Improving Discussion in Virtual Communities

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Recently, several strategies have been suggested for supporting and improving virtual discussions (Brescia, 2003; Bonk, Angeli, Malikowski, & Supplee, 2001; Hanna, Glowacki-Dudka, & ConceiÇão-Runlee, 2000). These strategies encompass coaching, questioning, providing structure, summarizing and supporting student work.

Several researchers and programs, including MentorNet (Single & Muller, 1999), CoVis (Pea & Gomez, 1996) and the Electronic Emissary Program (Dimock, 1997), have provided places for virtual discussions to occur.

Ferneding-Lenert and Harris (1994) found that the key to success in online discussions was in building strong teacher-student and student-student relationships. In another study, Harris, O’Bryan and Rothenberg (1996) suggest that success is based on developing clear learning goals and the frequency and number of online communications by the instructor.

In order to foster a high level of student participation, instructors have a responsibility to make the virtual discussion a setting in which: students are comfortable assuming responsibility for their own learning, inquiry is encouraged, the necessary tools are provided and the instructor is active and involved by participating in the discussion. The instructor needs to help students grow from their current understandings to richer, more complex understandings (Brooks & Brooks, 1993). An effective way for instructors to foster the learning process is to provide structure to the class by making the goals clear, managing the discussion and controlling group size.

Discussion group size should depend on the nature of the task (Rikkerink & van Halstein, 1994). As facilitator, the instructor should structure the nature of the inquiry by defining the problem, developing and evaluating several solution alternatives, coming to a resolution and leading participants through a reflection on the process. Virtual conferencing facilitates this by allowing the instructor to observe students’ messages, keep a record of the discussion forum, model appropriate posts, question students and show critical thinking about the issue (Duffy, Dueber, & Hawley, 1998). These actions provide appropriate support for learners, and allow them to perform assigned tasks (Duffy & Cunningham, 1996).

The instructor can provide examples of analysis and critical reflection that virtual community members can observe. The virtual discussion enables the students to divert the focus from one’s self to the group when performing tasks or making decisions (Marsick, 1987). Instructors can use virtual discussions to make reflection a regular practice that challenges students to support their hypotheses and question learners’ statements. Learners can describe their practice, share their analysis of their actions, present why and how they came to the decision to do what they did and reconstruct the event (McGree, 1998).

Hanna, Glowacki-Dudka and ConceiÇão-Runlee (2000) present their suggestions for improving discussions in virtual communities in several categories, focusing on preparation before the course begins; evaluation of learning; and use of effective teaching strategies. Bonk et al. (2001) observed the following strategies as being successful in virtual discussions:

- **Social (and Cognitive) Acknowledgement**: “Hello...” “I agree with everything said so far...”
- **Questioning**: “Another reason for this might be...?” “An example of this is...” “In contrast to this might be...” “What else might be important here...?” “Can you justify this?”
- **Direct Instruction**: “I think in class we mentioned that...” “Remember back to the first week of the semester when we went over X, which indicated that...”
- **Modeling/Examples**: “Remember that video we saw on X wherein Y decided to...” “Doesn’t X give insight into this problem in case Z when he/she said...”
- **Feedback/Praise**: “Wow, I’m impressed...” “That shows real insight into...” “I have yet to see you or anyone mention...”
- **Cognitive Task Structuring**: “You know, the task asks you to do...” “How might the textbook authors have solved this case?”
- **Cognitive Elaborations/Explanations**: “Provide more information here that explains your rationale” “Please clarify what you mean by...”
- **Push to Explore**: “You might want to write to Dr. XYZ for...” “Perhaps there is a URL on the Web that addresses this topic...”
- **Fostering Reflection/Self Awareness**: “How have you seen this before?” “When you took over this class, what was the first thing you did?” “How might an expert teacher handle this situation?”
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