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ABSTRACT

In traditional face-to-face classrooms, teachers lead their students through discussions using strategies that promote reflection and further exploration of issues and topics. The same holds true in the online class. There are specific techniques and strategies used in facilitating learning through discussion in both types of classes. The discussion formats differ according to the Course Management System (CMS) used, and it is helpful to use a CMS with features that allow for collapsing and expanding message threads, read and new messages, and email alerts for new messages. In distance learning, the geographical physical isolation requires that students learn new communication strategies--communication strategies that will allow them to feel comfortable participating in text-based social interactions. One effective method is to pair students during the first unit of the class. An activity used frequently is to have student pairs "interview" each other and then post an introduction of their partner to the class. In a collaborative classroom, teacher and students share in both the teaching and the learning. The teacher provides guidelines for each discussion by designing activities that include problem solving, case studies, brainstorming, group activities, etc., and he/she maintains responsibility for guiding discussions and keeping students on track. When discussions stall, strategies such as brainstorming activities, opinion polling, debates, synchronous meetings, guest speakers, student moderators, and journal writing can jump-start them. Stages in CMC (computer mediated communication) evidenced in online classes include, in part, socialization, exchange of information, construction of knowledge, and development/application of knowledge. Each stage requires specific CMC skills, all of which necessitate specific instruction by an experienced online teacher. (NKA)

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Interaction In The Online Classroom

by Sunnie (Leslie Bowman)

How does a teacher facilitate learning through discussion in an online classroom? Most of us do this everyday in our traditional face-to-face classrooms. We lead our students through discussions using strategies that promote reflection and further exploration of issues and topics. We use specific questioning techniques that draw out our students' opinions, prior knowledge and experience upon which they construct new knowledge. Discussions have long been a valuable method of learning through interaction with other learners and all teachers know how effective this shared learning is for the application of knowledge.

The same premise holds true in the online class. Students are encouraged to participate in discussions as they share prior knowledge and experience and use that as a stepping stone to constructing new knowledge. There are specific techniques and strategies used in facilitating learning through discussion in both f2f and online classes. The advantage of online discussions is that there is no time limit and students have many opportunities for reflection and exploration of issues before such time that they are required to respond to a question or comment.

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Interaction and discussions in an online classroom are similar to the discussions on the Teachers.net discussion boards with threaded messages for different topics. The discussion formats differ according to the Course Management System used, but essentially the premise is the same. It is helpful to use a CMS that has features that allow for collapsing and expanding message threads, read and new messages, and email alerts for new messages. Every CMS is different and as such, discussion forum features will differ as well. It is important to provide an introduction/orientation to the discussion forums and practice time so students have an opportunity to become familiar and comfortable with the discussion forum in the CMS for that class.

Social interaction is very important in the learning process. In distance learning, the geographic physical isolation requires that students learn new communication strategies. Those of us who use the discussion boards here at Teachers.net are very familiar with this method of communication and have become comfortable and secure in our communication with others via CMC (computer mediated communication). However, many distance learning students have not had the opportunity to communicate and/or interact socially via a text-based medium. So we must help our students learn new communication strategies that will allow them to feel comfortable in participating in text-based social interactions. One effective method is to pair students during the first unit of the class. This allows students to become adept at communicating one-on-one with another student and provides a bridge to communicating in a whole class discussion. An activity that is used frequently is to have pairs of students "interview" each other and then post an introduction of their partner to the class. The success of effective discussion depends upon the involvement of students and teacher. In a collaborative classroom, teacher and students share in both the teaching and the learning. As students participate, they assume responsibility for furthering meaningful discussion. The teacher provides guidelines for each discussion by designing activities that include problem-solving, case studies, brainstorming, group activities, etc. The

students bring to the discussion knowledge and opinions based experience, reading, research, and interactions with others. The teacher maintains responsibility for guiding discussions and keeping students on track, contributing insight and further knowledge, maintaining group harmony, and weaving the various discussion threads into a summary of points that correlate with the course content.

So exactly how does a discussion begin and how does a teacher maintain an effective discussion in an online classroom? Generally this happens in much the same way that it does in a traditional class. The teacher begins by assigning readings and research to ensure students' familiarity with the content. From that point, the teacher summarizes the main points and asks questions that require knowledge and reflection on the readings and content. Generally students will begin by answering the questions and including some of their own opinions of the new knowledge gained through the readings. Students will also incorporate in their answers prior knowledge or experience of the topic. After the initial answering of questions, students will begin to comment on others' responses.

Anyone who has participated on the discussion boards at Teachers.net has first-hand experience in text-based discussions. The primary difference between the Teachers.net discussions and an online class discussion falls in the responsibility of the teacher (moderator). The teacher in an online class must follow and observe all of the discussions. Just as in a traditional classroom, there will be comments and responses in the discussion that require clarification of points, further questioning to encourage deeper reflection, and perhaps even intervention to keep the discussion on track. Teachers often ask for further elaboration on an idea or point to encourage students to more fully explore a topic. In a discussion forum, often the teacher will connect ideas that have been shared and weave together the various points that have been posted by the students. The teacher sometimes provides transitions from one element

of a topic to another. And usually at the conclusion of a discussion, the teacher will summarize the learning that has taken place.

Sometimes discussions stall and seem to go nowhere. Sometimes students will become argumentative or harsh, even using inappropriate language. There will be times when a student just does not participate at all for some reason. In all of these instances, it becomes the teachers' responsibility to react immediately. Students may need reminders of proper discussion etiquette. A student may need an individual private communication (email or phone call) to determine the cause for non-participation. In some cases, students simply do not have the necessary text-based communication skills and they may need some hand-holding along the way initially. This type of inexperience is best dealt with proactively and the simplest, most effective method is to provide an introduction and/or orientation to text-based communication. Ideally, this will be required of all students before the first unit of a course begins. An orientation might include guidelines for discussion participation, preexisting expectations and standards for behavior, and suggestions for handling real or perceived inappropriate communications.

Sometimes online discussions will simply stall and become inactive for a few days. There are several strategies that online teachers use to re-energize lagging or inactive discussions. Strategies such as brainstorming activities, opinion polling, debates, synchronous meetings, guest speakers, student moderators, and journal writing can jump-start discussions that have stalled. As all experienced teachers know, sometimes discussions just don't work. Sometimes the topic needs to be changed or students need to have some relevance to their own personal experiences incorporated into the content. Whatever the cause for stalled discussions, it is the teacher's responsibility to discern the cause and find a means to facilitate further discussion.

While inexperienced first-timers often find text-based discussions difficult to follow at first, they soon discover that online discussions have several advantages over face-to-face class discussions. First and foremost is that every student has an opportunity to make his knowledge and views known to both teacher and fellow students. Students find a measure of comfort and security in knowing that there is no restrictive fifty-minute time limit imposed on discussions. This confidence is a result of the removal of the high level of competitiveness that occurs in f2f classrooms in which 25-30 students are vying for attention and time to voice their contributions in a short time period. Those students who have a tendency to speak out hastily in f2f discussions recognize the benefits of reflecting on their own responses and on the contributions of their classmates. Those quiet students who have a tendency to remain silent in f2f discussions find that there is an equal opportunity for them to voice contributions in online discussions. In both cases, the benefits are obvious to both teacher and students.

The stages in CMC evidenced in online classes include, in part, socialization, exchange of information, construction of knowledge, and development/ application of knowledge. Each stage requires specific CMC skills, all of which necessitate specific instruction by an experienced online teacher. In order to facilitate effective online communication among students, teachers must also have acquired the necessary CMC skills that allow them to effectively encourage, support, and moderate online discussions. It takes experience and skill on the part of online teachers to initiate and maintain meaningful learning through discussions. Though many online discussion strategies are similar to face-to-face discussion methods, there will be differences for which the teacher needs to be prepared. This preparedness, by necessity, includes the experience and ability to instruct students in effective CMC skills so they can fully experience the benefits of online discussions.

About Leslie Bowman...

Leslie Bowman was a K-3 teacher for 15 years; child abuse/neglect investigator for 2 years; designer/author/instructor Personal Safety and Violence Prevention Workshops (onsite and online) for 7 years; country/western line dance instructor for 2 years; college instructor (freshman comp, business communications, sociology) for 2 years.

She received a Graduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning Online from California State University in Dec. 2000 and her M.S.Ed. in June 2001.

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