

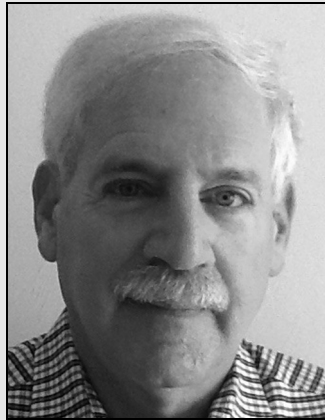
e-Coaching Success Strategies for Synchronous Discussions

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INTRODUCTION

Our last [chat] session online was just painful.... We were 2 hours into it and we couldn't get one question answered. I mean, it hurt.... I mean, it's like what a waste of 2 hours of my life. Let's just try to answer the question. And part of it was because I think the questions were designed to be very in depth, and the discussions just remained shallow and we couldn't get it resolved. (Vince)

Educators often use discussion to help learners become critically informed about a topic or issue, take responsibility for their learning, question their assumptions, and gain more insight into themselves as learners (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005). As Vince noted above, however, his discussion group's chats were more painful than productive. The first step in decreasing the pain of shallow chats involves awareness on the



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part of the instructor about how learners can facilitate discussion, coalesce as a group, and synthesize comments to move the group toward shared understanding (Stein et al., 2007).

An inquiry-based discussion is successful when learners engage in purposeful, critical dialogue to construct individual and group understanding of the issue (Garrison, 2011). In an inquiry-based discussion, learners take responsibility for their learning, create meaning in a group, and learn from the group. In a physical classroom, instructors can model moderator and discussant skills and have learners practice those skills in the presence of the instructor. Using a stop-action approach, instructors can stop the discussion and provide feedback. Learners can then practice the skill and continue with the discussion. In an online environment, instructors may not be able to have a group stop action. Frequent interruptions by the instructor might disrupt the rhythm of the discussion, especially when the discourse occurs in text-based chat rooms.

In a typical approach to modeling discussion skills in asynchronous spaces, the instructor participates and demonstrates appropriate facilitation behaviors through appropriate comments. Using a scaffolding approach, the instructor removes prompts and hints as learners begin to take more responsibility for the flow and content of the discussion. The instructor might take on the role of a student for demonstration purposes (Baran & Correia, 2009). However, students may still need to be coached in how to organize and moderate an online discussion until the skills are firmly established (Shea, Li, & Pickett, 2006).

In a synchronous, continually flowing chat space, consideration needs to be given to the difficulty of modeling behaviors. Too much intervention or modeling on the part of the instructor, even in the guise of a student, might disrupt the natural flow of ideas. It may be that the speed and flow of a synchronous chat make it impractical for

an instructor to be the only voice of guidance. Learners in chat environments need time to reflect, practice, and receive guidance on effective moves made during their discussions. Coaching, rather than modeling or direct instruction, may be an appropriate intervention for improving learner-led text-based chats.

Learners who are coached and provided with timely feedback are able to achieve improvements in their ability to master the subject matter by better integrating and resolving the issues under discussion (Stein, Wanstreet, Slagle, Trinko, & Lutz, 2013). The question for instructors is how to provide coaching and feedback in educational online environments to help students improve their higher order thinking skills, such as integration and resolution. If coaching on discussion skills can increase student performance in the discussion, how then might instructors create a safe space for learners to practice and learn the art of discussion in an ongoing discussion-based environment?

In this article we will first discuss the idea of e-coaching and then describe how we use academic chats in our course. A third section will describe the framework for our e-coaching and feedback process. We will conclude with recommendations for practice derived from our experience with electronic coaching and feedback.

WHAT IS E-COACHING?

Coaching is becoming part of the landscape in higher education and is being used to improve learner performance in managing course content and setting academic goals (Murphy, Mahoney, Chen, Mendoza-Diaz, & Yang, 2005; Robinson & Gahagan, 2010). e-Coaching moves the process and guidance to an electronic space. In our work, we define e-coaching as a process that uses electronic tools to improve task performance by increasing an individual's or group's ability to build the discussion skills that are required to

come to a collective understanding of an issue.

We use e-coaching for inquiry-based assignments, and we use tools such as e-mail to provide coaching and feedback to learners who participate in synchronous discussions. Comments relate to the desired discussions skills and improvements learners need to make to more effectively participate in online discussions (Averweg, 2010; Rossett & Marino, 2005). The coach assists in the development of the group so that the group can self-manage, correct, and ultimately improve its ability to carry on a discussion and improve cognitive functioning (Hackman & Wegeman, 2005).

We position coaching as distinct from the instructional or facilitation role in that the coach is independent of the learning situation and can provide feedback on the form rather than the substance of the issue under discussion. Unlike instructors, the coach is not accountable to assess the academic performance of the group and focuses solely on helping the group develop the processes to conduct and manage online discussions effectively (Sofa, Yeo, & Villafane, 2010). Coaches focus on the process of being in a discussion; establishing the rules for participation and roles the members might take; asking appropriate questions for clarity, depth, and criticality of responses; making connections among the responses; and other elements of being in and contributing to a discussion (Brookfield, 2006).

HOW WE USE CHATS

We teach an inquiry-based course that blends classroom instruction with web-based learning. Specifically, we meet in person at the beginning, midpoint, and end of a 10-week quarter course. During the intervening weeks, we give learners the opportunity to choose whether they will conduct small-group discussions in person or in online chat spaces. The out-

come of the discussion is a group posting to the rest of the class that resolves an issue we pose each week.

In our course, multiple chats occur simultaneously, which limits the amount of time the instructor can be present in any one chat. Therefore, developing our learners' facilitation skills is critical to their ability to arrive at a resolution during the chat. Shea et al. (2006) report that students prefer directed facilitation from the instructor and may need to be coached in how to organize and facilitate discussions. This is particularly important in courses such as ours that feature learner-led discussions.

As instructors, we no longer assume that learners have the necessary skills to integrate information and resolve issues under discussion (Wanstreet & Stein, 2011). This applies to learners in both online and face-to-face environments, who tend to transfer practices from ordinary conversation to their online interactions (Schönfeldt & Golato, 2003). Therefore, we have developed an approach to provide electronic coaching to improve cognitive performance and electronic feedback to indicate what learners have done well and what follow-up work is required.

A FRAMEWORK FOR E-COACHING AND FEEDBACK

We have used the community of inquiry model in our course design because it provides a framework for analyzing online discussions in terms of teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). Teaching presence involves course design and administration, discourse facilitation, and direct instruction. Social presence is the ability of learners to project their personal characteristics to others and coalesce as a group; and cognitive presence is associated with higher order thinking that results from recognizing problems, exploring suggestions for consideration, integrating concepts, and developing a resolution

to the issue under study (Garrison et al., 2000).

The community of inquiry framework features templates containing categories, indicators, and examples of each presence. The templates have guided researchers in analyzing the content of synchronous and asynchronous discussions (Anderson, Rourke, Archer, & Garrison, 2001; Garrison et al., 2000; Ling, 2007; Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 1999; Shea et al., 2010, 2006; Stein et al., 2007). The analysis generally takes place when the course is completed and is not conducted as a way to guide coaching and feedback during the course. However, we have used the templates to focus the substance of our coaching and feedback. We have found that a group receiving electronic coaching before each chat and feedback immediately afterwards experienced an increase in higher order thinking over time when compared with a group that did not receive coaching and feedback (Stein et al., 2013).

Coaching involved providing examples from previous group interactions and explaining how to improve discussion performance. Group members were encouraged to practice (i.e., mentally rehearse) the skills before the next session. Our e-coaching cycle began with observation in the form of reviewing transcripts directly after the chat to determine deficiencies in performance. Guidance delivered electronically alerted the group members to identified deficiencies and suggestions for improvement. Practice was encouraged in

the days before the next session. The final component, feedback, was provided immediately after the subsequent session to report the extent to which the group members acted on the discussion process recommendations. The coaching cycle was reiterated 24 hours in advance of the next discussion.

Table 1 shows the type of coaching and feedback we provided to address specific categories of teaching and social presence. Teaching and social presence dialogue is necessary for an academic chat to achieve cognitive presence (Anderson et al., 2001) and was, therefore, the focus of our coaching (Stein et al., 2013).

Teaching presence coaching and feedback was informed by the community of inquiry teaching presence template (Anderson et al., 2001). In the category of instructional design and organization, each group was advised to name a moderator and summarizer for the following week so that undue time was not spent organizing the group each week. In terms of direct instruction, members were coached on how to summarize the discussion before moving on to the next part of the question. Regarding facilitating discourse, the group was coached on how to gain agreement that the response reflects the input of all group members.

Social presence coaching was based on the template developed by Rourke et al. (1999) and Garrison and Arbaugh (2007). Social presence coaching promoted the use of cohesive language, such as “we, our, and

Table 1. Community of Inquiry Coaching and Feedback Guide

Elements	Categories	Coaching and Feedback
Teaching presence ^a	- Design and organization - Facilitating discourse - Direct instruction	- Name moderator/summarizer; establish norms - Gain input from all; check for understanding - Present questions, refer to readings, summarize
Social presence ^b	Group cohesion	Use “we,” “our,” “us”

Sources: ^aAnderson, Rourke, Archer, and Garrison (2001); ^bRourke, Anderson, Garrison, and Archer (1999), Garrison and Arbaugh (2007).

Table 2. Examples of Simple, Directive Coaching and Feedback

Coaching Before the Chat	Feedback After the Chat
"Confirm who the moderator and summarizer are at the very beginning of the chat and decide on the next week's moderator and summarizer at that time."	"You did a nice job of naming the moderator, so keep it going. Remember to identify a summarizer at the beginning of the chat."
"Consistently follow a convention to signal where you are in your response."	"Bobby and Mary used ellipses ... to signal when they weren't finished. When you are finished, you might try using 'end' or some other convention. It cuts down on five people talking at once."
"Summarize where you are before moving on to the next question, and check for everyone's understanding."	"I counted about three instances that looked like summary statements, which were supplemented by some of the other group members.... Going forward, the moderator can ask for a summary to see where the group is headed regarding an answer."
"Get input on every question."	"I can't see that you actually addressed all of the questions, so your moderator will probably be filling in the blanks based on her sense of where the discussion might have gone. You'll want to make your job easier by getting input on every question."
"Include examples from the readings to support your positions."	"With two exceptions, there were no examples from the readings to support your opinions. After initial brainstorming, you'll need to integrate information from the readings to support your opinions and move the discourse to a productive outcome efficiently."
"Offer reasons why you agree or disagree."	"There's quite a bit of simple agreement without any follow-up as to why. You may have good reasons for agreeing or disagreeing that could be useful in writing the discussion posting."

us" to show the learners working together and coalescing as a group. Feedback assessed how well the group achieved the goals of the coaching.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

1. Coach shortly before a chat and provide feedback immediately afterwards. This will help learners increase their knowledge of the inquiry process, ask questions to confirm their understanding, and facilitate inquiry, among other metacognitive activities (Akyol & Garrison, 2011). We provided coaching 24 hours in advance and feedback 1 hour after the chats.
2. Provide continuous coaching in discussion processes and feedback about the gap in those processes throughout the course. Our learners showed an

increase in their higher order thinking with as few as five coaching and feedback sessions.

3. Keep the coaching and feedback simple, directive, and task based (see Table 2). Use feedback to complement the coaching by identifying gaps between the coaching tasks you encouraged and the performance. In that way, coaching and feedback are iterative and build on each other. Our coaching consisted of a maximum of four items before each chat, which were repeated as needed.

Continuous coaching and feedback can reinforce the power of learner-led discussions to foster more interdependent learners so they can conduct inquiries together and model collaborative learning. In addition to teaching, social, and cognitive presence, continuous coaching and feedback

contribute to a successful course. Groups benefiting from coaching and feedback will have the tools to move chat discussions deliberately from painful to productive.

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