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Center for Effective Undergraduate Teaching (864) 388-8426

Coaching Strategies to Enhance Online Discussions

I AM NOT AN athlete. I lack coordination and have some physical limitations. My husband, on the other hand, is an excellent skier. He isn't a teacher but he believed I could learn to ski, convinced me to try, and partnered with me in the learning process, like the best teachers do. Learning to ski taught me 10 coaching strategies bridging four areas: establishing a safe space to learn, sharing responsibility, providing feedback, and empowering the learner. I apply these strategies to facilitating online discussions, but they relate to a range of learning contexts.

Create a safe learning environment.

Learning to ski is scary. Falling is embarrassing. Who wants to look foolish? My husband/coach shared his learning experiences with me and vividly described what to expect, which reduced my anxiety. Similarly, online discussion facilitators should:

- Prepare students for the challenges of online learning and interaction. Identify the skills students will need. Provide examples of successful and not-so-great discussions. Critique work together. The bunny slope is filled with beginners falling and skiing clumsily. Remind students that discussing content online is awkward and difficult.
- Make it fun. Begin with small incentives or mini-games to spur interest. Practice in low-stakes contexts first. Get to know each other: instructor with students and students with each other. This fosters community and creates a safe space for learning. Incorporate humor with a reminder that laughing with someone is fun, laughing at someone is not.

Share responsibility.

The coach is an expert, no question. One minute watching my husband slalom "effortlessly" made that clear to me. He planned, explained, and modeled what I needed to do. Then it was my turn. As online learning partners, teachers should:

- Model what you seek. Watching an expert in action is more effective than listening or reading about how to do something. So "carve a few turns" by posting for the purpose of modeling. Follow up what you've demonstrated with a discussion of what students observed. Now it's their turn. Consider engaging as a participant instead of simply moderating.
- Request feedback often. Coaches spend a lot of time reviewing tapes; reading threads is the online discussion equivalent. Seek input from students about content, format, and pacing to reinforce that learning is a partnership. Asking for feedback provides opportunities for students to learn about their learning, not just the content.
- Explain your reasoning. Heavy mental lifting is easier when we understand what's motivating the work. Repeatedly snowplowing down the beginner hill gets boring pretty quickly. But over time, that skill transitions to graceful parallel skis in slalom turns. Online, we should show how learning happens through discussion. Provide insights about content relationships: across topics, courses, and personal connections. Then ask students to make these associations. Share how the current interaction or series of discussions scaffolds more complex learning and skills as the course progresses.

Provide timely feedback.

As we skied I heard: "Push your tips together," or "Shift your weight forward." Similarly, feedback during online discussions is critical to advance interaction and redirect unproductive threads to enhance learning. Feedback may be the most valuable and challenging coaching responsibility.

- Maintain balance. Observe what went well and what could have been better. Provide feedback on individual or group performance. Feedback should be timely, but not always in the midst of activity. Build in timeouts or halftimes to gauge progress and debrief with students. In skiing we go to the lodge and have cocoa by the fire. The virtual "water cooler" or "lounge" is the online counterpart. Formative feedback provided in a casual space supports the partnership quality of online interaction. Summative assessments belong in more private contexts.
- Develop students' ability to assess quality. Improving assessment skills allows students to work and learn on their own, without a coach. Online this means self-assessing post and comment quality. Peers can also provide feedback. In a group ski lesson, peers often diagnose a problem and provide helpful feedback because they may have just experienced the same issue. Online, peers can assess the educational quality of individual contributions and the exchange as a whole in conjunction with their learning.

Empower the learner.

Sometimes my coach was by my side to lend a hand when I fell. Other times, he forged ahead and I followed. In time, he empowered me to choose the trails to pursue. Eventually I found my way down the mountain. To empower learners in online discussion,

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Teachers, Students and the Classroom Tango

"FROM THE WAY students act at the beginning of a class we can tell a great deal about the profs who taught them previously." It's an insight offered by David Johnson and Roger Johnson, the well-known cooperative learning researchers and advocates.

How do students act at the beginning of a course? It does depend on the students and the course, but in general I would not say they are bursting with enthusiasm, happy to be in class, and excited about the learning adventure that awaits them. If it's a big university, a commuter campus, or a required course, they tend to be quiet. They don't know each other and don't seem all that inclined to make connections. To me it often felt like a kind of laid-back-hoping-for-the-best-but-rather-expecting-the-worst attitude.

I wonder if the Johnsons' quote doesn't imply too much professorial responsibility. I have passed out the syllabus, sat silently for 10 minutes while the students read it and then said I'd answer whatever questions they had about the course, only to find out that nobody had any questions. This kind of student behavior makes a teacher feel compelled to respond and fill the void. After all, there are things about the course students need to know up front. So, if they don't ask and we aren't sure that they'll read, we tell them. The problem is that we tend to explain in such exquisite detail that they've learned there's no longer any need to ask. The actions of students influence teacher responses. It doesn't just work in the teacher-to-student direction.

Professor and student behaviors feed off of each other, often in these counterproductive loops. It isn't just that some (perhaps many) profs don't invite students to speak all that often, don't know much about any student individually, don't seem all that excited about teaching their courses, and appear to believe that rules are the key to productive learning environments. It's also that students have made it clear to their profs that they'd rather not be called on, want their profs to just tell them what they need to do, arrive to class convinced they aren't interested in the course content, and believe that because they've paid for this educational "product", it's theirs to use however they see fit.

However, it's just as possible for these behavior loops to become productive connections where what the professor does changes student responses and where student behaviors encourage the prof to take more constructive actions. Here the quote's focus on the professor is appropriate. Teachers can change how students respond easier than students can change teachers. Professors can provide leadership and in the teacher-student relationship, they have more power, even though the distribution of power in those relationships is more fluid than fixed.

All this reminded me of a lovely metaphor proposed by Deb Bickford who compares teacher-student behaviors to the interactions that occur between dance partners. She says it's "a dance in which we may lead in the beginning but then we let our partners provide movement and energy and direction." Faculty are better positioned to make those first moves—to get the dance started. Students will follow, but as the dance gains momentum who's leading and who's following becomes much less obvious. The partners work together. They provide support and showcase each other's moves as the dance unfolds.

From the television show "Dancing with the Stars," we've seen what a good dance partner can do for athletes, actors, and other notables who aren't professional dancers. We've also heard how much practice that takes. Every class is a different partner and the content dance we are trying to teach students is often complicated. Moreover, they are being taught different dances simultaneously, most of them requiring unique moves. But there's a fundamental principle at work here, which I suspect we all know but can forget or take for granted. "It takes two to tango." Education locks professors and students into mutually influencing relationships that can make learning a thing of beauty and a joy forever, or a clumsy dance better forgotten than remembered.

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Bickford, D. J., (1997). Reflection on artful teaching. *Journal of Management Education*, 21 (4), p. 467.

Maryellen Weimer, PhD; Teaching Professor Blog; Faculty Focus; March 26, 2015; [http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/teachers-students-and-the-classroom-tango/]; April 6, 2015.

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facilitators can:

- Allow choice of format. This flexibility promotes sharing by multiple student voices more than teacher-directed topics and instructions to post once and comment twice. Highly structured approaches typically result in "one-offs" by students, not lively interactions. Alternatives to the Q&A discussion format include debates, role-plays, and mock trials. (Mandernach, Forrest, et al., 2009)
- Enable students to select topics or identify issues for exploration. Discussion topics that are personal, timely, and relevant promote the kind of multiple-nested threads that are characteristic of scholarly discourse. As with format, providing choice of topics increases student ownership of their learning.
- Develop students as facilitators. The coach-athlete relationship reaches maturity when the two become more like peers. In online discussions, this means students plan, manage, maintain and facilitate discussion to accomplish pre-determined learning goals. (Baran & Correia, 2009).

Before I met my husband, I never thought about learning to ski. I lacked context; I didn't see myself as a skier. Many students may feel a similar disconnect if they believe a course's content is personally irrelevant. In order to facilitate learning, coaches and teachers must break through this divide. Despite the vast differences in setting, the teacher-as-coach metaphor works because both seek to connect learners with the content, provide a safe space for learning, and empower students to become independent learners.

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Lolita Paff, PhD; Online Education; Faculty Focus; March 23, 2015; [http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/online-education/coaching-strategies-to-enhance-online-discussions/] April 6, 2015.