

Learning Online - A Guide to Empowering and Facilitating Online Communications

Gráinne Hamilton

University of Glasgow

Jisc Scotland

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Introduction

This guide provides effective practices, underpinned by relevant educational theory, for empowering and facilitating communication as an online tutor. It is intended for those facilitating adult education and community-based initiatives.

This guide is formed from course content created by the author for Jisc Scotland's *Learning Online: Facilitating Online Communications* course, delivered between 2011 and 2013 to educators in UK Further and Higher Education. The design for the *Learning Online: Facilitating Online Communications* course was based on an online collaborative learning approach developed by Hamilton & Blair (2005).

Creating the right environment

A key component of enabling effective online learning is to create the right environment. This takes planning and preparation but once the correct structure and mix of activities and resources are in place, the course design and many of the resources can easily be re-used for future online courses.

Heutagogy

Sound educational practice should be the starting point for teaching and learning, no matter what context it takes place within or what tools are used. Educational theories that have come to the fore for online teaching and learning include Social Constructivism and Connectivism. Building on Piaget's (1936) theory of Constructivism, which argues that people develop knowledge and meaning based on their experiences, Vygotsky's theory of Social Constructivism (1978) highlights the social aspects of constructing knowledge and meaning, through discussion and collaboration. Siemens's theory of Connectivism: A Learning Theory for the Digital Age (2004) suggests that we learn through our connections and by making connections, tapping into networks, accessing resources, and connecting ideas. It proposes that knowing where to find information is more important than what we know. The corresponding educational practices relating to these theories include supporting opportunities for collaboration, interaction, discussion, and finding and evaluating resources.

Structure

When facilitating an online course, as with a face-to-face course, you need to consider how you will support the student to find the information they need and to reflect on and review their learning. What activities, resources, assessment, opportunities for feedback etc will you include? Salmon (2002) refers to online activities intended to promote interaction and learning by doing as e-tivities. Incorporating and linking a range of e-tivities, including opportunities for discussion, mixing asynchronous and synchronous activities and building in collaborative group and individual work will help create a richer experience and motivate students to engage.

Thinking about how rigidly structured or flexible you wish to make your course, is another consideration and is likely to be determined by the type of learner. Some learners may need less support initially to manage their own learning, while others will need more input. For those who are more self-directing in their learning, a looser structure which signposts resources and opportunities for discussion and collaboration, may be appropriate. Learners who are not so confident in navigating resources, may require a more set and linear structure initially. However, including interactive activities which enable collaboration and discussion will

introduce them to less structured learning experiences, an important step for helping them become more self-directing learners.

Community

Building in plenty of opportunities for students to interact, will help their engagement with the course and allow them to learn from each other, through the questions other participants ask, peer feedback and review. Feeling part of a learning community can be a powerful motivator, helping to combat feelings of isolation and providing opportunities to engage with other perspectives. Encouraging a sense of ownership and community early on in the course can also make your life as an e-Tutor easier as it will lead to a mutually supportive environment, enabling students to seek information and support from peers as well as other networks they may tap into. Creating a sense of community is perfectly possible online and social media tools in particular can easily connect people, anytime, anywhere. These interactions can require support or facilitation, however, particularly in the early stages of an online course.

One of the benefits of online learning is that people can log in from anywhere and at anytime. Potentially this means groups of learners who do not know each other and have not met prior to engaging online. It can be daunting contributing to a conversation online, if you do not know who you are talking with and have not had the chance to pick up any clues about the other participants. We would normally pick up some information about the others in a group in a face-to-face setting through interpreting visual clues, perhaps chatting with people over a coffee break etc. So it is important that the facilitator builds in time at the start of any course for familiarisation and socialisation – familiarisation with the system(s) being used and the structure of the course, and opportunities for socialisation so participants' develop a sense of trust and feel part of the group. Once participants feel comfortable with the system and each other, they are more likely to feel comfortable contributing effectively to a discussion on the subject being taught.

It can be beneficial to choose e-tivities which are not subject related in the early stages of a course to help avoid a sense of pressure to contribute to a certain 'standard'. Socialisation e-tivities work well if they are fun and are based on subjects participants won't feel judged when responding to.

Support

Facilitating an online course requires an over-arching support role, which includes facilitating discussions, supporting the overall community / learning experience, dealing with conflict, troubleshooting etc. Just as important, is to help students to learn to self-direct and manage their own learning. Incorporating activities which promote self-directed learning through collaborative work, opportunities for reflection, peer feedback / review and self-evaluation will create a richer experience for the participant and can help to reduce the tutor's input.

Another key consideration when tutoring online is time-management. Some aspects of teaching online can take less time than in a face-to-face setting, particularly where resources can easily be re-used or through making use of automated marking, for example. However, the course structure still needs to be created initially and students will require the same, or more support as they learn to navigate the vast amounts of information and resources available online. Due to the 'always on' nature of the online environment and ease of access to it, it can be easy to feel overwhelmed with information or requests for help. Providing comprehensive and easily accessible support information, will help reduce the amount of time you spend

responding to individual requests. Setting up a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) discussion area can help to gather questions and you might wish to add these to a wiki and direct queries to this in the first instance for students to check if a question has already been answered.

As with interactions in a face-to-face context, conflict can arise online and it is important to deal with this quickly. In a face-to-face context, ground rules can provide a guide for appropriate behaviour. This works in the online environment also and agreeing ground rules or *Netiquette* as an early collaborative exercise can ensure even better engagement with them and make it easier to refer participants back to them.

Online courses open up the opportunities for people from different countries and therefore, cultures to interact. This increases access to different perspectives and alternative viewpoints. While this can create a rich and interesting environment for ideas and discussion, it is also important to consider different cultural behaviours and to ensure everyone feels enabled to participate. Finding out something about the cultures of those participating can help manage expectations about how individuals will contribute. Again, setting the *Netiquette* for the course, can help to set acceptable guidelines for behaviour and interaction.

e-Safety can also become an issue, particularly if you are engaging with younger students, although this applies to people of any age. Ensure you refer to institutional or system policies about minimum age requirements and consider if you need to set up separate areas or policies for younger participants. Have policies in place regarding how to escalate any issues and how you will deal with unacceptable behaviour, for example, deleting an account, or removing material, or referring this to a system administrator. Ensure participants know who to contact if they have concerns.

Connection

As facilitator of an online course, it is important that you have the ability to navigate a range of online resources and networks and can support students to do the same. Siemens suggests that 'the pipe is more important than the content within the pipe' (Siemens 2004) and through his theory of Connectivism discusses the importance of the connections we make and the learning we do with others. Being able to facilitate these connections to knowledge through access to online materials and networks is vital to supporting people learning in our digitally connected world.

You do not need to be a technical expert to use the online tools and resources you choose to engage with in your course but to use them effectively, you will need to feel reasonably confident with them. Your students may also need support in using them and contact you with questions, which if you can't answer yourself, knowing who else to contact or where to go for further information, is helpful. Your students may also choose to use other online tools than those you point them to, so having an overview of the types of tools available that could be useful in the educational context can be useful.

You may find you need to answer questions relating to connecting to the internet, problems with the technology itself and other issues which will arise when supporting a group of participants with differing levels of IT literacy. Again, building in time at the start of a course to allow participants to ensure they can access the tools they need to will help to address issues before moving on to the course proper.

Participants might also be using a range of devices and operating systems to access the course. Consideration needs to be given to this when developing course materials and designing the course structure – will people be able to access the resources and engage with activities from a mobile phone, for example? If not, it is worth developing different versions of a resource so you do not restrict access and engagement.

A Model for the Stages of Online Learning

Salmon's 5 Stage Model (2002) may be useful for exploring the different stages that an online group might go through. The model highlights that an e-Tutor's input should decrease as participants or students progress through the stages and become more self-directing in their learning. To summarise:

Level One focuses on access and motivation. This level is equally important for participants and tutors. Individuals need to be encouraged to explore the environment in use, experimenting with the different tools available whether they are discussion facilities or interactive learning materials.

Level Two focuses attention on the socialisation aspects of learning online. A common misconception is that eLearning is a lonely experience however this has been disputed by many over recent years (Rheingold 1994, Salmon 2000, Wenger 1998). It is the tutor's role to ensure that participants understand the rules of netiquette and have acquired the skills to enable interaction between each other in the online environment. At the very least, participants ought to be providing some information about themselves and demonstrating that they have basic skills required for communicating and learning online. E.g. ability to post and read messages.

Level Three begins to look at the process involved in exchanging information. Such information exchange could be between participants or participants and the e-Tutor. The main focus for this level ought to be participants collaborating with each other however. The tutor supports this through facilitating activities and pointing to appropriate resources.

Level Four is a more advanced stage in the model. This level focuses on the students' ability to construct their own learning experience and seek out information for themselves, (the tutor's input should be less by now and focus on facilitating this process). Course-related discussions ought to be occurring in depth by this point.

Level Five By level five participants ought to be taking increased charge of their own participation and learning and less input is required from the tutor. Individual participant reflection and self-evaluation of their learning is key to this level.

Facilitating Group Interactions

Synchronous

Synchronous group interactions take place in real time, for example webinars, online chat rooms and games, and can require more or less facilitation depending on the group and the purpose.

In question and answer sessions with an expert, having a separate facilitator can be helpful. The facilitator can manage the session and, in the context of a webinar, might choose to switch

off the participant's microphones and request they post any questions for answering during or at the end of the session. The facilitator can then monitor questions, ensure they are flagged up to the speaker and that all participants can contribute, as well as managing any technical or access issues, recording the session and so on. This approach ensures the speaker can focus on the subject. If all participating are given rights to speak, the facilitator might choose to set a virtual hand-raise rule, where participants indicate they have a question or comment and the facilitator invites them to speak. This can help to control the pace of a session and is useful for less confident participants who may be unwilling to jump in.

With general group discussion participants will be communicating in a variety of ways, crossing discussions between each other, one-to-one, facilitator to participants, participant to participants etc. With a well established group, individuals often begin to sense the group dynamic and how they can contribute, so a facilitator will have to provide less intervention. General debate amongst a less mature group can move quickly, however, and be daunting for those new to the medium. Again, a facilitator can pull the pace back by introducing protocols such as virtual hand-raising or stipulating an ordered approach to contributions based on name or the order of entry to the chat.

There is evidence of learning benefits that can be achieved through online games (McGonigle 2011). Facilitation within an online game will vary depending on the type of game, purpose, group etc. However, a key component of games is for individuals to overcome a challenge, either on their own or as part of a group. When part of a group, they will often have to work together in order to overcome the challenge. In this kind of context they are more likely to manage themselves and pull together to agree how they might progress through the scenario. Having a common purpose, e.g. to solve a problem to move to the next level, will provide a focus which perhaps makes self-regulation easier and less need for external or tutor facilitation.

Asynchronous

With asynchronous group interactions, participants can contribute in their own time. In this context, the input from the facilitator is more likely to be to provide motivation and focus for the interaction. To encourage contribution, providing sparks for discussion (Salmon 2002), which require thought on something specific, can help to give participants a starting point for reflection and discussion. For example, a discussion after students have completed a particular task, might include asking for something they did well and what they found challenging and what they would do to address that.

A key aspect of facilitating asynchronous discussion is to keep them on topic and help students to navigate through the amount of information that can be generated. Using different discussion rooms or email threads for specific topics will help students and you to follow the flow of conversation without having to wade through non-subject related content. Setting a discussion area for general social chat can help with this so that if participants do want to take some time out for general chat, there is a space for them to do so (meaning they will be less likely to use a subject specific discussion room for this).

Summarise

With both synchronous and asynchronous interactions, summarise the discussions to pull out the pertinent points and to highlight where more work might be needed to address conceptual problems. Asking students to do this can help them focus on the topic and to analyse for themselves areas they need to review / do more work on.

Tips

- Recommend participants enter the discussion area 10 minutes early to check access (synchronous)
- Welcome participants as they enter (synchronous); reply to first posts (asynchronous).
- Notify participants if discussions will be recorded and point them to *netiquette* guidelines
- Use an appropriate framework for participation, e.g. round robin, free flow, virtual hand-raising (synchronous)
- Have a back-up plan to let participants know what the problem is in the event of a technical failure
- Ensure everyone can contribute, i.e. no one participant is dominating discussions
- Keep discussions on topic
- Subscribe to topic threads of interest (if the software allows this)
- Use meaningful titles for posts
- Scan contributions to check for flaming (abusive behaviour between participants) / inappropriate behaviour and contact those involved if appropriate or escalate as per grievance / site policy
- Be welcoming, encouraging and supportive throughout
- Summarise the discussions (or ask a student to summarise as part of their learning)

Netiquette

- Be sensitive and reflective to what others are saying
- All CAPS is the equivalent of SHOUTING!
- Think before posting
- Don't use offensive language
- Use clear subject headings
- Only use acronyms/abbreviations which others will be familiar with
- Keep dialogue professional
- Be forgiving of mistakes – anyone can make them!

Motivating and engaging participants

"What we now know is that the concepts of time, motivation and the quality of support and training are the key factors in eLearning success" (Salmon 2004)

There are a range of activities, tools, feeds and other things you can use for stimulus to engage students. These might include multimedia learning objects, links to YouTube videos, asking students to blog, use twitter, develop a knowledge base on a wiki, develop their own digital stories etc. Stimulus to engage in discussion is just as important to ensure active use of discussion rooms. Encouraging discussion can be helped by linking discussion to other activities, asking students to focus on specifics, building in opportunities to consider their own experience and stipulating a timeline for contribution.

Sample e-tivities

- Ice-breakers: virtual postcards, a bit about me, the perfect meal
- Role-play where learners are assigned a role or personality to play to discuss a particular topic, e.g. optimist, pessimist, journalist etc
- Webinar question and answer session with guest experts

- Presentation followed by debate
- Automatically marked quizzes; human marked free text
- Polling followed by discussion: e.g. conflicting ideas to discuss are posted and a poll is taken
- Each participant posts a resource they have found useful and summarises why in a wiki
- Develop a digital story based on a scenario of a workplace situation and how to deal with customers /clients

Some of the tools and resources you might use:

- E-books, multi-media learning objects
- Quizzes, e.g. VLEs, apps, online
- Discussions, e.g. webinars, chats, discussion boards
- Polls, e.g. in VLE or using tools such as [www.polleverywhere](http://www.polleverywhere.com) with a phone
- RSS feeds
- Images, e.g. use Flickr to access images labeled for re-use
- Blogging, e.g. use blogs for in-depth reflections, or twitter for micro-blogging
- Videos, e.g. YouTube

To find more e-tivities, from which some of these examples were taken, have a look at: *E-tivities: The Key to Active Online Learning* (Salmon 2002) or refer to the *Social Learning Handbook* (Hart 2011) for examples of how to use social media tools for learning.

Overall incorporating and linking a range of e-tivities, including opportunities for discussion, mixing asynchronous and synchronous activities, setting timelines and building in collaborative, group and individual work will greatly help engagement.

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