Top Tips for Moderators of Online Discussion Groups

Moderating network dialogues is an art – an experience that each individual is free to interpret and experiment with in order to cultivate their own, unique style. As with any art, attention needs to be paid to both the fine details of the work as well as to the overall structure. Moderating is an evolving process that can reflect different periods of interest and growth of the teacher moderator.

There is no single way to be a "good" moderator. Instead, there are many effective and different styles. What makes for a successful moderator is having the confidence to put forth your own style in order to "grow" network conversations. The markings of an effective or interesting network dialogue are very similar to those of a good person-to-person conversation – a meaningful exchange of sentiments, observations, opinions or ideas. Moderating is about interpersonal communication.

Online dialogues can take many forms and serve multiple purposes. Some dialogues engage members in doing while others engage them in thinking.

MSPnet members may find these tips to be a useful reference guide for moderating Working Group discussions.

Engaging members in doing

- Focus the discussion on the use of a tool or resource. Others can be drawn in by their interest in the topic, and by your level of enthusiasm
- Ask for a specific commitment to join the discussion. For example, the commitment might be to read a paper or article.

Engaging members in thinking

- Provoke curiosity and stimulate intellectual discussion about a critical, controversial, or intriguing topic. Identify a rich theme, a question or dilemma with no simple answer. Embed one or more questions in your messages, and use an inquiring tone to invite others to join the discussion.
- Stake out a controversial position or play devil's advocate to challenge others to think through their own ideas.
- Ask good questions that stimulate thought.
- Share and compare experiences as a way of learning form others, and seeing your experiences/ideas through someone else's eyes.
- Invite others to help problem-solve a dilemma you are facing.
- Use or post one or more files in the file manager or in the MSPnet Library to stimulate interest, and to provide resources for the conversation.

Opening the conversation

When creating a new topic for conversation, the title of the topic and the content of the first message all have a bearing on who will be attracted to the topic. Use witty or intriguing titles that identify a clear topic area to draw in members of the community.

Promoting Reflective Dialogue

Reflective dialogue is usually less common than information seeking dialogue in a professional online forum. A reflective dialogue tends to begin with a triggering message that offers a "window" into one's professional practice, exploring personal beliefs, and philosophies. A reflective trigger message engages author's self, is stated in a non-judgmental manner, and invites inquiry (DiMauro & Gal, 1993).

A reflective dialogue can be difficult to initiate or to participate in, because it can feel risky to post one's personal ideas, beliefs, and struggles. However, the benefits of exposure usually outweigh the fear of scrutiny, for both author and reader. By telling one's ideas in a reflective way, a writer is then able to receive responses that him to consider alternatives and reshape his thinking. In addition, in a group conversation, all readers have an opportunity to think through the issues raised in the dialogue.

Getting to Know Each Other

One important step to forming any community – network or face-to-face – is getting to know the members of your community on both a professional and personal level. Some ways that moderators have reported as useful for getting to know the others are as follows:

- Talk about your situation; offer a "profile" of yourself.
- Talk about your interests.
- Look for things you have in common with other members.
- Address people by name.
- Sign contributions with your name, school, location, etc.
- Use humor to make the conversation feel more informal.

Keeping the Quality High

Promotion of reflective dialogue requires the posting of messages that are thoughtful and tend to linger – slowing down the conversation to focus on specific details. A contemplative message can take many shapes and forms that are largely determined by the moderator.

Asking Good Questions

Asking good questions is a fundamental aspect of moderating a group discussion. There are two components to asking good questions: First, it is important to ask questions that could be responded to with a thoughtful answer. Questions that only require a "yes" or "no" response can stilt a conversation whereas, a question that specifically asks about another's idea of point of view can lead to a rich and reflective dialogue.

Second, asking through-provoking questions effectively requires much thought and careful phrasing, especially in an online dialogue where there are few opportunities to reveal one's emotions or intentions. Often the recipient of a question needs to infer the agenda behind the question. Therefore, it is appropriate and helpful to make your intentions more explicit when writing messages which contain questions.

Answering Questions

By posting thoughtful answers, moderators can help to sustain the flow of conversation beyond a simple question/answer rhythm.

Are you posting background for an idea and getting new ideas as a result? There are a variety of techniques such as the following:

- Ask for clarification of the question, if needed.
- Suggest several alternatives, rather than one "right" answer.
- Be explicit about your assumption in answering, and invite others to test your assumptions.
- Solicit ideas and responses from theirs.
- Ask for feedback and follow up – how were the answers used?
- Bring up related questions and ideas.
- Redirecting a conversation that has "gone off" on a tangent takes a diplomatic hand, a gentle reminder about the original discussion, or a revitalization by the introduction of new material.

Maintaining Continuity of a Topic

Continuity means a specific topic or issue is carried on and explored in depth. Continuity may be motivated by a long-term commitment to an issue. It often requires patience, staying power, and a willingness to sustain the conversation even when it's slow.

There are specific methods that many moderators employ to foster continuity of a conversation. One of the most fundamental skills is knowing when to redirect the conversation. Paying attention to orchestrating the conversation (organizing events, delegating responsibility) is often the next step in moderating an issue-based topic.

Keeping People Involved and Contributing

All people who take the time to contribute to a conversation believe they have something valuable or notable to contribute, Many people find it difficult to add to a conversation, and often need to muster courage to contribute. Therefore, it is critical that they and their ideas acknowledged in some way.

Occasionally, someone will add a message that is off the topic or out of sync with the present conversation. This can be difficult to manage, especially if the conversation is following a specific topic or idea. In these cases, it may be helpful for the moderator to address the message/person, acknowledge his or her contribution, and attempt to steer the contribution back to the more mainstream conversation. If the posting is truly out of sync with the topic, perhaps the moderator can "refresh" the conversation with a posting that re-visits the topic at hand. For example "for those of you who have just joined us, the topic is… Please read the preceding messages for the complete conversation to date." Alternative, it is often appropriate to create a new topic within the working group to support the new thread of conversation.

In addition, summarizing an individual's contributions throughout a topic in a single message can demonstrate the value of their work.

Ending dialogues

Sometimes a discussion will remain dormant for some time with no one posting or contributing. It often makes sense to let the conversation remain inactive as conversations sometimes are re-activated by new participants. Therefore, it is helpful to recognize that a topic can lay dormant for some time (one month, on the average) and still have the potential to be re-awakened.

Timing

With electronic communication, messages travel quickly but the timing of the response is left to the user. How quickly you respond to messages affects the pace and feel of a conversation:

- An instantaneous response (e.g. same day) helps to keep conversation moving, but may make the recipient feel pressured to also respond very quickly.
- A timely response (e.g. within a few days) helps the sender feel responded to, and allows some time for reflection before responding.
- A delayed response (e.g. within 1-2 weeks) or never responding may make the sender feel ignored, unappreciated, or neglected.
- Responding when a conversation seems to be dwindling can help to revitalize it.

Tone

Tone is an important factor in any communication, and striking the right tone can be particularly challenging in network communication where there is an absence of inflections, facial expressions, or body language. Using emoticons ("smiley faces") can help to soften the tone of a message, or make it clear when you are making a joke. Your choice of words, length of message, spelling, emotion, etc. will also affect the tone of your communication. You will need to find the tone that is right for you and for what you are trying to communicate. Your "tone repertoire" might include some of the following:

- inquiring;
- warm, inviting;
- Humorous;
- thoughtful, analytical, serious, reflective;
- friendly and supportive, nurturing;
- Challenging, provocative, stimulating;
- Informal, musing;
- blunt, honest;
- Sharing feelings (discomfort, panic, nervousness, etc.);
- Off-the-cuff, typos and all.

Reference:

DiMauro, V. and Gal, S., "Dimensions of network-mediated space for professional discourse of science teacher leaders," in the Journal of Science Education & Technology, June, 1994.