Tending the Fire:
Facilitating Difficult Discussions in the Online Classroom

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As Instructional Specialists for the University of Phoenix Online Campus, we have observed hundreds of online classrooms and responded to faculty requests for assistance with a variety of instructional challenges. Frequently, we receive requests for support with student-student and student-faculty conflict resulting from difficult online discussions. The instructional approaches for online “hot topics” discussions shared in this session are based upon a faculty seminar we developed for the University of Phoenix Online Campus to address these concerns.

At this point, we have offered the seminar to an initial group of eighteen faculty members and received an overwhelmingly positive response. Additionally, we have observed these facilitation approaches applied effectively in creating and restoring productive online discussions. In the future, we will offer the seminar to a larger group of faculty and continue to gather data to assess the effectiveness of the approaches offered.

In all University of Phoenix Online Campus courses, discussion is an integral component, comprising 10-20% of a student’s grade and required on at least four out of seven days each week. (Courses are accelerated, lasting five weeks for a 3 semester-hour undergraduate course, and are generally completed one at a time.) Classroom discussions are asynchronous, and most facilitators and students use threading to help organize discussion and create a sense of coherence. Because students and faculty are physically located all over the world, they do not meet face-to-face at any point during their entire degree programs. Most students work full time, and many of them also have children or other dependants. Given the pace of coursework and the multiple pressure points, it is not uncommon for online facilitators and supporting administrators such as Instructional Specialists to be called upon to resolve classroom conflicts on a weekly, almost daily, basis.

Instructional leadership is especially important during online discussions of controversial or emotional subject matter. When discussing controversial topics, students frequently express beliefs and opinions in a way others find offensive, unthinking, poorly informed, or attacking; the result can be destructive, disruptive conflict, which diverts attention from the lesson objectives. Additionally, in an asynchronous discussion, conflict can erupt and escalate while the instructor is out of the classroom. This situation makes anticipatory measures important, and conflict resolution strategies are essential. Through personal and professional experience as online instructors and coaches, we have found the following approaches effective when preparing for and facilitating difficult online discussions:

1. Specify goals and parameters for discussion;
2. Create facilitation messages communicating **acknowledgement**, building, and focusing components; and
3. Coach students privately via e-mail when behavior is not productive.

While the communication approaches in these steps are not unique, the application of these methods to the online environment in a conscious, systematic way has been helpful for online faculty members.
**Discussion Goals and Parameters**

For courses in which difficult discussions are likely, UOP Online instructors find it effective to create discussion “ground rules,” and post these guidelines in the main discussion forum at the beginning of class. Styles vary widely, from short motivational messages to more formal lists of requirements. Since tone is so often misinterpreted or is not communicated well in written communications, the ground rules brings this challenge to the forefront and offers students examples for communicating and expressing ideas in a positive and open way. Equally beneficially, the instructor can reference these ground rules when coaching students.

UOP Online instructors frequently begin their discussion ground rules by emphasizing the benefits to students of focused discussion. For example, on-topic discussion not only exposes students to the perspectives of others, but it also forces them to verbalize their own ideas. This process enables them to understand the strengths and weaknesses of their own thinking more clearly (McKeachie, 1999).

Addressing the challenges that are likely to arise in discussion is also useful in this ground rules message. In an online class, it is essential to consider the value of positive tone when posting message and why it is also beneficial to interpret others’ messages in a constructive manner.

It is also valuable to provide some specific examples of ways to phrase one’s ideas while encouraging input from classmates. Depending upon the subject matter of the class, it may also be productive to elaborate on specific challenges and ways of addressing the topic. For example, in a science class, students often post controversial religious perspectives, and facilitators can ease tensions by addressing these controversies from the onset of the course. It may also be beneficial to include examples of behavior that are not productive for discussion (i.e., name-calling, profanity, threats, put-downs, dismissal of others’ ideas, etc.). Again, while not the definitive means of ensuring proper “netiquette” is observed in the online classroom, this ground rules post can go a long way toward raising the bar on student expectations in class and can provide the instructor a useful text for any conflicts that arise during the course.

**Facilitation of Discussion**

Recent studies have emphasized the importance of the instructor’s teaching presence in effective online discussion (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005; Thomas, 2002). This cognitive leadership, coupled with the instructor’s facilitative or managerial role, is vital to difficult subject matter discussions. Such discussions are stressful in a face-to-face environment, and they involve additional complicating factors in the online classroom. Along with the difficulty of expressing one’s tone in writing and the absence of mitigating behavior present in face-to-face communication, people may also communicate more aggressively online than they would in a non-virtual environment (Wallace, 1999). Misperceptions are frequent, and the result can be unproductive conflicts.

Maintaining an active facilitative presence is essential not only in shaping discussion but also in helping defuse conflict before it escalates. The following facilitation model has been effective in our own facilitation and for other facilitators at the University of Phoenix Online Campus. Within an online discussion, effective instructors combine the tasks of direct instruction, encouragement, keeping participants focused on the main topics, and stimulating additional discussion and critical thinking. Faculty who consciously craft a majority of facilitation messages using the following model have found it helpful in building and maintaining productive online discussions:
**Three part facilitation message:**

*Acknowledgement*
*Building*
*Focusing*

*Acknowledgement* involves deep listening to the student, expressing respect and reflecting what he/she has communicated. Then, the facilitator *builds* on the student statement by adding another perspective, along with ideas from the text readings or outside source. In the building step, the facilitator can also try to emphasize a foundation (or build one) of common ground between student positions. To close the message, the facilitator formulates a *focusing question* for the class. (By directing the question to several students or the whole class, the focus is taken off the one student and also helps prevent a showdown between one student and the facilitator.)

Using this approach, the instructor can use a student message – even an off-topic or possibly offensive message – as a learning opportunity and starting place for refocusing discussion and stimulating critical thinking.

*Figure 1. Crafting a Facilitation Message*

**Acknowledgement**

“Sarah, you have expressed a perspective many people share…”
“Thank you for sharing your thoughts with the class, Lamont. It looks like you and Nadia share a similar approach to this issue…”

**Building**

“In our readings this week, the author brings up the idea of ___ (p. ). Additionally, in thinking about this topic, many people have found the concept of _____ especially important…”

**Focusing**

“Considering the concerns raised by Amy, in addition to the concepts of _____, what do you think might be two viable approaches to this problem?”
“Place yourself in the position of ____. What are your concerns and needs?”

**Intervention**
Attentive facilitation practices using *acknowledgement*, *building*, and *focusing* will be adequate to keep most students focused on the course content and provide any needed re-direction. Nevertheless, some students may not heed instructor cues, repeatedly posting messages that disrupt the discussion. If students continue disruptive behavior in spite of the facilitator’s guidance, it may be necessary for the instructor to “coach” the student in a private email (or phone call, if desired).

In the private note to the student, the approaches of *acknowledgement*, *building*, and *focusing* work quite well when modified for a more personal note. The instructor may open the note by trying to identify some positive aspect of the student’s behavior (i.e., “Mike, it is apparent you are engaged in the ideas of this course and are passionate about your beliefs…”). In the building phase, the instructor can express concern about the student’s specific word choice when expressing thoughts, and the effect of those words, even if unintentional. Then, it is helpful for the instructor to identify a more productive approach and give an example (i.e., “Mike, what I have found helpful for having people *really* hear and respond to my ideas is to express them in an open way. For example, when you have a point to make, you might use phrases such as “in my opinion…,” “from my readings…”,” “in my experience…” and “Have others thought this way too?”)

Even with the best facilitation possible, some situations require administrative intervention and should be brought to the attention of the department chair or another university administrator. In most cases, though, the facilitation and private communication methods mentioned above will guide students through difficult situations in a way that contributes to their learning and growth.

**Preparing Oneself to Facilitate Difficult Discussions**

Finally, when preparing for moderating difficult online discussions, instructors should reflect upon their own biases and beliefs regarding the course topics. Unintentionally, facilitators can express their points of view in a way that dominates or closes productive discussions. When facilitators present their opinions, it is important they leave statements open-ended, so that students remain comfortable expressing diverse views: a practice that furthers student critical thinking on the topic. In fact, if opinions are identified as such and accompanied by reasoning or evidence, then genuinely opened back up to students for alternative opinions and experiences, this can lead to dynamic online discussions.

**Conclusion**

Our experience with the success of the above facilitation methods has been largely experiential; we have seen these approaches help de-escalate conflict and move discussion forward in more productive directions. As a starting place, communication of discussion goals, along with the facilitation approaches of acknowledging, building, and focusing are useful tools to guide online students through difficult discussions. For the future, additional research is needed to help illuminate why these approaches have been successful and ways we might continue to improve the effectiveness of online interaction for learning. Future research will involve analyzing transcripts of many online classrooms to determine the level of student critical thinking and interactivity in discussion messages and how facilitator actions affect those levels.

Online discussion will remain a key component of virtual classrooms. Despite the challenges faced by participants in threaded, asynchrononous discussions, the online forum provides distance learners with important opportunities for increasing understanding of subject matter, of themselves, and of others. Thus, it is imperative for distance educators to continue striving to improve the context, mechanics, and leadership of online interaction.
References


Biographical Sketches

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