Discussions in Online Learning

Social presence is critical in the online classroom. During discussions, instructors and learners want to be perceived as "real people." Instructors can create presence through open "safe" communication, productive (i.e., unforced) group collaborations, and emotional expression (e.g., humor). Establishing social presence creates a productive cognitive space where learners can explore, digest, reconnect and apply course concepts to real-world problems.

For social and cognitive presence to flourish, "teaching presence" is needed. Teaching presence takes the form of clear organization, defined procedures, regular faculty interactions/feedback, and established evaluation criteria. Let's look at a few strategies for stimulating an online learning community.

Establishing Community

General Suggestions

1. **Require Participation:** If discussions are not required, students will not participate. Studies suggest that discussions should be worth between 10%-20% of the overall course grade.

2. **Social Presence Cues:** Model sound social cues by addressing everyone by name, describing personal/professional experiences, encouraging participation, and by being funny where appropriate. Building a safe social environment goes a long way towards encouraging participation.

3. **Feedback:** Respond promptly to your students, but don't overwhelm them. You are there to facilitate/focus the conversation, not to become its center.

4. **Question:** It is not enough to simply allow learners to present concepts or factoids. If the learner proposes a solution to a problem, one technique would be to ask for more details about their plan's implementation. The important thing is to get the learner to reexamine and re-conceptualize the content they are presenting.

   ○ Make it clear in advance that you will be asking these types of questions. Students do not like to feel singled out.

5. **Audio & Video Feedback:** Remember that you can respond to audio and/or video feedback to students. Audio and video feedback is a great way to create presence, clarify intentions, and make sure your remarks' emotional "tone" is understood.

Prompt Types

1. **Problem-based Prompts:** Write questions focusing on problems related to essential course topics. Ask students to discuss and propose solutions to these problems. Problem-based prompts work well in group discussions. Ideally, there should be several ways of "correctly" solving each problem.

2. **Project-based Prompts:** These are similar to problem-based prompts, but in this instance, learners are asked to research and prototype a plan for addressing conceptual problems. Several guidelines are suggested:

   ○ Allow for multiple iterations throughout a module or course.

   ○ Set up clear milestones for development.

   ○ Ask learners to reflect on their undertakings.

   ○ Provide increased support as learners reach the end of the process. Be sure to outline your evaluation strategy for this activity carefully.

3. **Debate Prompts:** Ask students to research and debate a contentious topic. Learners do not need to be assigned based on preference and should understand that it is their responsibility to articulate their side's position clearly. Beyond simply outlining their position, learners should challenge opponents, formulate arguments, examine preconceptions and work through areas of disagreement. Lastly, students should attempt to persuade others of their assigned position.

   ○ In this type of discussion, it is vital for the instructor to model and enforce respectful and productive forms of communication.

4. **Challenge Prompts:** Play the "devil's advocate" and provide alternate solutions and/or evidence. Ask learners to respond to these different viewpoints. Alternatively, assign students the role of "devil's advocate" or ask them to "challenge" their colleagues with requests for clarification.

   ○ Use this technique in moderation. It's easy to take over a conversation accidentally.

Considerations

Remember that online discussions are not autonomous. In the online classroom, substantive and meaningful communication requires careful consideration. Plan three steps of back-and-forth participant interactions by asking yourself the following:

1. **Is the initial prompt nuanced enough to produce a diversity of perspectives?**

   ○ A class of students writing 500 words on the same article will not result in a variety of opinions.

2. **Are response prompts framed in a way that will empower students to deepen the conversation?**

- ○ Simply asking learners to respond to their peers rarely pushes the conversation forward. Plan a response prompt that encourages students to reflect on, question, and critique each other's posts.

3. **Do I provide a way to create closure or a link to other activities?**

- ○ If your discussion is moving along well, feel free to ask follow-up questions; however, plan a wrap-up activity. A discussion "warp-up" might include an instructor summary statement, group reports for participants engaged in a challenging topic, or individual reflections. Simultaneous class sessions are a great way to "put a bow" on a valuable discussion and tie it to your course's learning goals.

(This article draws heavily on "[Strategies for Creating a Community of Inquiry through Online Asynchronous Discussions](#)" by deNoylles, Zydney & Chen).