



Ten Tips for Effective Online Facilitation

1. Make everyone feel welcome and heard; create a comfortable environment

Respond publicly to initial introductions in a way that uses them as a springboard for discussion, connecting participants' experiences to the content and raising questions for consideration. After everyone is comfortable, responses can become more global: instead of responding to each message individually, you can post replies responding to issues raised in several messages. Encourage participants to join actively in the orientation session and to get to know one another. Show your personality so that your participants feel as if they know you. Use an informal and friendly tone in your messages. You may also want to include emoticons, or "smileys," short sequences of letters and symbols that are used to emulate emotions and to express the message spirit.

2. Establish clear goals and expectations at the outset

Make clear to participants exactly what you expect from them. You and your team should come to a consensus on what your basic requirements will be. If your participants will be evaluated or graded, make sure that they thoroughly understand the criteria that will be used. You may want to post a weekly checklist in your announcement of each topic, or monitor participants' contributions in Course Statistics and privately remind them if they are not actively contributing to the discussion.

3. Provide behind-the-scenes support via email

Email is a good way to respond to individual problems or to motivate people to participate without embarrassing them. You will want to be in regular email contact with your participants, either by group or individual communication. If participants send you interesting content-related comments via email, encourage them to post these thoughts to the discussion forum as well. If you receive a number of questions by email, you may want to consider posting a special discussion forum for questions or suggestions. This way everyone can benefit from answers to questions of general interest.

4. Foster communication between participants

Phrase your discussion contributions in ways that will encourage further responses from participants, and draw connections between participants' comments. Try to avoid "over-facilitating." You don't need to answer every question and settle every point! You may

want to wait a day or two before you address comments to give participants an opportunity to respond to one another. When you do post messages, try to push the discussion forward by raising additional questions.

5. Model participation and discussion techniques for participants

Pay attention to the tone of the messages that you post, as you will be setting the tone. Try to be both professional and informal, establishing an environment of mutual respect and comfort while avoiding any sense of intimidation. Being inclusive and making connections between participants' comments will model this type of discussion behavior and attitude for your participants as well.

6. Keep the discussion alive; prevent stagnancy

Periodically post "acknowledgment" messages to participants' comments, even if you don't have anything elaborate to contribute on that point. A simple "interesting idea," "good example," "I agree," or similar message can provide the online equivalent of eye contact and a nod of the head: it lets the communicator know that someone is paying attention. Often, this is also a good time to refocus the discussion by posing a new question that stems from the current conversations. Be aware of time. Participants don't tend to check the discussion board as frequently as facilitators do, so part of your role is to make sure the discussion lulls don't last too long. If you keep the discussion alive and stimulating, your participants will have an incentive to check more frequently. At a minimum, you should be reading and contributing to the discussion at least every other day, more often if possible especially if you have an active group.

7. Keep the discussion on-topic

Keep the majority of communication in the public forum, even if you find that some participants prefer to share their thoughts with you via email. Do not dilute the discussions on the discussion board with too much private one-on-one communication. Keep the discussions on track; rein in long digressions; push people forward on the topic. If comments drift off-topic, be creative. Use subtle or humorous messages, or perhaps a humorous graphic or photo, to redirect discussion. Send personal emails if necessary.

8. Guide participants through the curriculum

Send out email messages to all participants to announce each new topic, introduce the next assignment, and remind participants of upcoming due dates for activities. This can also be a good opportunity to tie readings, activities, and discussion questions together for participants.

9. Make sure the audience and the content are in sync

Observe participants' behavior and responses to assignments and adjust your facilitation strategies or curriculum content and presentation as necessary. Encourage participants to reflect on the experience and to provide feedback in the online discussions or via email.

10. Bring closure to each topic before moving on

It is valuable to provide "we are all together" moments to segue from one workshop session or course assignment to the next. These pauses help to keep the participants united as they establish a collective understanding of what they have completed and what they are about to do. Topic summaries provide this closure in part, but a number of other types of activities can be used to provide these synergistic moments.



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Last updated: Aug 2012

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