online.
- Allow extra time particularly for first time users and for the first task as participants familiarise themselves with the online discussion system. Participants will need more time to reflect, synthesise and collaborate, especially when combined with busy lifestyles for distance students.
- Gradually release discussion moderation responsibility to the participants.
- Do not have too many concurrent discussion topics, especially if your group is large. It will overload you as the moderator in reading and responding to messages, and the participants in terms of the time they must spend reading and responding to all the discussion topics. It may diffuse the discussion to the point where it becomes superficial.
- The ideal size for a discussion group is 6–8 students and experience indicates that one person can adequately handle approximately 30 students. This number would then be broken up into smaller groups for discussion and collaborative tasks.

Need more information?

For more information and resources see the advanced module **Advancing communication & collaboration online**. Also see the related quick guide **Netiquette for online communications**

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