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Résumé de l'article

Facilitation by a moderator is crucial to a purposeful and productive conference. The moderator keeps the session focused, and ensures that all participants receive feedback regarding their contributions to the discussion. These functions are particularly important in the otherwise impersonal context of online discussion. The current report reviews recent literature regarding the moderator's roles regarding participant access and motivation, online socialization, information exchange and knowledge construction. A synchronous audio conference situation is assumed. Principles of online teaching and learning identified by Salmon (2002) are discussed, as well as the direct personal experiences of the report's co-authors.

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26. Best Practices in Online Conference Moderation

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Abstract

Facilitation by a moderator is crucial to a purposeful and productive conference. The moderator keeps the session focused, and ensures that all participants receive feedback regarding their contributions to the discussion. These functions are particularly important in the otherwise impersonal context of online discussion. The current report reviews recent literature regarding the moderator's roles regarding participant access and motivation, online socialization, information exchange and knowledge construction. A synchronous audio conference situation is assumed. Principles of online teaching and learning identified by Salmon (2002) are discussed, as well as the direct personal experiences of the report's co-authors.

Access and Motivation

Two contrasting approaches to conference moderation may be identified: 1) a facilitatory approach, which emphasizes the sharing of experiences between participants, so that they can build on each others' contributions without deviating too far from the intended topic of discussion; and 2) a more didactic, guided approach, which may be appropriate for the occasional steering and re-focusing of discussion. Different combinations of these two extreme approaches are appropriate in different teaching and learning situations contexts, and the moderator should be prepared to move effortlessly from one approach to the other as the moment demands.

The skills of online conference moderation are learned most effectively via a hands-on approach that encompasses the experience of being both a facilitator and a participant. Prior to the beginning of a conference session, participants should be encouraged to test their hardware and practice using the conferencing software. They should have access to information that explains how the software works (e.g., a troubleshooting guide, and a list of frequently asked questions). The moderator should provide an agenda including clear and relevant objectives, a description of what is expected of the participants, and an outline of recommended pre-readings. Green (1998) argues that provisions for ensuring that all participants are clear about the event's two-way expectations are central to a conference's design. Preparatory materials may be circulated by email or made available on, for example, a course website. The agenda for a conference session

does not need to be elaborate or complex, but should operate with an "optimum amount of structure."

Online Socialization

Green (1998) describes the social aspects of conference design as "creating a community." In considering the role of the moderator in an asynchronous text-based conference, Green acknowledges the particular problems that face a moderator in the attempt to foster interaction between participants. In face-to-face communication, visual and auditory cues are held to account for 70 percent of the information conveyed; and the moderator has the challenge of identifying alternative means of communication to compensate for the lack of these cues. Though they enjoy the advantages of aural cues, online audio conferences may also contain features that distort the manner in which they are transmitted and received. Even if ancillary webcam features are available, the visual cues provided may also be distorted by comparison with those conveyed in a normal face-to-face environment.

In this context, building a high degree of interactivity and participation is one of the moderator's most important facilitation skills (Hootstein, 2002). It is important for the moderator to create a learning environment that generates a sense of trust among the participants. Strategies such as personally welcoming everyone as they log in to the conference are important ("Hello, we hear you and are glad to have you with us"). Green (1998) suggests that beginning the conference by asking everyone to introduce themselves is a good way of promoting interaction. Such techniques put the participants at ease, and help to promote social interaction among them. They can be used to give the participants practice in interacting with the software interface; to inform them about their cohort; and to provide the moderator with information that can be used to engage them in conversations.

Hootstein (2002) indicates that effective facilitators use comments, questions, and probes to help learners connect around shared problems and experience in the use of the synchronous audio technology. For example, the tone of a response may be: "Thank you for posing that technical question. I'm sure many have been struggling with the same problem." Hootstein points out the many opportunities to model good behaviour that are provided by "verbal rewards;" and that moderators' wordings should be sensitively chosen. Thus, "Your speech is clear and concise" provides more constructive feedback than "Good job, I like the way you speak." What a facilitator says and how they say it both have a profound impact on the conference's outcome. Throughout the conferencing process, it is important to be mindful of 'netiquette,' which Greene defines as being respectful of other's opinions, beliefs and values; not dominating the discussion; and being supportive of others by encouraging and praising their contributions.

Information Exchange

Group size can be critical to the success of an online discussion, and to the effective exchange of information within it. Green (1998) suggests that the ideal number of participants in an asynchronous, educational, text-based conference is 10 to 15. It is the authors' experience that ideal group sizes in synchronous audio environments may be lower than this. It may be necessary for larger classes to be divided it into smaller groups in order to facilitate a meaningful discussion.

Salmon (2002) recommends ensuring that participants are provided with practical ways of sharing information online, not only by linking with other media and processes in the course, but by sharing information about using the conference technology. The synchronous audio conference should be purposeful and play a role not met by other course processes. The text-chat boxes typically featured in online audio-conferencing software can be used to provide a means of sharing structured communication in parallel with the audio mode.

Knowledge Construction

Questioning techniques used by the moderator are critical to the function of 'knowledge construction.' Questions can be posed once a block of content has been provided for the purpose of focusing the discussion. The moderator should also provide brief summaries of relevant course content, paraphrases of participants' contributions, comparisons and contrasts between participants' views, and timely reiterations of earlier points. Green (2002) summarizes the moderator's responsibility to ask questions that are open-ended, thought-provoking, draw on personal experiences, and are suited to the learners' level. This approach stimulates interest by demonstrating the relevance of points and encouraging discussion of them. The moderator may call on a specific participant to speak, or may elicit responses from the group as a whole, though should be sensitive to the individual participants' personalities in, for example, providing warnings that such contributions will be invited. The features of synchronous audio technology should be carefully used in order to designate speaker order. This enhances the pace and purpose of the interactive event. In order to facilitate learning, the moderator needs to listen attentively and respond with positive and specific feedback.

It is also helpful for moderators to have access to information about the participants' hardware specifications, and to details of conference objectives, relevant text passages, definitions, illustrations, references, and hyperlinks. These can be "cut and pasted" into the conference text box at appropriate moments. In this case, learners may have to be advised to activate their text boxes. The moderator may also use features of the conferencing software during the session, to track student participation. Alternatively, s/he may simply use a checklist to record the frequency of contributions. As more software packages provide audio-archiving features, these may be employed for the purpose of more detailed records. The moderator may wish to follow up privately with non-participants via an email or telephone conversation.

In debriefing conference participants, the moderator can ask them to summarize the session's main issues and outcomes, thereby eliciting useful feedback about its content and process. It is usually appropriate for the moderator to close the session by providing his or her own summary of it, and clarify misconceptions and subsequent tasks.

Conclusions

Unlike asynchronous conferencing, the synchronous media afford little time for reflection and deliberation. Moderators of synchronous audio-conferences therefore face a daunting task. They must support both process and content, guide interaction through meaningful feedback and deft questioning strategies, and provide additional cues and information as needed. Moderating functions can be fulfilled collaboratively by teacher and learners, in the interests of effective information-sharing. Experience and practice is mandatory in the acquisition of moderating skills.

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The next report in the series discusses potential educational uses of the 'Wiki'.

N.B. Owing to the speed with which Web addresses are changed, the online references cited in this report may be outdated. They can be checked at the Athabasca University software evaluation site: http://cde.athabascau.ca/softeval/. Italicised product names in this report are assumed to be registered trademarks.

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