Facilitating online discussions

This chapter examines the most common challenges in facilitating online discussions and effective strategies to overcome them. After reading the chapter, you should be able to:

✓ Explain the importance of discussion as an educational method,
✓ Use specific methods to engage participants in discussions using technologies in synchronous and asynchronous settings,
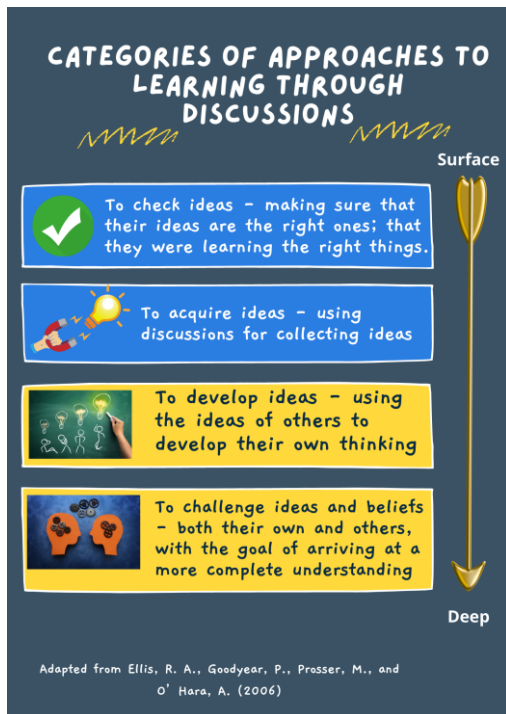✓ Compare face-to-face, online synchronous, and online asynchronous methods of facilitation discussions.

The chapter includes the following sections:

1. *Facilitation of online discussions – what is the fuss about?*
2. *The role of the educator in facilitating online discussions*
3. *Practical advice and tips – how to engage, involve and guide learners in online discussions*
4. *Discussion in face-to-face, synchronous, and asynchronous educational settings*
5. *Overcoming challenges*
6. *Questions for reflection*
7. *References and resources*

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1. Facilitation of online discussions - what is the fuss about?

CATEGORIES OF APPROACHES TO LEARNING THROUGH DISCUSSIONS

Surface

To check ideas - making sure that their ideas are the right ones; that they were learning the right things.

To acquire ideas - using discussions for collecting ideas

To develop ideas - using the ideas of others to develop their own thinking

To challenge ideas and beliefs - both their own and others, with the goal of arriving at a more complete understanding

Deep

Adapted from Ellis, R. A., Goodyear, P., Prosser, M., and O' Hara, A. (2006)

According to dictionary definitions, **DISCUSSION** is "a consideration of a question in open and usually informal **debate"** (**Merriam-Webster**).

Discussion is one of the most important methods in education because it helps learners process and understand information better rather than simply receive it and stimulates the development of critical thinking. Leading a discussion requires facilitation skills that are quite different from delivering the information.

Discussion methods in digital education are open-ended, collaborative exchanges of ideas between the educator and learners, or among learners themselves. The purpose is to support the further development of learners' skills for learning, thinking, problem-solving, literary appreciation or understanding.
Learners present different points of view, listen to and respond to the ideas of others, and reflect on their performance, their ideas to further develop knowledge, understanding, or interpretation of the subject in discussion.

Discussions may occur among members of a dyad, small group, or whole group and be educator-led or learner-led.

2. The role of the educator in facilitating online discussions

In the process of discussion, we as educators, play the role of facilitators. The definition of a facilitator is "to make it easy" or "ease a process". While facilitating discussions, the main tasks of facilitators are to:

- Create an inclusive environment of trust and support for effective communication,
- Challenge learners to think, see a problem from different angles, and search for alternative viewpoints,
- Keep the discussion focused and on track,
- Keep people engaged,
- Advance and deepen the discussion,
- Provide an opportunity for everybody to be heard,
- Leave participants a little "hungry" to engage in follow-up conversations,
- Help participants summarise and conclude the discussion.

3. Practical advice and tips – How to engage, involve and guide learners in online discussions

Facilitating discussions, in general, is not an easy task and according to the feedback from digital educators, facilitation of online discussions requires additional skills and effort. Let's investigate some Dos and Don'ts of facilitating synchronous discussions online. The first task will be to create an inclusive environment.

<u>**Methods for creating an inclusive environment**</u>

- Make sure that everybody is **familiar with the technology** that you are using – give a small tutorial if needed about how to use chat, emojis and reactions, virtually raise your hand, and rules of using a microphone and camera.

- It is crucial from the very beginning to create a **friendly, safe and relaxed atmosphere**. So, start with "get to know each other" activities – use name games and icebreakers from our website, for example, <u>Good news festival</u> or <u>What is your spirit animal?</u>

- **Name tag** - almost every video teleconference software has a "name tag" for participants. Sometimes when people join the digital platform, their name shows up as a number. Ask everyone to rename themselves and write the name they prefer to be addressed. You can also ask them to include other relevant information, such as the location they are joining from (country, city...) Or you can use the "rename" function as an icebreaker or warm-up activity and ask participants to write for example, "Name and one trait you have and are proud of" ("Name and colour you like, or an animal that you associate yourself with...)

- Set the **Ground Rules** - you can provide your already prepared list or ask the group to brainstorm and come up with the list of rules that will make them feel comfortable during the discussions. Here are some examples you can use:

  o Don't interrupt, be respectful.
  o When you want to make a comment or join the discussion, you can raise your hand digitally using a special sign, physically or by writing in the chat.
  o Be an active listener. Try to understand others' views. (Instead of thinking about what you are going to say while someone else is talking, pay attention).
  o Concentrate and comment on ideas, not individuals.

- o The goal is to learn, not debate. Comment to share information, not to dominate and convince.
- o Avoid confrontation, blame, speculation, and manipulation.
- o Make sure that everyone has the opportunity to speak.
- o Watch out for any assumptions about group members. Don't generalise.

Check out these ground rules for online discussion from Colorado State University.

- A good practice for the beginning part of the session is to use **"Check-ins".** This is a simple tool to help participants transition from previous activities and be present in a group. In an online setting, it is especially important to give everybody the chance to have their voice heard at the beginning of the meeting. Check out the activity Battle of the argument. The size of the group determines the method you use for the check-in. In **small groups** you can give everybody the chance to speak by asking a question, for example:
  - o How much energy do you have on a scale of 1-10 right now?
  - o What is your expectation from this session?
  - o Which animal best represents your mood right now? (Silly questions are very good icebreakers)
  - o You can use an Emotional weather report.

  In the "screen mode" it is not very easy to imagine how to go around the "circle"; our advice is to call the learners' names as they appear on your screen and invite them to share one by one. You can also ask the person sharing to then nominate the next person by just naming, or "throwing the ball" (physical imitation of the movement, when one is "throwing" the ball and the other is "catching").
  If time is scarce, you can ask participants to just share one sentence or even just one word or use a method for bigger groups.
  In **larger groups,** it's not easy for everyone to be heard, but there are still ways to give learners the chance to share. For example, you can ask:

  - o Show your energy level on a scale from 1 to 10 using your fingers. For this, you could use the power of scaling.
  - o Ask a check-in question and ask them to write their answer in the chat, then read a few of them out loud.
  - o Use the breakout rooms to put learners in pairs or small groups and answer a check-in question.
- Make sure that you are using **inclusive language**. It is especially important when you are working with multicultural groups.
- Ask for clarification if unclear about a learner's intent or question.

Methods for creating engagement

- Ask participants to turn their **cameras on** if this is possible - one of the major benefits of synchronous online educational programs is the opportunity for interactions, socialisation, and connections. Having a camera on will mobilise the learner to be more engaged and will help you as a facilitator, to get visual feedback about group dynamics.

- **Individual reflection and journaling.** Instead of going straight into a group discussion or activity, it can sometimes be more efficient if participants have time to gather their thoughts and reflect on themselves. Ask everybody to prepare any writing tools (pen and paper, notebook, iPad, word document etc.). Choose the question for journaling – individual reflection and type it in the chat or bring it on the whiteboard. Allow learners to ask clarification questions if something is not clear. Tell them how long they can reflect/write (e.g., 2-3 min) and invite them to turn off their cameras if they feel more comfortable. You can turn calm, meditative music on low volume as a background while keeping the reflection question on the whiteboard. Don't forget to keep the time!

- **Breakout rooms.** Some video conferencing software platforms have a great possibility to break the whole group into pairs or small groups, which will help learners to talk, share and be heard. Before putting people into breakout rooms, it's important to give clear instructions.
    - What is the topic or question of the discussion?
    - How long will they be in the room?
    - Will the discussion be structured (each person has 2 minutes to share for example) or will the participants decide on how to organise the discussion?
    - Should they prepare a presentation with the key points from the group discussion?
        - Information about Zoom Breakout rooms

- **Listening Circles** are a great method to ensure that everyone has time and space to be heard equally and allow all group members to share their opinion and perspective. After announcing a central topic or discussion question, go around the 'circle' and ask each participant to share. Ask everyone to keep the rule - speak only when it is their turn. Everyone is allowed to say pass if they don't want to speak. If you have enough time and the topic permits, have one or more additional rounds. Instead of the facilitator naming the person who will speak next is to ask each person to "call out" the next person once they've finished sharing - "throw an imaginary ball". Important here is to make sure that everybody is equally involved.

- **Popcorn** is a Zoom community term and essentially means that anyone who would like to share – or go 'pop' – can do so. Here it is very helpful to use the digital hand-raising tool to keep track of who wants to share. This is a good method to use if there is not enough time for everyone to share in a listening circle, or if you want to create a more organic dialogue. It is very important that people listen to each other and respect each other's space for sharing.

- Use a **whiteboard** for capturing the group's thinking. It is very important that you capture the key ideas, questions and decisions that arise during a meeting. To ensure that you can concentrate on facilitating the process, designate one person in the group as the recorder. Some video conferencing software platforms have in-built whiteboards (Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Skype, Heyhi ...). You can use other online whiteboards too, such as Miro, Stormboard, Mural, Limnu, and Conceptboard).

- **For harvesting ideas and insights** from the discussions, you can use a shared Google document and ask participants to make their input. The benefit of this method is that everyone can see what everyone else is writing, it creates the feeling of working together, it's efficient, increases interest and engagement, and it allows you to get into the discussion process in writing. The best practice is to set up the document with the questions that you want them to answer beforehand, and then post it in the chat.

- Research shows that visuals increase the engagement of learners by as much as 94%. They also help increase attention and memory, boost feelings of inclusiveness, and encourage interaction. Use **Screen share** for sharing videos, visual material, presentations, and questions for starting discussions. Keep in mind that some participants have a predominantly visual learning style and the more visuals you use, the higher will be their engagement.

- **1-2-4 – All.** This is a technique from Liberating Structures which taps into the collective wisdom of the group and gives space to everyone's input no matter the size of the group. It is a nice way to link the methods described so far. This is an adapted version for an online format, and of course, you can adjust the timing depending on the context.
  1. Define a central question,
  2. Give everyone 1 minute for the written reflection,
  3. Divide the group into pairs, send them into breakout rooms and give them 1 minute each to share,

4. Put pairs into groups of four in breakout rooms and give them 4 minutes (1 minute each, or reflecting together),
5. Bring everyone back into the main room. Then you have several options:
    - Ask each group of 4 what was one idea that stood out from their conversation? or
    - You can ask everyone to write in a shared document.

After this use the method of a listening circle or invite a few people to share if they wish.

- **The 5-minute rule.** One major challenge for digital educators is to keep learners engaged. Never go longer than 5 minutes without interacting with the group and giving them a task or problem to solve. Remember that participants are surrounded by various tempting distractions and if you don't keep them involved, they can retreat into an observer role (in a good case) or even totally disengage. What can you do? While presenting the topic, and facilitating discussion, every 5 min keep everybody busy by asking them to perform different tasks:

    o "If you agree, type in chat letter B, if not, type letter O" (You can be creative here, give them random letters, numbers, or symbols to type to keep their attention on the topic and with you)
    o "If you like it, press the smiling emoji, if not - then press the one with tears"
    o Let's stretch! Let's breathe in and breathe out...

- **Use Gamification.** Incorporating elements from games will increase the engagement of learners in the process. You can use platforms like Poll Everywhere Competitions, Kahoot or Mentimeter to gamify your content and process.
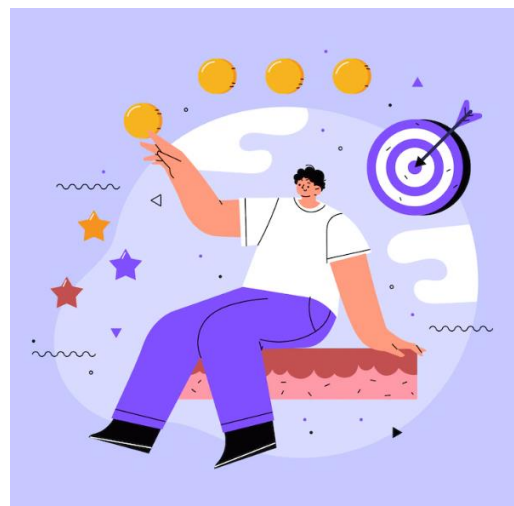
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Methods for encouraging participants

You can encourage the participants by:

- ✓ Writing their comments on the whiteboard,

- ✓ Asking follow-up questions and paraphrasing the comments for everyone to consider. You can use probing questions to help your learners to bring out their ideas,

- ✓ Using clarification questions,

- ✓ Giving credit to discussion contributors,

- ✓ Inviting others to add their reactions or ideas to build on previous comments,

- ✓ Admitting if you don't know something; don't be afraid to admit your ignorance or confusion – invite others to contribute.

Don'ts:

- ▪ Don't use specific terminology, certain conventions or language that will exclude certain groups from understanding the context of the discussion or make them feel uncomfortable.

- ▪ Don't assume all participants have the same expectations when the group gets together.

- ▪ Don't over-generalize behaviours or have stereotypical expectations of participants (tokenism).

- ▪ Don't use (or allow others to use) disrespectful language or tone, or disrespectful non-verbal communication.

- ▪ Don't convey a sense of self-importance or superiority.

- ▪ Don't allow only the dominant or more verbal participants to take over the conversation.

- ▪ Don't discourage alternate views or counterarguments.

How to prepare good discussion questions

Preparation is the key to success, and facilitating online discussions is not an exception. While preparing questions for a discussion, use the following tips:

- Decide what your purpose is: to check the knowledge, brainstorm new ideas, help learners to see new perspectives or to spark interest?
- While shaping the question, think about the final goal.
- Try not to use closed questions that prompt a yes or no answer.
- If you still get closed answers, ask learners to dive deeper and justify their responses.
- Be aware that different questions elicit different thought processes.

Types of questions that stimulate different kinds of thinking

Convergent Thinking - Using Logic	Divergent Thinking - Using imagination	Evaluative Thinking
Usually begins with words: - Why - How - In what ways...	Usually begins with: - Images - Suppose - Predict... - If..., then... - How might... - Can you create... - What are some possible consequences of...?	Usually begins with words and phrases: - Defend - Judge - Justify... - What do you think about...? - What is your opinion about...
Examples: - How does formal education differ from non-formal education?	Examples: - Suppose that... Would ... - What predictions can you make regarding... - How might the educational system differ in 2100 from today?	Examples: - What do you think are the advantages of online courses over face-to-face ones? - Is it fair that ...? - How do you feel about ...?

4. Discussion in face-to-face, synchronous, and asynchronous educational settings

Online discussions can be classified as synchronous – happening in real-time in the chat or face-to-face conference mode or asynchronous, via discussion forums. Let's look at the quick summary of what, when, why and how of the two modes of communication and discussions (adapted from Hranstinski, 2008: Asynchronous and Synchronous E-Learning).

When, why, and how to use asynchronous vs. synchronous e-Learning[1]

	Asynchronous	**Synchronous**
What	Delayed mode of communication Allows for cognitive participation	Real-time communication Supports personal participation
When	Reflecting on complex issues	Discussing less complex issues Brainstorming ideas Getting acquainted Planning tasks
Why	Increased reflection and ability to process information. Learners have more time to reflect, as an immediate answer is not expected	Increased excitement and motivation to participate. Learners become more committed and motivated because a quick response is expected.
How	Use discussion forums, e-mails, and blogs.	Use chat, videoconferencing, instant messaging, and online meetings.

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[1] Haythornthwaite and Kazmer, "Bringing the Internet Home."

5. Overcoming Challenges

Facilitating discussions generally means that you deal with the interaction of different opinions and characters, and there is a possibility that problems and tension will arise. We invite you to look for some common problems and suggestions for how to deal with them.

- **The whole group is silent and unresponsive.** Sometimes learners are reluctant to participate actively in the discussion. To help them to join and participate, you can use several methods:

  o Post the question and ask to think individually, reflect, and maybe even write down some notes. You can put in some music (better without lyrics so as not to distract the thought process).
  o Divide learners into pairs or small groups and ask them to discuss the question.
  o After a few minutes of small group discussion, ask everybody to report the results of their group discussions. This method helps to engage shy and quiet learners to first formulate their ideas in an individual setting and then "try them out" in a safe environment of pair conversations. As experience shows, by allowing different kinds of pre-discussion activities, you create a welcoming environment for different learning styles and promote equity in the conversation, which increases engagement and active participation of all instead of a few dominant and super-active learners.
  o Direct participants to a sentence, paragraph, slide, or table of data, and ask them to analyse it closely and carefully.
  o Draw attention to how the issue you're grappling with in the discussion has real-world applicability.
  o Summarise, or ask participants to summarise the main points of the discussion and solicit ideas about where to go next.
  o Invite participants to stand up, stretch, or move around the room. Use a fun energizer or warm-up activity to change group energy.

- **Some learners are constantly silent and unresponsive**. The best way to include those who are less active in group discussions is to allow them to share their opinions in smaller groups or pair-share discussions. When participants are divided into small groups, it makes it easier for them to speak up and share. A second strategy is to ask direct, open, exploratory, opinion questions occasionally (e.g., "How do you feel about this?"). This technique will ensure that participants will feel less fearful and more secure about answering incorrectly. Another technique is to ask participants to write their answers to a question. For those who are shy or fearful, this technique will be the best option to express their opinion.

- **Some of the participants talk too much.** If you have a dominant participant who tries to take all the space, you should use the technique of redirecting the discussion to another person or changing the topic. You could also reframe their comments and make them contributors to the discussion. You can also ask the person to act as an observer for a few sessions, reporting back his/her observations to the group. Perhaps assigning the avid talker to the observer role would help the person develop sensitivity. Another option is to break down the group into smaller task groups.

- **Discussion goes off-topic and becomes irrelevant.** Set clear topics and agenda from the very beginning. It is useful to keep a visual summary of the topics discussed for everyone to see. You can use or build-in teleconferencing software whiteboard, use an external link to the existing whiteboard or use your Whiteboard or Flipchart. You can ask: "How does what we are discussing relate to our topic?" You can ask the group to think again and agree on what they think should or should not be discussed.

- **Discussion turns into an argument**. In good discussions, conflicts will sometimes arise. If such conflicts are left unattended, they may cause harm to the educational process. Here are a few ways to resolve them:

    o If the solution depends on certain facts, you can ask participants to refer to the text or another authority.
    o If there is an experimentally verified answer, you can use the opportunity to review the method by which the answer could be determined.
    o If they argue about the values, you could use this opportunity to dive deeper and discuss how they understand the values. You can write both sides of the argument on the whiteboard.

    As a moderator, you can take a strong position, to prevent participants from speaking simultaneously or interrupting each other. It's up to you to lay ground rules for discussion, for example asking participants to concentrate on ideas instead of people and to try to be less judgmental.

- **A disruption occurs** (somebody is late or lost the internet connection and joined again, somebody forgot to turn his microphone off). Discuss this possible situation in advance (beginning of the program) or send the group a PDF tutorial with instructions and rules.

- **Participant (learner) becomes argumentative (attacks) the facilitator.**
  You might have a participant who loves to argue for the sake of argument. If such a situation presents itself, try not to take the bait. Participants who attack often usually want attention, so simply giving them some recognition and acknowledging their contribution while firmly moving on often takes care of the problem. If participants are simply trying to embarrass you, they may seek to make you defensive with such comments as, "How do you know that…?" or "You're not really saying that…?" To deal with these kinds of questions, you can use the method called **Boomerang**. You could respond: "What I'm saying is…, and now I would like to hear your opinion, your perspective". When we turn the question back to the person asking the question, we force her or him to take responsibility for his or her words, ideas, and opinions. Other ways to handle these situations include:

  Confrontation – You can confront the person by asking questions about their reactions to his or her behaviour. "What I really hear you saying is..."
  Active listening – You can paraphrase the message they heard and check out the accuracy of their assumptions before responding.
  Locating – You can ask the questioner to explain the context behind the question.
  Reframing – You can try to clarify the assumptions behind the person's argument and then invite her or him to see possible alternatives.
  Postpone – Sometimes the best strategy is to offer a "time-out". Ask participants to meet after the session and find time to talk about the disagreement they have. You can move the discussion on to another topic. Just keep in mind that the best option is to have closure facilitated by you, as moving to another topic after a disagreement will leave some unresolved emotions.

6. Questions for reflection

1. *Think of the best and worst experiences you had as a participant in online discussions. What was the main distinguishing factor? Was it about the questions? About the group members? Or maybe about the style of facilitation of the process?*

2. *Which methods for engaging learners in discussions do you like and why? And which ones are challenging for you and how can you overcome those challenges?*

3. *How could you make the asynchronous discussion more engaging for learners? Which new technologies could you use?*

7. References and resources

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Stefan Hrastinski, "*Participating in Synchronous Online Education,"* PhD dissertation, Lund University, 2007, available from http://www.lu.se/o.o.i.s?id=12588&postid=599311

Webpages:

1. Discussion methods
2. The role of facilitator
3. Tips on Facilitating Effective Group Discussions - The Harriet W. Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning
4. Guidelines for discussing difficult or high-stakes topics
5. Center for innovative teaching and learning
6. Facilitating Group Discussions
7. Free fun icebreakers for online trainings
8. Asynchronous and Synchronous E-learning
9. Synchronous Online Learning
10. How to facilitate engaging meetings with Zoom
11. How to get people to actually participate in online meetings
12. Types of questions teaching critical thinking