



Facilitating Discussion Forums in Online Language Learning

Helping learners to develop autonomous learning habits is one of the responsibilities of being an online facilitator. In spite of this, your facilitator presence needs to be maintained throughout an online course or activity – learners embrace independent learning in different ways and at different times. Your facilitation may become more subtle as the course progresses; however, learners will always look to you for instruction, guidance, and confirmation that they are progressing in positive ways. Learners will expect ongoing support and feedback on language use that other learners cannot provide them with. Try not to forget, as well, you are an active member of the community and will need to maintain consistent presence, just as any participating member does.

Keeping a balanced but strong facilitator presence will help your learners stay engaged in the online space. Your facilitator presence is part of a larger teaching presence among the relationships described in the Community of Inquiry framework. Your teaching presence helps learners establish their own social presence and cognitive presence, helping to develop community in an online setting. Among these three presences, your teaching presence is the presence that you as a course facilitator have the most control over. With your presence, you should be highlighting the features of the course design, such as deadlines, assignments, course support, and course

materials, so that language learners can focus on developing their language skills. You should be providing direct instruction and feedback, and suggestions for improvement. You should be responding to concerns and problems that you notice in the developing community or with an individual learner. You should also be modelling course participation so that language learners have examples of effective communication in the target language that they can observe and learn from.

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The discussion forum is a valuable course space that you can use to build your facilitator presence. Facilitator participation in a discussion forum requires planning and a sense of balance between communicating too much and not enough. On the next page are some tips for facilitating a discussion forum in online language learning.



Tips for Facilitating Discussion Forums

HAVE A PLAN

Take time to plan what you want your discussion forum involvement to be. This plan may depend on the nature of your learners. For example, if they are generally responsive and have much online experience, then plan to post less frequently and challenge them more in your posts. Your plan may change as the course progresses, but starting out with one is a good strategy.

POST SPECIFIC REQUIREMENTS

Be as explicit as you can about any posting requirements and assessments associated with the discussion forums. Develop a criteria for successful posts and communicate this criteria to your learners. Learners will need information repeatedly, so add reminders at the end of your own discussion forums posts and course announcement tool. If you have useful posting guidelines for learners, make them explicit as well. See our resource [Discussion Forum Tips for Learners](#).

STRIKE A BALANCE

Try to maintain a balance between providing guidance and dominating the forum. In language learning contexts, maintaining this balance can be challenging because learners will want to communicate with you as a form of practice. Remember that there is no universal balance; it depends on factors such as your group of learners, your teaching style, the content, and the goals of the course.

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USE OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

Try ending your discussion posts with open-ended questions. Appeal to the class to continue the discussion, and do not be afraid to post questions based on your own undecidedness or lack of knowledge on a particular topic. Elicit opinions when you can. You can even point to this strategy explicitly as a conversation technique that your learners may want to adopt for their own posts. Provide model answers to open-ended questions that are specific and manageable.



MAKE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN LEARNERS

Refer to people by their names, cite information that they have communicated in previous posts, and connect it to the discussion. Ask them to comment directly on someone else's post if you think they might have a relevant comment to add. Discussion forums can easily start to resemble short answer assignments if you do not actively connect learners and foster discussion.

ADJUST DISCUSSION FORUM GROUP SIZES

If you have your learners in discussion groups, try changing the members around and try adjusting the sizes of the groups. Sometimes combinations of specific people just produce too much or too little forum posts. For learners studying in a second language, either of these extremes will be difficult. It make take a few adjustments to find the ideal group size for that particular class of learners.

PROVIDE A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Language is linked with culture. Learners will look to you for a cultural perspective on some of their discussions and will often have usage questions directly related to cultural norms and behavior. Provide this perspective for them when you can. Include Intercultural Communication material to supplement the course content when you feel it is relevant.

PROVIDE DISCUSSION SUMMARIES

Posting a summary of a discussion will help learners to focus on what you feel are the important concepts and language from that discussion. Learners can use the summary as a comprehension check or as a way to review discussion later. You may even invite learners to post their own summaries throughout the course as a language exercise.

BE PRESENT OUTSIDE OF THE DISCUSSION FORUM

Strong teacher presence does not always mean communication within a discussion forum. You can reinforce your presence in the forum by communicating outside of the forum. Building strong individual relationships with learners will give them the language confidence to communicate more effectively in the discussion forum.

- Use a course announcement to comment on discussion forum activity.
- Contact learners individually by email or phone to offer positive comments about their own discussion forum participation or to offer suggestions.
- Through assignment comments and feedback, encourage learners to bring their ideas into the discussion forum.



SUPPORT A VARIETY OF LANGUAGE FLUENCIES

If possible, and without bombarding your learners with technology that may be confusing to them, try posting using audio, video, and other visuals. Supplementing your text posts with a relevant photo can be enough to provide visual media to enhance your communication. Posting with audio or video media will provide your learners with a deeper language experience that includes listening to language, rather than simply reading it.

USE APPROPRIATE TASKS

Forums should be focused on a specific task or discussion question. Learners become more engaged where there is an appropriate task that they need to collaborate with other learners to accomplish. When crafting your discussion forum activities, if you find that any forum has more than one activity or question associated with it, narrow down your activity or provide a separate forum for each one.

TRACK DEVELOPMENT

Towards the end of a course, it may be worthwhile to look at an individual learner's discussion posts throughout the course. See if there is any noticeable progression in their language development. Notice if they have tried out new language strategies and vocabulary. Offer them some feedback and point out what you noticed.

