


INTRODUCTION

Unfortunately, most of our faculty development related to online learning has been regarding designing courses. Yet where do we faculty spend most of our time? We spend it facilitating the courses, semester after semester. However, one of the reasons more one provides more guidance about online facilitation is that many people assume teaching online is more or less the same as traditional instruction. In fact, nothing can be further from the truth (Fink, 2003). Online learning shifts the focus from teacher to learners, and our role as educators from “all knowing experts” dispensing knowledge, to facilitators of more self-directed and independent learning. How do we do that? Where do we find good examples? Where are the boundaries for facilitating online learning? This paper provides recommendations to answer these and many more questions about facilitating online learning.

BRAVING THE WATERS OF FACILITATION

Once ready to leap into facilitation as a new approach to teaching, most faculty wade gradually into these strange pedagogical waters rather than dive in headfirst. However, if we as faculty focus on developing a personalized form of facilitation, the once scary or risky process can very quickly shift to thrilling (Lari, 2009).

Self-Assessment

In building new facilitation strategies, we can begin by examining how well we facilitate our campus-based classes. A simple self-assessment tool can aid in this effort. Once we begin teaching online, opportunities for continued self-reflection (Schon, 1983) abound and we can examine our online facilitation efforts through tools related to these activities (See Appendix A). By examining our efforts in specific areas (such as feedback for students, complete preparation of online materials, coordinating online small groups, cultivating safety and respect among participants, etc.), we will have specific direction for improving our online facilitation strategies.

Making Facilitation Personal

Crafting our own version of facilitative teaching is a renewing and invigorating experience for faculty when pursued as discovery (Collison et al, 2000; King, 2011). Imagine pealing back the layers of our core teaching values, and purposes, one by one, and continuing to discover opportunities to support students through facilitative teaching strategies. Reflective practice can guide such professional learning efforts in effective ways fostering faculty’s lifelong learning (Cranton, 2001; Schon, 1983).

In considering this personal and professional learning, we recognize individual differences will lead all professors to unique specific details and pathways in their professional growth. Providing space for freedom, creativity and new possibilities builds a fertile environment for learning and change (Cranton, 1996; Wlodlowski, 2001).

DEFINING FACILITATION
Facilitation Defined

Facilitating online courses incorporates many possibilities, but by basic definition facilitation means “to assist the progress of a person/program” or “to make easier or less difficult” (Random House Dictionary, 2011). Therefore, the definition shifts our focus to what we do in our online courses to support student learning progress and how we ease that experience even at a distance.

Certainly, some educators focus on facilitation in their traditional, face to face classes, but not all do. Because online learning is so much more dependent on self-discipline and initiative than traditional classes (Mullen & Tallent-Runnels, 2006), students need more support by their instructors to bridge the gap in the learning process. Depending on their traditional teaching style, some educators consider their role differently. However, the literature reveals that in online learning contexts a facilitative style is more successful (An, Shim, & Lim, 2009; Haavind, 2006; Lockyer et al, 2006).

Online Facilitation

Such facilitation may include, but is not limited to virtual office hours, additional online support materials, more frequent and detailed feedback, assignment installments, and transparency in grading and evaluation criteria (i.e., rubrics), etc. The following sections briefly introduce each of the suggestions for advancing online facilitation practice.

Virtual Office Hours. The instructor can setup virtual meeting with the students using different kind of online communications such as Skype, Adobe Connect, Elluminate, etc. To do so, instructors use a webcam to video conference with the students, and address student questions about content, policies or assignments. The video connection can greatly improve communication in situations of distress and confusion. Moreover, video connections with the instructor, increases the rapport between student and teacher which many find essential to successful learning (Brookfield, 1995, 2009; Cranton, 2001). This suggestion emerges from the importance to communicate with students, hear their specific concerns, and provide complete resolution of any outstanding issues.

Additional Online Support Materials. Posting handouts and instructions for students is very helpful, because they can return to them at any time as a reference for their work. This form of support is much more important in online classes than on-campus classes, because students do not meet with the instructor each week and do not have as many opportunities to clarify assignment expectations or clarify content questions (An, Shin, & Lim, 2009; Fink 2003). Posting previous projects or examples helps students understand the instructor’s expectations, while it may have it drawbacks of restricting creativity.

More Frequent Feedback. Providing frequent feedback for students work is essential in facilitating the learning progress at a distance. Replying to students’ posts, whether publicly or privately, as well as commenting on their assignments and their group work are forms of frequent feedback. Research and experience demonstrate that compared to a traditional classroom, most online students need ongoing feedback from their instructor in order to cultivate the instructor-student rapport and sustain their course participation (Collison, Elbaum, Haavind, & Tinker, 2000).

More Detailed Feedback. Offering feedback that is more detailed to online students helps them build their understanding of the course content and assignment expectations. Such detailed feedback includes providing specific comments for each student regarding their work, participation, posts, and activities. Most LMS now provide easier ways to report such feedback privately, but if the system is cumbersome, university email is also an option. Professors have to
develop streamline ways to meet this need while handling the heavy demand of online instruction (Conceicao, & Lehman, 2011).

**Assignment Installments.** One of the methods that online faculty find helpful in providing structure for students is to divide assignment into several segments or milestones. Many online learners lack the self-directed learning and self-discipline skills needed to succeed in online courses (Collison, et. al, 2000; Dirix & Smith, 2004). Multiply this problem by three or four and you have a wayward small online group, unable to achieve their goals. Faculty who provide consistent structure to such groups see much greater learning occur, as well as empowered collaborative learning in action.

Consider that for an online group project the following milestones could be used: (1) students submit their team topic and names, (2) each group submits a list of group tasks and who is assigned to each, (3) the groups submit progress reports at the project midpoint, (4) the groups submit their final group project to the discussion board where they can engage their classmates in a discussion about it, and (5) each student submits a private reflective statement for what they learned from their participation and the project/assignment. This approach does not require the instructor to force compliance: it provides structure, enabling students to build the skills they need for online and workplace success.

**Rubrics.** One of the most helpful methods in facilitating the learning progress at a distance is to create a rubric for assessment. Rubrics increase transparency as they help students understand what is expected from them, as well as it allows them to self-score their work and make it better before submitting it to the instructor. Furthermore, rubrics can be designed to increase structure, accountability, motivation, and learning effectiveness among electronic groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grading Rubric for Assignment 1: Collaborative Archive Project</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>10 pts each short paper: max 2 pts per criteria</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C 0.50-.99 List the characteristics of a grade of C for each criteria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B 1.00-1.50 List the characteristics of a grade of B for each criteria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A 1.51-2.00 List the characteristics of a grade of A for each criteria</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Criteria 1**
- Displays basic understanding of the chosen topic
- Displays moderate understanding, insight and reflection on the chosen topic
- Displays exceptional depth of understanding, insight, and reflection on the topic

**Criteria 2**
- Demonstrates basic research of peer reviewed literary sources AND basic analysis of the findings in the final paper
- Demonstrates moderate to excellent research of peer reviewed literary sources AND moderate to excellent analysis of the findings in the final paper
- Demonstrates substantial research of peer reviewed literary sources AND excellent analysis of the findings in the final paper

**Criteria 3**
- Demonstrates basic insight AND minimal synthesis of literature to develop a unique or updated perspective of curriculum issues related to the selected topic for higher education, community college or adult ed.
- Demonstrates moderate insight AND moderate to excellent synthesis of literature to develop a unique or updated perspective of curriculum issues related to the selected topic for higher education, community college or adult ed.
- Demonstrates outstanding insight AND excellent synthesis of literature to develop a unique or updated perspective of curriculum issues related to the selected topic for higher education, community college or adult ed.

**Criteria 4**
- Presents few examples of grounded, practical OR forward thinking/innovative recommendations regarding the curriculum topic chosen
- Presents moderate achievement in grounded, practical, AND forward thinking/innovative recommendations regarding the curriculum topic chosen
- Presents exceptional work in presenting grounded, practical, but forward thinking/innovative recommendations regarding the curriculum topic chosen
Figure 1: Rubric Sample for a Collaborative Project

TYPES OF FACILITATION AND COMMUNICATION POWER

The role of communication and building teacher-student rapport (Betts, 2009) is an example of one of the specific needs we address in this section. Strategies for such communication include (1) identifying several modes for students to have as options to communicate with the instructor to afford different medium and timeframe (synchronous and not), (2) balancing instructor access and boundaries (setting expectations and limits), (3) structuring frequent, but brief forms for feedback, (4) Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs), (5) Query folders and more.

Several Modes of Communication. In order to build and continue instructor-student rapport and feedback, having multiple modes for students to communicate with the instructor is invaluable. Addressing issues of access and preference when building equitable learning communities ensures our online learners are able to communicate with us easily. A good beginning includes providing several of the following options, or others: e-mail, Skype, telephone, videoconferencing, discussion board, etc.

Balance for Instructors. It is easy to become overwhelmed when teaching online. Strategies for providing quality and consistent learning support include instructors setting boundaries and guiding students to observe them (Conceicao, & Lehman, 2011). One example is to inform students that they will respond to students’ emails within 24-48 hrs. Using this approach, students learn not send redundant e-mails and to readjust their expectations. At the same time, we provide guidance towards developing more professional online behavior.

Frequent, Brief Feedback Forms. Providing guidelines for students helps to facilitate the learning progress at a distance. When instructors deliver frequent and brief feedback they guide students towards better learning and increase the transparency of expectations. Faculty can expedite this process by building feedback on the structure of their assignment rubrics (see below).

FAQs. After teaching an online course several times, instructors will usually be able to develop a list of students’ FAQs. Reformating this list into a FAQ webpage, blog or Wiki, or posting them in a FAQ folder provides greater transparency and much more information for students. An added benefit to the discussion board or wiki formats is that students may reply to one another when additional questions arrive. Peer learning can be powerful learning while building learning communities. Unlike e-mail, the FAQ also provides instant replies for students’ questions. Students may also suggest additional questions for the list thereby building responsibility and ownership by providing valuable input for the course.

Query Folders. A slight variation on the FAQ is the Query folder. In this strategy, instructors post folders in the discussion board labeled, Syllabus Questions, Assignment 1 Questions, etc. This approach encourages students to post their questions publically and ensures access and equity of information to all class members than email does. Moreover, sometimes peers answer the questions before the instructor, demonstrating a learning community in action.

GROUP WORK FACILITATION

Many faculty are at a loss as to how to facilitate online small groups effectively (Collison et al, 2000; Conceicao et al, 2011). This section, as well as the ones prior, provides a few specific

| Criteria 5 | Several errors in writing quality (grammar, spelling, etc.), substantial lack of organization of materials. | Few errors, well-written (grammar, spelling, etc.), but well organized materials. | No errors, well-written (grammar, spelling, etc.), and well organized materials. |
examples, strategies, and options, which we will demonstrate and discuss guiding effective group learning (An, Shin, & Lim, 2009; Conrad et al, 2004). A few of the critical strategies integrated in these sections include (1) managing projects by segments or milestones (see the extended example listed under Measuring Students’ Motivation), (2) using assignment options for students to create content, (3) hosting options such as group work in private small groups or private wikis where the instructor can monitor student work, and (3) offering group consult sessions where the instructor virtually meets with the small group to check on progress and provide resources or direction. (An, & Kim, 2007; Dirkx, & Smith, 2004).

Sample Group Project: Our sample course instructor may divide the class into online groups by random assignment. During course design, she constructed the related materials and activities using several Web 2.0 tools. Each group selects two of the three activities to complete by the stated due dates. In addition to the activity, each group member will write a reflection of the group activity including roles, responsibilities, learning outcomes and benefits. Faculty may offer to meet as a “project consultant” with each group or the group leaders via Skype, phone, or discussion board to work through problems, or discuss questions they may have.

- **Activity One: Content Design.** Learners use a Wiki platform to create in-depth and interactive content for one module of the course material. They must carefully research the content, plan their module, negotiate their decisions, and create the content based Wiki for the entire class to view.
- **Activity Two: Podcast Development.** The small group researches, plans and uploads a podcast (audio or video) to share their research topic with the class.
- **Activity Three: Mashup Learning.** The groups develop a Mashup Site on their research topic. (Mashups use information and functions from many sources, and then organize and present them in one website or interface (i.e., a travel website presents information from weather channels, Google maps, and travelers’ reviews.)

![Figure 2: Screenshot of Mashup Blog Post by Student](image)

**Assessment While Building Learner Skills**

Facilitation and assessment are not frequently linked concepts, but research and experience reveal opportunities to improve assessment and efficiency through group facilitation. Several
strategies to leverage facilitation for better student assessment include (1) using rubrics to build transparency and responsible learners, (2) leveraging self-assessment to build self-directed learners, and (3) increasing students’ motivation and learning effectiveness by building accountability in online small groups (An, & Kim, 2007; Dirkx, & Smith, 2004).

Creating online groups using an LMS can facilitate the learning and assessment process for students as well as educators (Stewart, 2010). While students can collaborate electronically, educators can monitor them and trace their reactions, inputs, and discussions. Educators begin by allowing students to select their roles in the group, such as leader, communicator, and researcher. Students may develop a brief explanation of their role and their deadline.

DISCOVERING YOUR FACILITATION STYLE

Recognizing that each of us has a unique teaching style, there are several tools to help identify facilitative teaching styles. The tools include but are not limited to self-assessments, facilitation planning tools, and resources for facilitation and continuing professional development in the skill. We encourage readers to use one of the tools listed below or the one we created in Appendix A. The goal is reflective practice to improve online facilitation (An, Shin, & Lim, 2009; Schon, 1983).

Several helpful resources for facilitation self-assessment tools include the following links

- Facilitation Skills Assessment: http://intranet.library.arizona.edu/teams/hroe/effectiveness/documents/FacilitationSkillsSelfAssessment100507.doc

CONCLUSION

When teaching online courses a major concern for success becomes how to facilitate learning progress at a distance. When instructors cannot determine if students understand because they cannot see the students, we need different strategies than we use in traditional classrooms to support learning.

As discussed above when teaching online courses facilitating the process does not mean giving the students the answers. Instead, it includes helping them build their understanding, building self-directed learning strategies, and taking greater responsibility of their learning. The strategies and research included in this paper provide a direction for instructors to increase student success in their online courses while also making online teaching manageable.

REFERENCES


**APPENDIX A**

**FACILITATOR SELF-ASSESSMENT TOOL**

**Instructions:** Use the following tool to help you reflect on your performance as a facilitator. When a group discussion session is over, reflect on your performance, rate yourself, and think about how you can practice and improve as a facilitator for your next online courses.

1. Please identify whether you are a Faculty member ☐ or a Student ☐

Assess your most recent online facilitation performance by checking the appropriate box for each skill/behavior using the following scale:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>S</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>NA</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strong achievement</td>
<td>More progress needed</td>
<td>Did not consider</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
</tr>
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</table>
2. I was prepared for the session. All links were working and content available.

3. I informed students I was available to meet with their groups.

4. I shared the importance of active listening and respecting the ideas of others.

5. I posted a question as an icebreaker that allowed participants to share something about themselves in a non-threatening, enjoyable way.


7. I allowed group members to select or focus on topic of interest to them.

8. I made sure that all group members had an opportunity to participate.

9. I provided multiple ways for students communicate questions to me.

10. I watched online groups to see if any group members monopolized “time and discussion.”

11. I recognized fears or disagreements among group members and brought them out into the open.

12. I modeled active listening by focusing on individuals’ comments when they posted.

13. I gave positive reinforcement and feedback with a word of praise and / or follow up questions.

14. I used words that everyone was familiar with, avoiding technical terms.

15. I brought the group back to a topic when it strayed from the main issue and obtained agreement from the group when it was time for a change of topic.

16. I avoided debating ideas with group members.

17. I cultivated a climate of respect and safety for group interactions.

18. I resisted the urge to "teach." Instead, I listened, talked with, and/or learned something from the participants and their experiences.

19. I dealt with misinformation among learners in a positive and/or constructive way.

20. I brought ideas together, highlighting certain points made during the conversation.

21. I had the group members share one new thing they learned or something they may do differently.

22. These are some items I plan to practice and strengthen the next time I facilitate an online group discussion:

* This tool has been adapted from WIC Learning Online Instrument by Kathleen P. King and
INTRODUCTION

In the past 30 years, distance learning has come a long way in innovative technologies advancing opportunities for teaching and learning. In 2011, the public understands and accepts widely the once surprising concept of “Anytime, Anywhere” learning (Allen & Seaman, 2010). To expand our educational commitment to access and equity, this paper addresses the need and means to incorporate “Anyone” into this paradigm.

While we spend a great deal of time and effort teaching educators to adopt and design effective online learning, we focus much less on creating welcoming and accessible online learning environments for every student. This paper has three major sections: (1) defining the issues related to accessible online learning, (2) defining and providing examples of Universal Design Learning (UDL) and assistive technology easily applied to online classes, and (3) sharing strategies for online learning access by addressing policy issues, student needs and online course design. By introducing and discussing these