Moderation of an online discussion on communication skills – A GSMC FAIMER experience

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Abstract

Discussion forums provide the ability for asynchronous discussion to occur over a period of time. The ability to learn asynchronously gives flexibility in learning and is one of the primary benefits of online learning. The combination of the asynchronous and interactive nature of the online learning environment encourages participants to engage in higher-order learning and reflection. To foster an optimal online learning community three components are important: cognitive presence, social presence and teacher presence in order to ensure that effective group discussions take place that can share meaning, identify areas of doubt, and attempt to reach a consensus and understanding of the subject being discussed. Moderating an online discussion is an art of its own and requires meticulous planning and execution strategies. Maintaining participant interest throughout the session can be quite challenging. This article is to share our experience in moderating a session as a part of the FAIMER programme in GSMC regional institution in Mumbai, India.

Keywords: Asynchronous learning; Communication skills; Online moderation

Introduction

Threaded discussions or discussion boards are one of the most commonly used tools in online teaching. (Levine J S 2007; Furnari 2014) Discussion forums provide the ability for asynchronous discussion to occur over a period of time (Rovai A P 2002; Curtis J N 2006) The ability to learn asynchronously gives flexibility in learning and is one of
the primary benefits of online learning. Participants will be able to reflect upon their ideas before sharing them with others, leading to more reflective responses and in-depth learning.

It is often through online discussion that the highest quality of learning is developed in online courses. There is substantial research to indicate that the quality of discussion can be as high, if not higher, in online discussions as in a class setting, so long as ‘best practices’ are used.

To foster an optimal online learning community three components are important: cognitive presence, social presence and teacher presence. (Garrison R. R., Anderson T. and Archer W. 2000; Furnari 2014)

Cognitive presence includes the learner's process of reflection and dialogue in order to achieve meaningful learning. Social presence is the ability of learners to present themselves as ‘real people’ and along with the teacher create a cohesive, supportive virtual group.

Teacher presence involves: 1) planning the design and delivery of the learning activity, setting time parameters and use of the online medium; and 2) facilitation and direction to promote an effective group discussion that can share meaning, identify areas of agreement and disagreement, and attempt to reach consensus and understanding. (Garrison R. R., Anderson T. and Archer W. 2000)

This article is to share our experience in moderating a session as a part of the FAIMER (Foundation for advancement of international medical education and research) programme in GSMC regional institution in Mumbai, India.

Methodology

As a part of this fellowship programme, 32 participants at a time are actively involved in an asynchronous online discussion forum called the mentor- learning web discussion. 16 junior fellows conduct the moderation sessions while 16 senior fellows guide the juniors and mentor them in the same, all via the online discussion forum. Faculty and other fellows guide and observe the session closely.

Many of the features that are true for developing good discussion in class are also true for online discussion, but there are also some special requirements for ensuring, not only that the quality of discussion is high, but that all, or nearly all, participants are actively participating.

We present to you a sequential flow of events which enabled us to successfully complete the moderation session on the topic "communication skills" and share our experience in making the participation active.

For the ease of understanding, we will explain the events as

- Pre-moderation preparation
- Moderation online
- Reflections post moderation

Pre-moderation preparation

Preparing for conducting the online session is as important as the session itself. Various aspects regarding the topic
of discussion need to be looked into and planned appropriately.

- **Clarity of goals:**

As moderators it is important to be clear with our goal and learning outcomes for the session. Many a times, the topics chosen for discussion may not be possible to complete in a month's discussion. Hence, focusing on pertinent topics or dividing the topics into subtopics for discussion will be beneficial. For eg: the topic assigned to us was communication skills. As the topic was vast we decided to limit our focus to Classroom communication skills.

- **Effective communication among the moderators:**

As moderators of the sessions we had to outline our learning outcomes and plan the activities for this session. But in our case as the facilitators did not have a chance to have face to face discussions due to different geographical locations, it was quite a challenge to plan for the sessions. We used social media (WhatsApp) for basic communication. We did skype discussions to come to a consensus.

This initial discussion was of utmost importance to channelize our thoughts and start preparing for the session.

- **Advance preparation:**

We started our preparation well in advance so that enough time is catered to collect resources and plan activities. We also prepared an alternative plan for each activity, if under any circumstances we are unable to conduct a particular activity.

- **Preparing the environment:**

The success of managing online discussion lies in the preparation of the environment. This should include clear and logical structuring of the environment and the management of expectations, roles and responsibilities.

Prior to the preparation the following questions can help:

- Will the work take the form of tutorials, moderated class discussion or debate, paired or group tasks, a mixture of these? Our role as facilitator in each case.
- How much time will you allow for each tutorial, discussion or task?
- What is the level at which the moderation is planned?
- Is participation assessed? If assessed, what criteria will you use? If not, how will you encourage everyone to participate?

Keeping in mind the above aspects, we decided to divide our moderation session into 4 weeks spread over a month, with each week catering to two activities.

We prepared a pre-test questionnaire and administered to the participants to evaluate their base line knowledge.

Learning outcomes for all the 4 weeks were outlines and the activities were kept ready based on the results of the pre-test.

We included subtopics like verbal and non-verbal communication skills, communication in a small group and a large group, communication skills to handle difficult students.
Online moderation session

Moderation online:

- Preamble to the session:

The right introduction and setting the expectations of the participants at the start of the session is important.

We started our moderation session with an outline of the entire month activities and the learning outcomes so that the participant are aware of what they are expected to know at the end of the session. Interesting names were given to our group and each week activities to make it more interesting and fun. A role play regarding communication skills was prepared by the moderators. The script was shared among the group, including the faculties in-charge. Each member recorded their role and shared it in a common platform. All the clips were clubbed together and edited creating a video depicting a role play on communication skills. The video was uploaded at the start for the participants to view. This interesting video kick started participant interest and an overwhelming response was received for the activities to follow.

A few tips for an effective start to the session:

- Clear instructions for any tasks and, definition of roles for individuals within groups.

- Design an interesting video/clip to enhance participant interest and trigger their thought process regarding the topic of discussion.

- Technical Instructions on using the Discussion tool – If a new tool is being used, the participants need to be sensitised on the proper use of the same. For eg: we used e-tools like google document, survey monkey, ed puzzle to conduct our activities and we ensured that all the participants are sensitised on the use of these tools.

- Maintaining participant interest throughout the discussion period:

Our experience showed that capturing group interest for a whole month when the participants are distant away merely by the discussion forum can be quite challenging. Hence we incorporated innovative ideas for each week’s activities to keep the participation high.

a. Dividing the sessions into weeks and two activities per week:

Sufficient time was planned for each activity so that the participants do not have to complete the task for the sake of completion but will have sufficient time to explore, extrapolate and reflect on their learning.

The activities planned were interactive providing a platform for rich discussion.

Figure 1: Division of moderation session
b. Tutorials to introduce the topic:

We recorded basic tutorials on the topic of discussion and posted it for viewing prior to the participants starting the activities. This helped a lot and was appreciated by all participants as it enabled them to understand core concepts on which they could build later.

Figure 2: Online tutorials
c. Providing resources for the participants to read:

We provided the participants with multiple resources on classroom communication skills. These must read articles helped the participants to develop the basic understanding of the subject. The participants were encouraged to share any other resources they found beneficial in the forum so that all will be benefited. Participants were asked to identify the key messages from the articles and share with all in a google form. This exchange of resources and key messages enabled us to have a rich access to the topic which could as be utilised by the participants at a later date.

**Figure 3: Resources Provided**
d. A quote on the topic at the beginning of the day and a tip at the end of the day

Each moderator posted a quote on communication skills at the beginning of the day. Quotes were carefully chosen so that there was an important message in it for learning. Similarly, a tip was posted from the moderator’s desk, at the end of the day which covered pertinent points about classroom communication skills.

Figure 4: Daily quotes
e. Cross word puzzles:

To maintain participant interest a cross word puzzle was given as a formative assessment tool to gauge participant understanding after two weeks of activities. The participants were paired for the activity and needed to communicate with each other to crack a password to open the crossword file.

A few examples are as follows:

a. communicating with others by virtue of the relative positioning of your bodies- Proxemics

b. rise and fall of voice when we speak – intonation

c. utilising touch in communication – haptics

**Figure 5: Crossword Puzzle**
f. Best participant of the week awards

To motivate the participants to actively participate we announced prizes like the early bird, best innovative presentation, best answer etc. This enhanced student participation and enthusiasm and as the weeks progressed there was a healthy competitive spirit among the participants to win the week’s activity.

Figure 6: Awards to participants
g. Debate between the two groups

We posted questions and split the groups into for and against. A debate was initiated and facilitated by the moderators.

h. Videos from movies and real life situations

Movie clips which depicted classroom communication between the teacher and students were posted using Ed puzzle. Participants had to see the clips and answer the questions posted.

Use of e tools helped in better engagement and interaction. This critical appraisal of the videos was an attempt to enhance problem solving and higher order thinking skills among the participants.

Figure 7: EDpuzzle - Online resource tool
i. Case based scenarios and challenge to participants to solve it in their way

16 case based scenarios of difficult students were posted and participants were asked to select one case without repetition and comment on how they would handle the situation using their communication skills. The participants enjoyed doing this activity and could relate to real life situations where they encounter different types of students in the classroom.

Figure 8: Real classroom scenarios
j. Share their experiences

Participants were asked to share their experiences of a classroom communication which had an impact on them. There was an overwhelming response for the same and it was interesting to learn from each participant's experience.

k. Prompt reply to each mail

As moderators, giving a prompt reply to the participant’s mail is important in an online discussion. It keeps the discussion alive and also makes the participants feel that their mail is adding on to the discussion.

Figure 9: Feedback and response to engage participants
We concluded the session with a post test and discussed the answers in the thread. Participants were asked to reflect on the entire month’s activity.

**Reflections and post moderation session:**

Reflection is a metacognitive process that creates a greater understanding of both the self and the situation so that future actions can be informed by this understanding. Reflecting on what is learnt in the moderation session gave an insight to both the participants and the moderators regarding the learning process and what improvements could be done in future.

**Conclusion**

The combination of the asynchronous and interactive nature of the online learning environment encourages participants to engage in higher-order learning and reflection (Garrison DR 2003). The asynchronous quality of online discussion allows participants time for more careful reflection than is possible in fast-paced classrooms (Garrison RR, Anderson T and Archer W 2000). The time between reading posts and responding, allows participants to reflect on and interpret what others have said before they construct their reply (Ziegahn L 2001). Furthermore, online discussion is interactive, which gives them the chance to collaborate and negotiate meaning in a context where multiple perspectives can be expressed as the participants search for understanding (Garrison DR 2003; Swan K 2005). The observations from our moderation experience were in accordance with the literature reported. Our journey as moderators was a great leaning experience and led to a deeper understanding regarding online discussions.
Take Home Messages

1. Success of online discussions depends on active engagement of participants through interactive sessions.

2. The combination of asynchronous learning and interactive nature of the online learning environment enhances critical thinking skills and reflection among participants.

3. Prior preparation for conducting an online moderation and creating the right atmosphere while conducting the session is of utmost importance.

4. Innovative activities make learning experience for the participants fun and interesting.

Notes On Contributors

Prof. Prashanti Eachempati and Dr. Priti V Puppalwar are 2016 FAIMER fellows who designed and executed the module. They have also compiled their experience in the form of this manuscript.

Prof. Kamal Shigli and Dr. Arunita Jagzape are 2015 FAIMER fellows who gave suggestions for execution of the module.

Dr. Kiran Kumar KS helped during conducting the online activities and manuscript preparation.

Prof. Avinash Supe is the director of GSMC FAIMER regional institute and our faculty advisor. He guided and mentored us in conducting this session.

Prof. Yuvaraj Bhosale was the faculty advisor for the session and helped in finalising the sessions.

Dr. Jaimala V Shetye helped in coordinating with faculty mentors and also in recording videos for the moderation session.

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Appendices

Declarations

The author has declared that there are no conflicts of interest.

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