Online Interprofessional Facilitation Guide

Introduction

Online discussion forums provide a means to bring together interprofessional teams of learners, while overcoming some of the common challenges of interprofessional education. As we move many of our learning activities to a blended learning model, including asynchronous online discussion forums and face to face component, the need for online training materials is apparent. Through asynchronous online discussions, students may participate at their leisure during a given timeframe. This enables learners to discuss the module content and cases presented without having to find a common time or location to do so. Also, it provides more time to reflect and allow learners to review through areas of interest. The challenges are there are no non-verbal cues and greater attention is necessary to learner motivation and group process. Online facilitation requires active online posting to ensure students remain engaged and discussions build understanding and develop an online learning community.

Facilitating Interprofessional Groups

Facilitating interprofessional groups of students is recognized as a complex and demanding task. Facilitators play a crucial role in creating an environment that supports the goals of interprofessional collaboration. It is important to encourage interaction among the members of the group and help students recognize opportunities for collaboration. Facilitators should foster inclusiveness and celebrate diversity. Facilitators should establish the link between effective team collaboration and patient/client care. At the conclusion of the experience, students should realize the value of collaboration and recognize that no one profession has all of the answers for a patient/client.

Similarities between Face-to Face and Asynchronous Discussion Forums

- Know your own facilitation style and that of your co-facilitator
- Know your learners
- Model what you hope to see in their group
- Support effective group processes (e.g. use icebreakers, establish group norms, reflection etc.)
- Encourage the group to see that every member is a contributor
Managing the Technical Aspects of Online Discussions

To participate in the online discussions, login to the University of Toronto’s Blackboard Portal @ www.portal.utoronto.ca. In order to sign into the portal site, you will need a UTorid. If you do not have this information already, it will be provided to you. Select the Program you are participating in under My Organizations Plus.

Upon entry to this organization, you will be able to view the announcements for the Program. These often include updates, requirements, timelines and student information.

In order to begin your discussion board, you will need to click My Groups then your Team #/Name. Select group discussion board
Follow the instructions below to add threads to a forum, reply to a post, and collect messages where necessary. If further information on managing the portal is needed, consult http://www.portalinfo.utoronto.ca/Faculty___Staff/Self-Help.htm, or contact rebecca.singer@utoronto.ca

| Adding a Thread | • Select **Discussion Board** from the Left Hand Navigation Bar under Control Panel  
• Click the title of the **Forum** you wish to contribute to  
• Click the **Add Thread** button  
• Enter a **Subject** and a **Message**  
• Click **Submit** |
| Replying to a Post | • Select **Discussion Board** from the Left Hand Navigation Bar  
• Click the title of the **Forum** you wish to contribute to  
• Select the **Thread** you want  
• Click the **Message** or **Post** you wish to reply to  
• Click the **Reply** button located near the right hand side of the screen  
• If desired change the **Subject** to reflect your message  
• Compose your **Message**  
• Click **Submit** |
| Collecting Messages | Collecting messages will allow you to view a number of messages or posts on a single page for easier reading, printing or grading.  
• **Collecting messages will allow you to view a number of messages or posts on a single page for easier reading, printing or grading.**  
• Select **Discussion Board** from the Left Hand Navigation Bar  
• Click the title of the **Forum** you wish to contribute to  
• Click the **Check Box** to the left of the **Thread(s)** you wish to Collect  
• Click the **Collect** button at the top of the page  
• **Messages** can also be collected while in a **Thread** in the same manner |
| Emailing from Blackboard | • **Emailing from Blackboard**  
• Go to Course Management on the left side of the screen. From here, click on Course Tools and go to Send an Email. You can send an email to the group or to an individual. |
Opening Forums

A good start to the online community is with introductions. Begin post a brief biography, ie who you are, your discipline, where you work and why you are interested in this topic or IPE. These early comments will help to engender enthusiasm and establish an atmosphere of collegiality. Invite the students to do the same as they introduce themselves. Building a sense of community in the discussion is critical to student learning and a great icebreaker for the forum.

Consider reviewing group norms as an online community (ie answering each other’s questions, no use of acronyms, active posting throughout the week, supporting each other’s discussions) as an additional icebreaker or in a short online period, you may need to post the group norms. Facilitators will need to be reinforce expectations regarding the level of participation in the discussion. They may need reminders about the type of interactions they should have with each other. At a minimum, students are informed they should make two comments in response to the facilitator, or to comments/questions from other students, and should pose one question.

Be sure to inform students when you will be present in the online discussion (indicate dates and times). For example, you may state that you or another facilitator will be checking the discussion forums daily. As well, inform them when you will not be present. If facilitators are away and unable to participate in the discussion, they should post or send an email to inform students so that they will not expect any interactions. Also feel free to expand on the types of interactions that they may expect from the facilitator (for example, you may pose a further question, or direct them to a resource) but your role is to facilitate discussion between students, not to provide all content answers.

After introductions, open the online discussion by providing initial discussion questions (suggestions will be provided in each elective specific manual) to the group. This can help direct initial themes and focus discussion on key initial topics. Ensure that you don’t overload online discussion forums with too many questions in one posting in your introductory or follow-up discussions.

Managing Discussion Forums

The early period of the online interactions is a particularly important time to establish rapport with the students, build motivation, develop confidence in mastering the discussion forum and model expectations. Creating a safe learning environment where opposing ideas are welcomed. Leading questions that reveal personal biases should be avoided. Begin a response to a student posting by providing a positive comment prior to a critical assessment of other issues. Early, active postings from facilitators will often create early momentum into a robust engaged online community.

As the discussion continues, facilitators need to connect and weave ideas. Probing and requests for further elaboration help to promote further discussion. Ensure you plan as able to check discussion forums daily, since immediacy in feedback appears to be a strong predictor of learning and learner satisfaction. This could be shared if you have a co-facilitator model where you can create a shared schedule of checking the forum.
Matthews-DeNatale and Doubler (2000) suggest the following steps to consider when composing a message:

- **What are the learners’ ideas?** When reviewing the messages, identify themes, unresolved concerns and discrepancies and any other ideas you plan to address.
- **Identify what the group needs to explore in greater depth?** Identify the most important issues raised thus far and then write a sentence about an area to be explored in greater depth. Conclude with an open-ended question.
- **Identify the behaviours to be modeled or encouraged.** Review the message drafted and ensure that the comments align with the program goals.
- **Consider how the readers will perceive the posting.** Reread and then consider the addition of a greeting or opening.

To encourage learners who aren’t posting frequently, sending personalized emails can enhance the perception of interaction and encourage further attention to the forum. This also helps foster the students’ sense of community, and increases their satisfaction with the learning experience.

The questions provided for each learning activity are designed to be a toolbox to utilize as needed within a discussion forum if further themes are needed to enhance understanding of topics. If interesting themes emerge from student questions, and students are engaging each other, your comments can be more facilitatory and supportive to continue momentum and you are not required to post all additional questions. Pacing questions and themes throughout the discussion period can help create a stimulating balanced discussion and encourage active posting throughout the week rather than just the beginning or end. Be mindful of any negative comments or stereotypes of professions during discussion. This needs to be re-directed positively; use this as an opportunity to provide positive education and the appropriate information of a profession.

See Appendix for Tips for Netiquette, IPE Online Facilitation.

**Concluding a Discussion Forum**

At the conclusion of the discussion period, the facilitator should prepare a brief summary of the main points and key learning. Consider debrief questions as you conclude the forum pending the length of your discussion forum and consider these in your summary.

**Debrief Questions**

Debriefing is an important process to strengthen learning. Students will discuss:

- **How the team meeting worked**
- **Collaboration, communication, and value and ethics competencies identified for this learning activity**
- **Lessons learned**
Ask questions to gather, analyze and summarize the student experience as it relates to the core competencies related to values and ethics, communication and collaboration. Consider the following questions to facilitate the discussion:

**Gather**
- *What did students think and feel about the experience?*
- *How did you feel about the process? Probe.*

**Analyze**
- *Facilitate reflection and analysis of actions*
- *Tell me more about...*

**Summarize**
- *Lessons learned*
- *Identify two actions that were effective*
- *Identify two things that could be improved next time*
APPENDIX

Tips for Netiquette

Online discussions are fraught with opportunities for potential misunderstandings. To avoid these, refer to the following guidelines to guide what you write.

Be friendly, positive and self-reflective: Think before you write. Edit your post if necessary to ensure that what you have written accurately conveys your thoughts. If you are critiquing a post, say it in a positive tone. Reread before you hit “submit”. Remember to treat facilitators and fellow students with respect.

Use proper language: Choose words so that you avoid the use of slang or profanity or excessive exclamation points.

Humour and sarcasm: It is best to avoid humour or sarcasm, as you are not able to supplement your comments with facial expressions or voice cues. Comments can be easily misunderstood in an online environment.

Clear communication: Choose words so that you are communicating clearly. Be sure to ask for clarification if the meaning of a post does not seem clear. It is helpful to write, “I did not understand...”. Here you place the misunderstanding on yourself. Remember that a point may not written as intended. Grammar and spelling are important in professional posts. Errors do occur, but take the time to correct as much as possible.

Netspeak: Avoid the use of capitals or bolding, as this is often regarded as shouting.
## Tips for IPE Online Facilitation

### Be Prepared for “Flying Blind”:
- Know that you will not have access to many of the sensory skills you use in the F2F setting
- Consider how the foundations of your F2F IPE Facilitation skills will transfer to the online environment

### Don’t let technology take over:
- The more complex it is the more likely there will be “bumps” – go with the flow
- Develop contingency plans that will allow collaboration to move forward in the face of glitches
- Provide support and gives learners adequate time to work with new applications and technology: keep tasks very simple at the start to reduce anxiety

### Be explicit, be clear:
- Expectations about homework, participation and other areas may need to be spelled out very clearly, in multiple places, multiple times
- Simple netiquette rules (e.g. introducing yourself before you speak in a synchronous environment, avoiding use of CAPITALS in the asynchronous setting) should be addressed and consider providing ahead of time

### Make sure the IPE Collaborative process gets it’s due:
- Look to connect process elements to tasks to deepen collaboration and group development
- Understand that learners may be drawn to the relatively safe structure of a task in the unfamiliar online world. Challenge and support them to address both task and process elements

### Expect IP group processes may take longer:
- Allow for extra time for learners to find their way in this new world. They will likely spend considerable time at first contributing from their own professional view points
- Watch for signs that the group is feeling greater comfort: asking each other questions, disagreeing with each other, taking leadership
- Foster the IP group process development through implicit (and explicit) encouragement as well as modeling
- Consider following-up with quieter participants through 1:1 contact to support and develop approaches to build their comfort and participation

### Make full use of your Co-Facilitator:
- If you have a co-facilitator, use him/her for modeling collaborative practice, content or process support, tech support and mentorship
- Ensure you both do reflective debriefing after every session
- If you do not have a co-facilitator, be open about your need for support from others
- Continue to reflect to allow growth from session to session

### Take full advantage of what the online environment offers:
- The online setting has a lot to offer that the F2F setting does not.
- Seize every opportunity to bring in online resources, tools, videos that enhance the collaborative learning

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