



E-Learning Guides

5. Moderating Online Discussions

This guide will be of interest to staff who are managing and facilitating online discussion groups with students. It aims to provide an overview of:

- the main issues involved in supporting students online
- encouraging a community of learners
- tutor and learner roles

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	2
MANAGING STUDENTS ONLINE.....	3
MOTIVATION	4
TYPES OF CONTRIBUTION	5
CHANGING ROLES	5
PLANNING ONLINE ACTIVITIES	7
REFERENCES	9

Introduction

When e-learning is integrated within a module, tutors will be expected to moderate discussions, monitor activities and set the tone for online communication. However experienced you may be as a lecturer, the shift to e-learning brings with it a change in role to which it can take some time to adapt. Rather than presenting in the classroom or lecture theatre, the lecturer becomes a **facilitator of learning**, encouraging and guiding rather than telling and leading. A positive and friendly attitude online goes a long way towards encouraging participation and keeping students motivated.



Although in most programmes the students will have already met face-to-face, it is still important to **establish the group dynamic** in the online environment. The social nature of learning is well-recognised (e.g. Wenger, 1998; Salmon, 2000), and if students are made to feel at ease in the online discussions and encouraged to identify with the community of learners, higher levels of motivation are likely to be maintained. This in turn can help them to attain the required learning outcomes. As each student logs on, the tutor is advised to:

- ◆ Where possible, **welcome** each learner individually
- ◆ Invite them to **introduce themselves** and provide some information on themselves and interests
- ◆ **Identify areas of common interest** and encourage students to respond to each other
- ◆ Allow time for students to become **confident with the technology** - accessing it from work or home is very different to using it on campus
- ◆ Keep messages **short** and easy to read
- ◆ **Be friendly, encouraging and supportive** - first impressions count.

This approach works well when student numbers are manageable, but will not be entirely practical for large undergraduate modules where student numbers are large. In this case, dividing the students into smaller **groups** and welcoming each group rather than each student, is likely to be a more realistic method for managing this process. Students within the groups can then take responsibility themselves for welcoming and encouraging each other.

Managing students online

Reliance on text as the sole means of communication can seem daunting for some students and they may find it difficult to establish an online presence. The lack of physical clues such as body language and facial expressions mean that remarks may be misinterpreted and misunderstood. As a tutor, you will need to be sensitive to these issues, and deal with them appropriately. You will also be expected to set the tone of the discussions, which may vary from formal to informal, depending on the circumstances and the aims of the course. You may decide to set up separate discussion areas for different topics or themes, and have an informal 'chat' or 'café' area for more informal interactions. It's also helpful if you are explicit with regard to your level of involvement as a tutor, highlighting the fact that students should not expect you to respond to every contribution, thus encouraging more peer interaction.

Some students may be more comfortable simply observing the discussions before feeling confident enough to make a contribution themselves. If this continues beyond the introductory stages however, you may feel it necessary to contact the browser or **lurker** directly, via email or telephone, in order to resolve any problems and encourage them to contribute. Similarly, if a participant hasn't managed to log on within a certain agreed period of time, you, or perhaps a designated group leader, will need to take action to find out if there are any technical or other difficulties.

In contrast, there may also be participants who have a tendency to **dominate the discussions** with their own views, and in this case you will also be expected to restore the balance of communication. Similarly, any offensive remarks will have to be dealt with promptly by the tutor and deleted as soon as possible from the discussion thread.

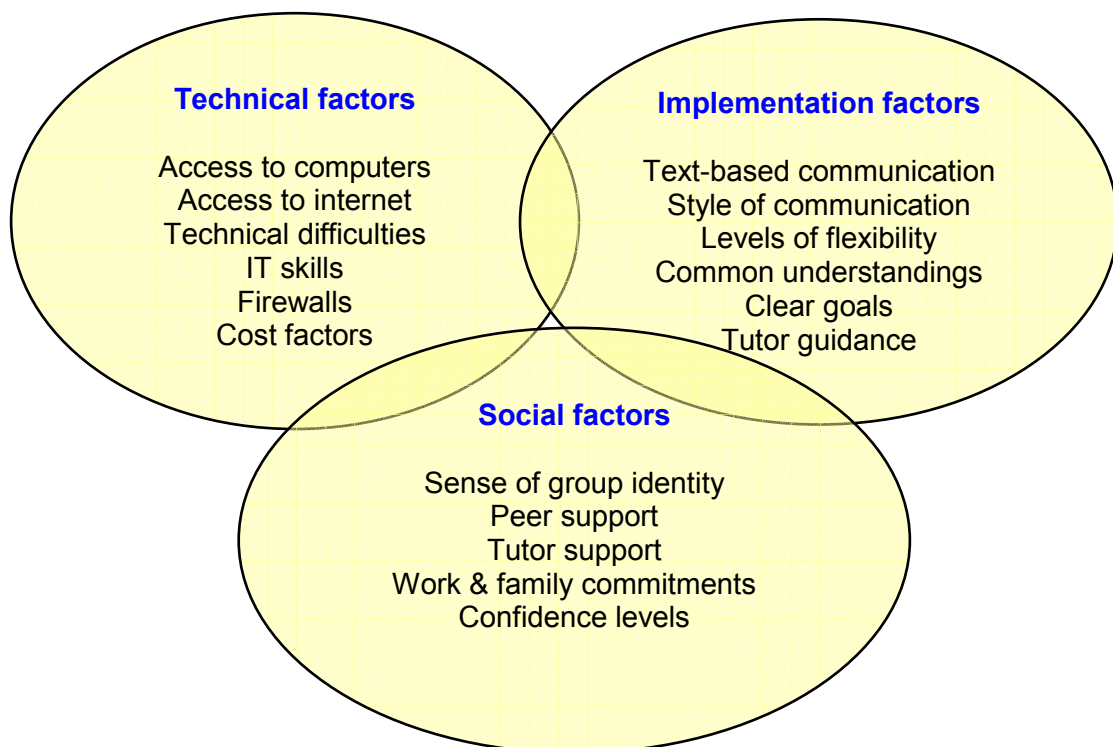
As the module progresses, you will also be **managing online activities and group work**, which can be a demanding task. To avoid misunderstandings and confusion, it is vital that all activities are introduced in a clear and concise manner to ensure that students are confident about what they need to do. Deadlines should be set for completing tasks, and if groups are working in sub-conference areas, regular report-backs to the main conference will help to ensure that everyone is kept involved and informed of the work of each group.

Motivation

To **provide an incentive** for students to log on regularly, it's useful to introduce new activities, information and resources on a regular basis, rather than make everything available at the start. This will help to maintain the students' interest and enhance motivation. **Regular summaries** posted by the tutor will provide a focus and framework for all participants throughout the module. A certain amount of **flexibility** is often required, and tutors should be prepared to make amendments to the programme if necessary. For example, if a particular group activity is ineffective due to lack of participation, it may work better as an individual activity, where each learner is given responsibility for their own contributions. An experienced tutor will instinctively know when change is required.

Motivation can be affected by many factors, including both external and internal drivers which may involve work-related or personal goals. It may be possible for you as a tutor to influence some of these through careful planning and timely interventions, but the student should also take responsibility for overcoming difficulties and committing themselves to participation online, preferably with support and encouragement from their peers.

Factors affecting motivation



(Adapted from Warren, 2000)

Types of Contribution

Researchers have identified a range of contribution types, all of which are valuable at different stages of discussion. For example, Salmon (2000) has identified the following:

Individual Thinking

- Offering up ideas or resources and inviting critique of them
- Asking challenging questions
- Articulating, explaining and supporting positions on issues
- Exploring and supporting issues by adding explanations and examples
- Reflecting on and re-evaluating personal opinions

Interactive Thinking

- Offering a critique, challenging, discussing and expanding the ideas of others
- Negotiating interpretations, definitions and meanings
- Summarising and modelling previous contributions
- Proposing actions based on ideas that have been developed

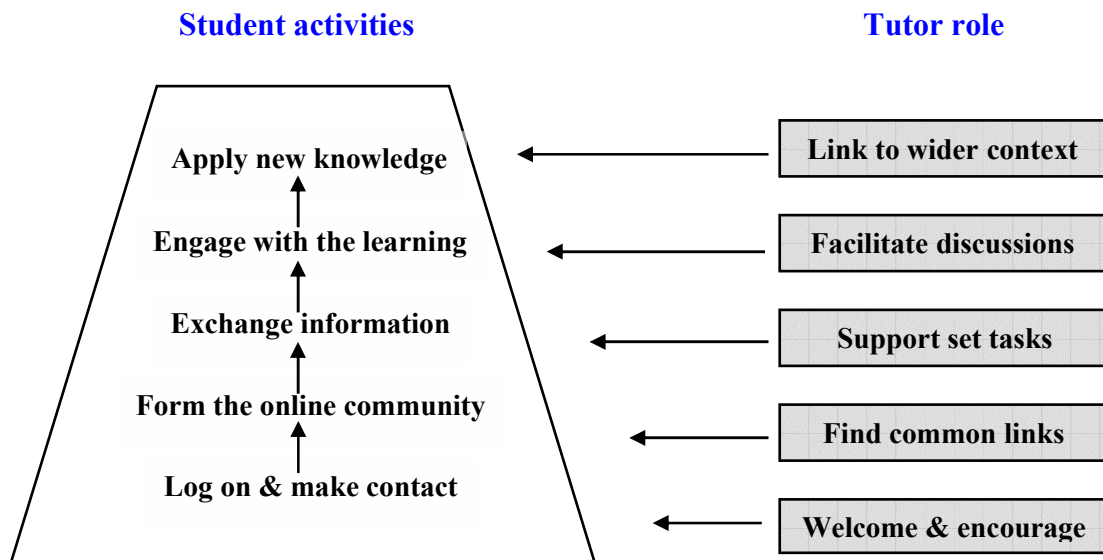
If the discussions are to be taken seriously by the students, they need to be seen as integral to the module, and in some cases, it may be useful to consider **assessing students' contributions** as a proportion of their final grade. If this is the case, then this needs to be made explicit to students from the outset, and criteria set against which they will be assessed.

The immediacy of online communication can make additional demands on a tutor's time, and in order to avoid work overload it is important to **make the students aware of your availability**, including how often you will log on and respond to questions and comments. Making this explicit will prevent disappointment and provide a basis for realistic time management.

Changing Roles

Learning and teaching in the online environment makes new demands on both students and tutors, and inevitably, roles and innovative approaches are still evolving. It is an area of interest for many researchers, and Salmon's recent high profile studies (2000) have identified

five common stages in students' behaviour online which illustrate the gradual development underpinning meaningful collaboration and constructivist learning. The diagram below, which is based on Salmon's 5 Step Model, clearly indicates how the tutor's role should also change in order to support and encourage the students as they progress through these stages.



It is worth bearing in mind however that Salmon's model is based on a fully online environment, and, depending on the context in which you are teaching, you may find it more appropriate to deal with some of these steps face-to-face with your students.

Even with campus-based students however, it is vitally important to allow sufficient time for the early stages of online socialisation and community forming, as these are essential for the establishment of a supportive and friendly environment in which students feel able to interact and collaborate. It is during these stages that the tutor needs to be most supportive, and as students become more confident within the online group, a more facilitative role can be adopted to encourage independent learning and collaborative activity.

Students will expect the lecturer to:

- Fully **integrate** online and classroom-based activities
- **Be explicit** about the role of technology in the learning experience
- **Organise** and **manage** the online environment
- Provide high quality online **resources** and relevant external **links**

- Develop **authentic** and **meaningful online activities**
- Give **clear instructions** on activities, tasks and discussion topics
- **Set the tone** of discussions and provide basic ground rules
- Encourage **collaboration** and **participation**

The students too will be expected to become more independent learners in the new environment. For example the e-learner:

- requires high levels of **self-motivation** to remain focused online
- should be prepared to accept more **responsibility** for their own learning
- needs to be **confident in using the technology**
- should be able to **communicate effectively** in online discussions
- be adept at **time management** to accommodate regular online interaction
- should know when and where to **seek help and support**
- be willing to **engage with the online community of learners**

For students who are new to learning online, it can be helpful to make these role changes clear at the start of a module to ensure the establishment of common understandings and shared expectations.

Planning Online activities

These initial steps are important, but planning meaningful online activities is essential if the students are to remain motivated throughout a module. Purposeful collaboration in authentic tasks such as group work, case studies, role play or analytical discussions will help to ensure full engagement with the learning and lead the students towards the desired learning outcomes. This can often seem daunting for the tutor, as lack of time and resources may not allow for the development of rich, interactive materials to support these activities, but if planned carefully, developing online interaction does not necessarily demand high levels of technical expertise or lots of extra time.

Indeed Salmon (2002) advocates that such online tasks, or ‘e-tivities’, require only a small piece of information, stimulus or challenge to provide the necessary spark. She describes e-tivities as:

- Motivating, engaging and purposeful
- Based on interaction between students, mainly through written message contributions
- Designed and led by an e-moderator
- Asynchronous (take place over time)
- Cheap and easy to run.

In her book 'E-tivities' (see references below), Salmon provides various suggestions for icebreakers and activities to encourage socialisation, debates, knowledge sharing and critical reflection. Extracts can also be found online at www.e-tivities.com. Further details on e-learning activities are also provided in the third guide in this series **Activities for E-Learning**, available to download at apu.gcal.ac.uk.

Some discipline areas however are much more dependent on content and may require additional online materials. If this is the case, it is worth finding out what already exists in your subject area by looking at the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN) web sites where there are lists and databases of relevant resources, and also the subject guides set up within the GCU Library web site.

LTSN	www.ltsn.ac.uk
Library Subject Guides	www.lib.gcal.ac.uk/subject/index.htm

Above all, a moderator in an online discussion should aim to support and encourage the **learning community** and help to establish the group identity. For many students, the opportunity to take part in an online discussion is a liberating one as they may find the confidence to make reflective contributions which they would not feel able to do in a tutorial or seminar. Having time to read and reflect before having to respond is viewed as a major advantage and, with expert moderation by the tutor, can lead to lively and meaningful learning experience.

References

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The full series of GCU E-Learning Guides is available to download from apu.gcal.ac.uk/pages/resources.htm

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