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Twelve tips for engaging learners in online discussions

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ABSTRACT

Educators play a critical role in designing, facilitating and delivering an online medical education experience. Their teaching decisions and practices shape learners' experiences and affect their achievements. This is true even in large-scale, open educational contexts such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), which are designed based on self-regulated and collaborative learning. Thus, it is particularly important to explore the ways in which educators can effectively support online or blended learning through their interactions with learners. The 12 tips in this article aim to provide medical educators with guidelines for creating engaging online discussions that both support and challenge learners' understanding. The advice draws on a recent study examining the experiences and activities of 24 educators in MOOC discussion areas, and how their learners engaged with them. It provides practical recommendations on facilitating online discussions, producing engaging discussion tasks, and creating a balanced educator presence.

Introduction

Educators, as one of the contributors to the learning process, have a critical role in facilitating different aspects of learning in online courses (Evans and Myrick 2015). They support learners by validating their understanding and contributions (Danish et al. 2017) and facilitate their academic growth through feedback and the regular exchange of ideas (Chandrasekaran et al. 2015). Additionally, they play a key role in creating and encouraging peer discussions by posing probing questions or comments and helping learners to consider them in depth (Sharif and Magrill 2015). Similarly, with appropriate facilitation strategies, educators can prompt critical thinking, encourage learners to explain their opinions, and elicit conflicting ideas (Chandrasekaran et al. 2015). If online discussions lack such inputs from educators, learners tend to limit their conversations to safe topics and may therefore miss potential opportunities for meaningful learning (Helm 2013).

Discussion areas are one of the main tools for educators to support learners in online or blended courses delivered through eLearning platforms or Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs); they are a vital way to understand group dynamics, learners and their activities and issues (Najafi et al. 2015; Nylén et al. 2015; Wong and Zhang 2018). They also enable educators to identify what learners have understood well and what may need further attention. Consequently, discussion areas help educators 'to become more adaptive to learners' (Murphy and Fortner 2014, p. 238). Likewise, they enable learners to exchange ideas, seek help, clarify doubts, and share personal and professional experiences (Garrison 2009;

Chaturvedi et al. 2014), which aids in overcoming any feelings of isolation (Chen et al. 2016).

This article brings together knowledge from across the sector and offers tips and practical recommendations for creating, facilitating and supporting productive discussions in these areas. It draws on evidence from Goshtasbpour et al.'s (2020) study of educators' experiences and activities in discussion areas, and from other literature in the field. Although the study focuses on MOOC educators, these tips are also applicable to other online or blended contexts.

Tip 1

Be aware of the diversity of your learners

You may be an educator on a small online course, or on a MOOC with thousands of learners. Large open courses, such as MOOCs, are less likely to have entry requirements and thus attract a diverse range of learners, with varying knowledge, experience, language proficiency and motivations for engaging with the course (Morris et al. 2015; Zheng et al. 2016). This often means learners have different goals and needs, and educators need to be aware of this. Do not assume that your learners all have the same prior experience and knowledge or that they are all familiar with the terms and the references from your context. Consider flexibility and variety in your discussion activities to encourage diverse viewpoints and more inclusive participation in discussions. Be prepared to engage in discussions at all levels, provide a range of content and examples appropriate for a diverse audience, and remind learners that interacting

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

with a range of people from different backgrounds will benefit them cognitively, socially and professionally, irrespective of why they took the course.

Tip 2

Set boundaries and conditions for how the discussion is going to work

Many learners will be familiar with online messaging and chat functions through the use of social media applications, and the transition to a discussion area for learning and teaching may seem intuitive and straightforward for the current generation of learners. However, it is important to establish the boundaries and expectations when it comes to learning and teaching within this form of discussion area. This includes house rules about things such as posting anonymously, the use of language and an appropriate and respectful tone, being open and having respect for others' perspectives, and recognising that learners are unique individuals. These expectations about what is and is not acceptable should be set early on, helping to ensure the creation of an open and safe environment for discussion. Information about how this will be managed may also help to prevent any confusion if and when situations arise. It is also important to provide clarity on who 'owns' the discussion area: is it purely learner-led or will staff also interact? Whatever approach is taken, clear guidance should be given so that learners know who will be in the discussion area and when and understand all the interactions involved in the course.

Tip 3

Ensure the discussion provides an additional learning goal

Discussion areas in online or blended courses are used as a tool to support learner engagement and provide a space for group activities and discussion with peers and educators. However, the use of these areas does not, and should not, be seen as synonymous with online learning. The way discussions are incorporated into the learning journey should be carefully considered and either linked to specific learning outcomes or used to support learners in acquiring learning objectives. This decision should be made during the development of the course, when the learning journey is being organised, and can be done through the use of existing, validated planners (see Supplementary Material). It should be clear how and why discussions are going to be used, and who will moderate them. This will provide valuable insight that can be communicated to learners at the beginning of their course and serve to set expectations. The team or individual who moderates the discussions should include an educator, so as to ensure that learning and critical thinking are scaffolded and that learners receive the correct information.

Tip 4

Design discussion tasks or lead-ins that encourage participation

Discussion tasks are key to productive discussions. Tasks and questions that require learners to go beyond exploring ideas and concepts and encourage them to integrate and apply new information are more likely to result in learning and productive discussions. A good example of such tasks are case study-based or problem-based prompts that foster discussions based on a real-world perspective that learners can relate to (Garrison 2017). Likewise, open-ended questions or prompts stimulate more participation, particularly if they encourage multiple perspectives and involve the evaluation, analysis and synthesis of information. By contrast, questions that have only one correct answer or simply require information recall tend to limit learners' involvement, and once the right answer is shared, the discussion is likely to end (Andrews 1980). It is therefore important to design tasks that are relevant to the content, require learners to think or apply what they have learned, and are supported by feedback (Hew 2018). In addition, consider how the collection of tasks will be integrated into a coherent learning experience in order to meet the intended learning outcomes.

Tip 5

Have criteria for choosing which comments to respond to

Large and open online courses, such as MOOCs, can elicit many hundreds or even thousands of comments in the discussion areas. It is not possible for educators to respond to all the comments in this context. In such a situation, criteria for responding to comments are useful. Goshtasbpour (2019, unpublished PhD thesis) interviewed a number of MOOC educators and found that they had two main criteria. The first is the quality of a learners' contribution – whether it is considered and reflective, comes from a critical engagement with the material or is a specific question. The second relates to whether the comment falls within the expertise of the educator or is connected to content that the educator has developed. While it tends to be easiest to respond to specific questions or comments that spark your interest, it is also important to respond to 'common' areas of interest, where many comments focus on the same topic, and to misconceptions or erroneous comments, which may take the discussion in the wrong direction. In relation to expertise, it is good practice to tag or mention another educator (you can tag a person in a comment with an @ so that they are notified of the comment) if a comment falls within their area of expertise rather than your own. It is also valuable, when several learners have commented on the same issue, to draw them into one conversation. This not only allows you to respond to several comments at once, but also encourages learners to respond to their peers' questions themselves.

Tip 6

Ensure continuity of discussion when you contribute

In most cases, an educator's comment tends to end the discussion and reduce the opportunities for turn-taking and collaborative activities (Goshtasbpour et al. 2020). Sometimes this is because learners have received the validation or information they sought from an educator, but it can also be due to the educator's *move*, i.e. the

communicative purpose of their contribution. A discussion can expand or end depending on the moves within it. That is, if an educator's comment is of the *acknowledge* or *give* type, it is less likely to generate further dialogue; however, if it is a *demand* type, it will require learners to reflect and respond (Wells 1996), and is, therefore, more likely to encourage continued discussion. Another aspect of an educator's move is to facilitate learners' progress to higher-order learning. This means that as an educator, you should contribute comments that push learners to go beyond brainstorming, exploring a concept and exchanging ideas. Your contribution should help them reflect, integrate new information, and if possible, draw appropriate conclusions. Also, consider the timing of your comments; on the one hand, you need to give learners enough time for this process (based on your discussion task), but on the other, delaying your comments for too long (more than about a week after a learner's contribution) will reduce the chances of learners returning to the discussion.

Tip 7

Provide a balanced 'instructor presence' in discussions

Based on the Community of Inquiry framework, educators' activities in discussion areas form their 'instructor presence,' and this must be balanced between 'teaching presence' and 'social presence' if both the academic and social needs of the learners are to be met (Garrison 2016). Teaching presence (activities for the design, facilitation and delivery of the course) is required to enable critical thinking and higher-order learning (Garrison 2017), while social presence (activities to develop interpersonal relationships within the group) is needed to make learners feel comfortable participating in the discussion and sharing ideas. You should balance your social and teaching contributions to discussions, bearing in mind that this balance will shift as learners progress socially and cognitively. At the beginning of a course, social activities are required to ensure that connections are made and a welcoming environment and sense of community is created. Examples of such activities include asking learners about their likes, dislikes and study preferences, sharing details about life outside the course, answering learners' non-academic questions, using humour, and complimenting and offering praise. As the learning evolves, social activities will recede to the background, and academic challenges will take precedence.

Tip 8

Support but also challenge learners' thinking and understanding

Our research (Goshtasbpour et al. 2020) shows that educators' teaching activities focus largely on facilitating discussions (i.e. encouraging or acknowledging learner contributions; drawing in learners; prompting discussion; or trying to reach consensus/understanding). This indicates that learners' thinking is mostly being supported rather than challenged, and as a result, they may be less likely to reach higher levels of learning (i.e. integrating information and proposing solutions). Thus, as an educator, it is important to provide not only facilitation but also direct

instruction (e.g. identifying misconceptions, providing clarifying information or posing questions); This ensures that learners receive systematic scaffolding for learning and are directed to higher levels of cognitive presence (Garrison 2016).

Tip 9

Provide explicit academic leadership

To create a learning community and ensure that discussions do not end prematurely or diverge inappropriately, explicit academic leadership is required. This includes identifying areas of agreement and disagreement, focusing or refocusing the discussion on the key concepts when necessary, identifying misconceptions, providing clarifying or additional information where needed, and summarising the discussion. Summarising discussions and bringing them together at different points during a course are essential for building and communicating a shared understanding (Garrison 2017). Our study (Goshtasbpour et al. 2020) shows that this occurs only rarely in large courses, and as a result, learners may not be provided with enough opportunities to recognise their misconceptions and confirm a shared understanding. Therefore, ensure that either you, or a learner, summarise the discussion. This can be done outside discussion areas and through weekly or bi-weekly emails. In this way, you also ensure learners who did not attend the discussion are kept informed and do not miss any information or agreed actions.

Tip 10

Direct your social contributions towards shared academic goals and group cohesion

While social contributions are socio-emotionally focused to help build interpersonal relationships and create a comfortable learning environment for sharing and exchanging ideas, they must also be purposeful and directed towards the shared academic goal of the group. In other words, academic association with the group must be stronger than interpersonal relationships. This helps create discussion areas that allow open communication and foster the group cohesion and sense of belonging needed for deep learning (Garrison 2016). Remind learners of the course goals and expectations and ask them to analyse them critically in groups. This enables learners to identify with the group's purpose and to clarify expectations while building interpersonal relationships. Also, do not restrict your cohesive communications to greetings and using learners' names; use group references such as 'we,' 'our group' or 'our class,' provide encouragement (e.g. 'as a group, you did a great job of reporting your case-study') and share your personal experiences.

Tip 11

Acknowledge lurking and try to minimise barriers for lurkers' contributions

Not all learners choose to contribute to discussions. Some prefer to engage by reading rather than posting

contributions. Such learners are known as lurkers. Nonetheless, just like active learners, they join discussions to seek information and gain understanding (Mazuro and Rao 2011). Lurkers may prefer to work individually without disturbance, may not be clear about whether they should participate, or may lack the academic or social confidence to contribute (Arnason et al. 2017). Thus, while respecting lurkers' learning preferences, you can encourage them to participate more actively once these barriers are minimised or removed. To this end, consider lurking as the first step towards more active participation. Provide clearer guidelines for participation and forming a response (if needed, model a response), incorporate some social aspects in discussions, allow some informality in discussing the content to reduce communication barriers, and remind learners that reading others' contributions is similar to reading books and articles, and will develop their understanding only to a limited extent.

Tip 12

Choose your teaching team and educator roles strategically

In some large courses such as MOOCs, a team of educators facilitate discussions. Our research shows that the educator's role (e.g. lead educator, educator, mentor) within a team influences learners' engagement with discussions. We found that the most engaging educator profile is one that makes the most teaching and content-related contributions and the fewest social comments. In addition, their teaching activities focus mainly on direct instruction, which means they are more proactive in identifying misconceptions or misunderstandings, providing feedback, clarifying information and supplying additional information and resources where needed. Their facilitating strategies also place more emphasis on inviting additional learners to a discussion, whereas less engaging educators tend to encourage those already in a discussion to continue it. These findings can inform the formation of your teaching team and how you divide the responsibilities within it.

Conclusions

Effectively engaging learners with online discussions is not an easy task and requires careful consideration during the design, development and delivery of a course. As an educator, it is important to consider your learners when setting the aims, expectations, and tasks within a discussion. If facilitation of discussions involves a team, be clear about how you will collaborate in the most effective way. Whilst the course is running, ensure your presence and contributions meet both the academic and social needs of learners and that you provide academic leadership, but be wary that your contributions and presence do not negatively affect group cohesion and the continuity of discussions, as learners may prioritise engaging with you rather than with their peers.

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