Roles for an Instructor in Online Discussion Forums

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Delivery Trucks and Scaffolding

The roles we see for ourselves as instructors are directly related to how we view learning—our theories about how it happens, and perhaps even more, the metaphors we use that reveal our underlying beliefs about learning.

If we see learning as information acquisition, we focus on instruction as "delivery"—providing the best summaries of information and the best explanations, and being able to answer all the questions as quickly as possible. In the acquisition metaphor, good instructors drive the largest and fastest delivery trucks, know all the best routes through the rush hour traffic, and have the best and largest quantities of content in their warehouses.

However, if we view learning as a process of individual and social knowledge construction, we focus on instruction as developing the learner's engagement in a learning environment—providing learning activities, supplying tools and resources for exploring content, and encouraging and supporting active expression of knowledge. In the construction metaphor, good instructors are responsible for erecting the scaffolding that allows students to work at heights they otherwise couldn't reach. They are also like building contractors, making sure the foundation is attended too, and that the walls, plumbing, and electrical work are installed well—but all installed by the student herself.

Effective Roles in Discussion Forums

Most experience shows that taking on the role of information deliverer tends to kill discussions. That role might work fine for giving lectures to an audience that already has a lot of experience, but it may not be best for students still exploring and feeling their way around a body of content. It won't give learners the opportunities they for testing their knowledge by trying to articulate it in conversation. If this is what you want to achieve, consider these roles:

Instructor as Fellow Student in a Peer Discussion

In this role, the instructor posts insights and asks questions like any student, but trying to provide a good model for inquisitiveness, clear communication, close reading, resource sharing, and civil behavior. A lot of leeway is given, and a lot of faith allotted to students to reach useful conclusions. However, by modeling a good learner the instructor helps to ensure that this happens as well.

Instructor as Initiator of a Structured Discussion

In this role, the instructor assumes more authority and drives the topic of conversation, and perhaps drives it back on topic if it strays. But otherwise, the instructor doesn't *dominate* the conversation by responding to every posting or trying to summarize the key points too quickly. Initiating means letting a

conversation develop on its own, and allowing learners to recognize the key ideas in their own time, if possible.

Instructor as Discussant in a Panel Discussion

Slightly more formal, in this case the discussion is even more structured, with time apportioned to each learner, with the instructor providing a critique of the discussion as it unfolds. But the discussion still belongs to the learners. The instructor fully exercises his or her expertise, but only at the appropriate time, after learners have an opportunity to demonstrate what they know and think.

Instructor Functions

Here is another way of looking at the productive roles of the instructor in a discussion, by examining the functions necessary to keep a conversation on target. (See Durrington & Yu, 2009)

Opening Discussion: Announcing the theme and clarifying content and purpose

Setting Norms: Establishing expectations about rules for discussion forum behavior

Setting Agenda: Subtly or overtly controlling the order and flow of topics

Recognition: Welcoming participants and openly valuing their contributions

Prompting: Soliciting comments from participants when they don't come voluntarily

Remedying: Responding to problems in context, norms, clarity, irrelevance, or other issues

Weaving: Summarizing and unifying the collection of participant comments toward a constructive end

Additional Reading

Durrington, V. A., & Yu, C. (2009). Its the same only different: The effect the discussion moderator has on student participation in online class discussions. In A. Orellana, T. L. Hudgins & M. Simonson (Eds.), *The perfect online course*. Charlotte, North Carolina: Information Age Publishing.

Havard, B., Du, J., & Olinzock, A. (2009). Deep learning: The knowledge, methods, and cognition process in instructor-led online discussion. In A. Orellana, T. L. Hudgins & M. Simonson (Eds.), *The perfect online course* (pp. 487-502). Charlotte, North Carolina: Information Age Publishing.

Wilson, B. G. (1995) Metaphors for Instruction: Why we talk about learning environments. *Educational Technology*, 35 (5), 25-30. Available at http://carbon.cudenver.edu/~bwilson/metaphor.html