

Facilitating Online Learning: Effective Strategies for Moderators

(Book Review)

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Textbook Details:

Facilitating Online Learning: Effective Strategies for Moderators

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Atwood Publishing, Madison, WI, USA

<http://www.atwoodpublishing.com/>

215 pages, Year 2000

ISBN 1 891859 33 1

With the advent of the 21st century, educators are being thrust into a new teaching environment: the cyber-classroom. In an attempt to stay competitive, many courses are being offered through higher learning institutions such as educational software platforms such as Blackboard (<http://www.blackboard.com/>) and WebCT (<http://www.webct.com/>). Often, in-house training seminars attempt to target the manner in which course content is delivered through these platforms, but fail to inform teachers of the importance and need for creating healthy communication between participants within the course. With this in mind, *Facilitating Online Learning: Effective Strategies for Moderators* uniquely focuses on the teacher/moderator as a communication agent within the online learning environment. In *Facilitating Online Learning: Effective Strategies for Moderators*, Collison, Elbaum, Haavind, and Tinker (2000) address this critical issue, noting that “course design and presentation mechanisms - together with excellence in online dialogue facilitation - separate the excellent online course from the mediocre or weak one” (p. xiv).

Clearly written and well organized, the purpose of *Facilitating Online Learning: Effective Strategies for Moderators* is to enlighten moderators to best practices for creating rich dialogue as well as fostering learning between participants enrolled in online courses. As staff members of the Concord Consortium - a non-profit research and development organization based in Concord Massachusetts - the authors are devoted to transforming education through the implementation of information technology. Using two educational cohorts as a medium for exploration - namely The Virtual High School® Cooperative (<http://www.govhs.org/website.nsf>) and the International Netcourse Teacher Enhancement Coalition (<http://intec.concord.org/>), the text is rich with examples of effective online discussion forums designed to maximize learning goals within an e-learning format. Such experience of the authors results in a good balance between the theory and the practicality for conveying their important message. The following is a brief chapter-by-chapter review of *Facilitating Online Learning: Effective Strategies for Moderators*.

Book Content

In Chapter One: “Principles that Support Effective Moderation,” Collison et al. posit three guiding principles for effectively moderating online courses which include:

- Moderating takes place in both professional and social context.
- The style of “Guide-on-the Side” (vs. “Sage on the Stage”) is the most appropriate for leading a virtual learning community.
- Online moderation is a craft that has general guiding principles and strategies that can be learned by prospective moderators.

With these principles in place, Collison et al. maintain that participants want and require a sense of community within online learning environments. Additionally, with a “guide-on-the-side” approach to facilitation, the moderator serves to guide participants as they create a good bit of the learning experience through their dialog

with each other. Finally, as this new avenue of course delivery may be a bit daunting for the first time moderator, the reader is assured that new skills are possible in the navigation of this “new landscape.”

Chapter Two: “Negotiating Space: Forms of Dialogue and Goals of Moderating” identifies patterns of discussion most common within the culture of an online course. Collison et al. describe such patterns as “forms of dialogue” which include social, argumentative, and pragmatic forms. While social and argumentative forms of dialogue tend to inhibit discussion, a pragmatic approach helps to maintain a productive focus, aiding in goal attainment of the learning environment. Such goals according to the authors include building community, shaping a supportive culture of respect, and cultivating reasoned discourse.

Key Facilitator Roles is the focus of chapter three. Here, Collison et al. detail the three major roles of moderators: guide-on-the-side, instructor/project leader, and group process facilitator. According to the authors, the guide-on-the-side approach allows the moderator to assist participants in constructing their own patterns of dialogue. Additionally, such an approach allows the participants to shape the culture of the environment more so than the moderator.

In addition to a “guide-on-the side” role, the authors suggest that moderators act as project leaders within the course. This role involves designing a regular and manageable feedback loop, separating content from process issues, and facilitating peer support within the online classroom environment.

Finally, Collison et al. encourage moderators to act as the leaders of group processes. The authors note that such a role involves leading introductory, culture building activities, providing virtual “hand-holding” to the “digitally-challenged,” as well as acknowledging the diversity of the participants. This role also involves organizing posts and discussions as well as balancing private emails and public discussion postings.

Being a communications major, Chapter 4, “Healthy Online Communication” was one of this reviewer’s favorites. This chapter offers sound advice and strategies for maintaining the functionality of online learning environments through the communication process. The authors, through multiple examples, identify how moderators can create, maintain, and evaluate the communication culture within the course.

Chapters 1 through 4 give the reader basic principles and practices for creating an effective communication environment within an online course. Additionally—dubbed advanced strategies—Collison et al. have developed a “palette of voices, tones and critical thinking strategies” that a moderator might implement to improve the on-line communication and learning experience. Chapters 5 through 8 speak to these advanced strategies.

Chapter 5 introduces moderators to the concept of “Voice” within an online educational culture. Much like a role player within the discussion, the authors encourage the facilitator to act as generative guide, conceptual facilitator, reflective guide, personal muse, mediator, and role player. According to the authors, the concept of “voice” gives the facilitator many options for achieving and maintaining effective interactions within various discussions. The situation generally dictates which role or “voice” the facilitator might choose.

Chapter 6 discusses the concept of “Tone” that identifies the importance of a moderator offering an empathetic and nurturing approach to those participants who are struggling with the content or technological aspects of the course. The authors expertly discuss how a moderator—through electronic communication—can effectively craft such an emotive expression. Nurturing, curious, analytical, neutral and whimsical tones are explored.

Chapter 7 discusses several advanced “Critical Thinking Strategies” available to moderators who are interested in producing ideas within the group. Acting as a “guide-on-the-side” the authors suggest that a facilitator should guide the direction of the discussion, aid in the sorting of ideas, and help participants focus on key points in an attempt to sharpen the focus of online dialogue.

Additionally, for a rich learning experience and idea generation, Collison et al. suggest certain key ways for deepening the dialogue between participants. Here, facilitators are encouraged to promote full spectrum of questioning, offer opportunities for participants to make connections, and support an environment that honors multiple perspectives. For optimum success, Collison et al. firmly note that ownership of the direction of the dialogue must remain with the participants as the facilitator remains a “guide-on-the-side.”

In concluding the book, Chapter 8: “Roadblocks and Getting Back on Track” identifies several typical barriers that moderators may face while facilitating an online course. Here, Collison et al. note that even the best

moderator may inadvertently block dialogue within the course by “hijacking the dialogue” or letting key discussion points “whoosh right by.”

Based on the experiences of the authors in maintaining effective communication and learning in online offerings, *Facilitating Online Learning: Effective Strategies for Moderators* is a beneficial tool for any instructor looking to maximize the learning potential of their own online course. What makes this text especially helpful is the fact that it centers on best practices for maintaining the communication culture within online courses.

While this is an outstanding text in the field of online education implementation, a few constructive comments are offered. As this reviewer feels that training for online course offerings is often overlooked in educational institutions, “end-of-chapter” assignments targeted toward the communication development process might better guide a novice online instructor through the design process. Additionally, as the online education environment is guided by visual stimuli, an accompanying CD-ROM that offers computer-based examples that guide moderators through the communication development stages of course development would be a nice addition to any further editions of this book.

Summary

From their collective expertise in such cohort projects as The Virtual High School® Cooperative and the International Netcourse Teacher Enhancement Coalition, Collison et al. provide a practical and valuable resource for moderators who find themselves navigating their way through the 21st century virtual classroom. The authors provide a unique focus on the teacher/moderator as communication agent within the online learning environment. Through their experiences with online teaching, Collison et al. keenly explore and proclaim the power of dialogue and communication in online teaching and learning environments. Expertly blending theory with actual practice, this book is an excellent guidebook for the first time moderator as well as the seasoned veteran. For the instructor looking to create an online course that is rich and full of impact via the communication process, *Facilitating Online Learning: Effective Strategies for Moderators* is the text to refer to.