

New Mexico Project for Children and Youth who are Deafblind

The DISCUSS Model: Pedagogy Online: Consultant as Facilitator

The various roles that a facilitator must play:

The Organizational Role

The Social Role

The Intellectual Role

The Assessment Role

The Organizational Role

This may also be called the managerial role, the administrative role, or the procedural role.

The facilitator has many organizational functions that he/she must carry out in order for the learning community to be successful

Introductions

Distribute a roster: Giving each person a roster helps the participants get a better composite of the community. Mini biographies and pictures also help. The more each participant can envision about the other members of the group the easier it is for them to relate to each other.

Set expectations

Set the tone: Generally, online learning communities are informal. You might want to let the participants know that spelling and grammar are not as important as the message they are trying to convey. The writer should not be overly concerned about the spelling and grammar and the reader should not complain about them or draw any inferences from them. Set the requirements: Right up front the participants should know what will be required of them. Inside the learning communities they should know that they will be expected to read case histories, read online documents, research various resources, watch video clips, try activities in their classroom, keep journals, interact with other community members, etc.

Set the agenda

What will be discussed: It is up to the facilitator to create a "game plan" for the learning community or listserv for the year. What video lessons or streaming video clips will be discussed? In what order will they be discussed? What should the participants be looking for in the videos or clips? Will there be a sharing session each week, each month? What will be the structure of the learning community? Should participants log in or check messages only when they feel like it or should they log in at least every other day?

Set the timetable

What is the schedule? The participants should be told what the timetable looks like. For example, a new case will be examined every other week. Sometimes multiple cases will be discussed at the same time because they deal with the same strand and/or topic at a different age level. The first week the case(s) will be discussed so every participant is expected to have read the case(s). Then they are expected to try an activity in real time. The next week they are expected to discuss their experience with the rest of the community.

Set the rules

Establish the rules: It is important that the rules are established and understood at the very beginning. All the participants should be aware of the rules from the outset. The rules should be broad enough so that they can cover almost all situations.

The Lovelace Rules: We use group rules for the conference which are:

Always acknowledge who you are.

Keep to the business at hand.

Be open and honest.

Treat each other with Respect; no personal attacks.

Do not use profanity.

Keep your sense of humor.

Get the discussion going

On your mark: Beginning a discussion in a learning community is no different than beginning a discussion in a classroom. A good lesson takes planning. A good teacher knows where the lesson will lead the students, what the students should gain from the lesson, what strategies and/or activities will be used to achieve those objectives, and how to assess whether the students met the objectives of the lesson. A good facilitator really has the same responsibilities. It is not enough to simply post a question and see where it leads. The facilitator should have a well thought out plan to get things started. As Stephen Covey writes, "Begin with the end in mind." Know where you want the group to go, why you want them to go there, what you want them to achieve, and how to determine if they did achieve your set goals.

Request/Require participation

Request comments: By asking participants how they feel about comments and ideas it invites the person to contribute to the community at a feeling level, which may be easier for some people than a pure knowledge level.

Assign tasks

There are some things that each participant will be required to do. This will get them involved in the learning. Required participation should be one of the things that is mentioned in the setting of expectations. One-to-one communication: The facilitator of a learning community can use various forms of one-to-one communication to interact with a learning community member. The facilitator can use email, phone calls, fax, snail mail, etc. to contact individual participants for private conversations. These private conversations can be used to get the person to participate. For example, in a phone conversation or email exchange the facilitator may say to a participant, " I didn't see any remarks from you in the general discussion. What do you think about.... That is really interesting. Why don't you share that with the group?" One-to-one email between participants: Side conversations or small group discussions within the larger community are fine and can lead to some really good

ideas. However, not everyone will have access to some of the wonderful side conversations. One of the things that a facilitator should do is to ask participants to always cc the facilitator. That way the facilitator will still be aware of the side conversations and, if interesting things are discussed the facilitator can ask the dyad to share with the larger group and be willing to post the side conversation into the group conference in an appropriate room.

Keep the discussion focused

Keep on track: One of the major responsibilities of the facilitator is to make sure that the discussion remains focused. The facilitator must be aware of what the objectives are and make certain that the participants are moving towards those objectives.

Tangents (but not secants): Not all tangents are non-productive. The facilitator must decide which tangents merit further discussion and which should be cut off.

Sometimes it is a fine line that separates the two. If it is decided that the tangent must be ended then the facilitator must end that line of discussion in a gentle manner. The facilitator could say, for example, that the discussion is an interesting one but that maybe it should be continued by a small group as opposed to the whole community.

Threads

It is important that the facilitator make certain that postings are made in the correct threads. Explain, through a posting, how threads are used and how to create new threads to open up a new discussion. If a discussion in a particular thread is about a lesson on the distributive property it is annoying to see non-related items such as behavior problems, geometry, discrete mathematics, etc, pop up in that thread. Each thread should follow a single topic. **Restate and bring participants together:** One good way to keep the discussion focused is for the facilitator to restate the main points of the discussion and invite comments on the restatement. The facilitator might say, "Let me see if I understand this correctly; So far, we have said that..or Do you all have the same understanding that I have?"

Vary participation

Change amount of individual participation: Often you are pleased to see any participation. But as a facilitator you must look carefully at that participation. Does it involve all or most of the participants or are one or two people controlling all of the discussion? The facilitator must make certain that the group is not dominated by one or two people. If this happens then other participants may back away from interacting with the group with thoughts like, "Who wants to hear from him/her again?" A private conversation with the people who control the discussion might persuade them to give others a chance to join in. Even though the interaction is asynchronous (independent of time-people post whenever they want) ask them to wait and give other participants a chance to express their views first. At the same time the facilitator can invite some of the more quiet participants to enter the discussion.

Change type of participation

Participation doesn't always have to be the posting of a message. The facilitator can ask participants to express their opinions by voting or making a list. Facilitators can create a jigsaw (just like the structure in cooperative learning) and assign different parts to participants. Discussion subgroups can be set up with a summary reported to the entire group. Use the rooms as work rooms to formulate ideas and complete tasks within small groups.

Reach out to participants

Come on in: This is probably the most difficult but most important part of being a facilitator. There is really no learning community without the participants. Even more important, there is no learning without the ideas, comments, and thoughts of the participants. To be a participant a person must participate. The facilitator must make the people in the group feel that they are wanted, needed, an important, valued member of the community.

Know when and how to end a discussion

Moving on: One problem that may exist in a learning community is that of a discussion going on too long, to the point where some members of the community lose interest in the group. As is often said, "Always leave them wanting more." The facilitator must gauge when the time to end a discussion is approaching. This may be based upon several factors. A fall off in the number of postings or the number of different participants posting about a particular discussion may signal the time to move on. The schedule may determine when to move on. If the schedule dictates that it is time to move on but there are still some very interesting discussions taking place about some current issues the facilitator can recommend that the discussion be moved to a small group discussion.

Suggested Activities

Activities to involve participants

Classroom or face-to-face activities

The Roles of the Moderator

Roles of the Respondents

Role		Example of activities
FACILITATOR		Peer discussion participant, mediator
MANAGER		Administrator, archivist, deleting/adding members
FILTER		Deciding upon on-topic rooms; increasing signal/noise ratio; rejects libelous posts; may reject jokes
EXPERT		Compiling or answering Frequently Asked Questions; expert in the topic
EDITOR		Text editor, digest posts, formats posts, may correct spelling, grammar
DISCUSSION LEADER		Poses questions or otherwise promotes discussion Keeps discussion on track
MARKETER		Promotes topics
HELPER		Helps people with needs in the topic area—more general than expert
FIREFIGHTER		Douses or rejects "flames" or protests/problems