Facilitating conversational web based learning using ‘Moderator Diary’

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Abstract

Web-based conversational learning is becoming the preferred choice in many educational training programs, taking place both synchronously or asynchronously. Threaded forums, are the most popular asynchronous discussion environments but often do not foster productive discussions naturally. Moderators can play an important role to bring strategies to energize the discussion and make it more productive. One such concept of creating Moderator Diary (MD) to foster web-based discussion has been tried on a web-based interacting platform (email list management software), and generated qualitative evidence through peer feedback. The MD which is used as a daily summary tool also helped to motivate and give directions to channel the online discussion.

Keywords: Online Learning, threaded discussions, Moderator Diary

Introduction

People can learn from each other through conversation. Web-based conversational learning is fast becoming the preferred choice in many educational programs taking place both synchronously or asynchronously. Asynchronous online discussion environments are important platforms to support learning (Gao et al 2013). Previous research has shown that such web-based discussion can equally match the robustness and dynamics generally experienced in face-to-face discussions (Jarvela, S & Hakkinen P 2000). The Listserv, being a method of communicating with a group of people via email, is ideal for exchanging expertise, obtaining feedback and fostering collaboration among geographically dispersed team members (Utov R et al 2004). A moderator plays a very important role in e-learning by trying to compensate for absence of a live teacher. An effective e-moderator has been described as multifaceted requiring several qualities and characteristics namely motivational, online personality, communication, time management, feedback, organizational, subject knowledge and technological expertise of which communication skills, being motivational and good time management are considered as useful for effective e-moderation (Gary P et...
al 2004). Asking good questions is a fundamental aspect of moderating a group discussion. Experts have suggested focusing the discussion by carefully preparing questions in advance & need to provide expectations on timeline of discussion (Hanna D et al 2000). Successful online moderation includes encouraging introductory messages, clear guidelines, intermittent summaries and refocusing of discussion (Selinger M 1997). However, in spite of many or all of these interventions, online learning remains a challenge for the moderator. Our own experience has brought out many problems faced by the moderators (see Box 2). Based on the evidence in literature and after experiencing some of the inherent problems in Listserv discussion, we created an educational tool called ‘Moderator Diary’ to summarize, motivate, give directions and channelize the asynchronous online discussions.

Process Description

The CMCL (Christian Medical College Ludhiana) FAIMER regional institute fellowship is offered annually to teachers of health professions, with the objective of cultivating good teaching–learning practices and educational leadership qualities (Norcini J et al 2005). The two year program is split into four sessions; two yearly residential sessions of one week each and two yearlong Listserv discussion formats. The fellows participate and contribute to the discussion on the preselected educational topics and education researches through an internet-based discussion forum. The selected topic for the month is moderated by fellows on a rotational basis (Anshu et al 2008). The moderating team initiates discussion about the learning goals, possible delivery modalities, and underlying subtopics/subthemes well in advance before the actual start of their respective moderation month. The discussion starts as an E-mail thread on the electronic mailing list forum (Listserv) for a pre-specified duration. Several such threads are created during the month depending on the content and volume of discussion. Authors moderated one such discussion on competency based medical education.

Box 1 :- Example of Moderator’s post on First Thread of discussion

Scenario:
‘A mother came to one Rural Health centre OPD with a 12 year old boy who had been suffering from fever for 5days and subsequently developing disorientation. The medical officer Dr B who was posted there had just come out from the medical college with flying colours. The pharmacist insisted on giving quinine drip along with IV antibiotics. But Dr B was reluctant to start the treatment without any investigation, for which there was no facility and the parents were reluctant to take the child to any secondary hospital. The argument between Dr B & the pharmacist led to chaotic situation and even led to public anger. Luckily the Chief Medical officer, who was on a visit to that RHC came to rescue and the likely untoward incident was averted that day.’

Questions for Discussion:
The Chief medical officer later asked the FAIMERIANS to analyse the situation & to formulate educational strategies to overcome such issues. At the outset he wants you to ponder on:
• How to relate this incident with the current UG training?
• What are the key changes in UG educational strategy that can address such an issue?
The number of participants in this online discussion forum varies from time to time as all the e-mails on the Listserv platform go to all the current as well as fellows who have joined it since its inception in 2006. However, the most active participants belong to year 1 & year 2 batches of the fellowship program. The actual conversational discussion is initiated by moderators by implanting some hypothetical but contextual scenarios related to the assigned topic of the month (as shown in Box 1). Participants then start sharing their views and comment on other’s views. But in this asynchronous online discussion many problems were faced by the e-moderators to maintain the flow of effective discussion as shown in Box 2.

| Box 2: Problems faced by moderators during threaded discussion |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|

- Participants just focused to answer question given by moderators rather than initiating lateral discussion/interaction.
- Articles excerpts are quoted without justification hence moderators were not sure on conceptualization of concept by respondents.
- Many participants remain silent especially when there is plethora of mail posts in the thread.
- Difficult to synchronise the discussion with duplication of answers to discussion question.
- Difficult to maintain a connectivity to the flow of discussion.

To address the difficulties faced by the moderators, it was planned to introduce MD from the second day of discussion as a diary where the moderators reflected the summary of events taking place during the previous day’s mail exchange. **Fig1 & Fig 2** depict a structured tabular colour template with different sections for addressing the identity of moderators, name of respondents, theme of discussion, agreeable points on previous day’s discussion, emerging theme for subsequent discussion, queries by moderators, upcoming task and sometimes motivating quotes. On the 9th day of the moderation, there was an addition to the sections of the MD about points on which there was less or no agreement as those were also useful learning objectives. Again on the 22nd day, another section was attached to the MD regarding the Group work assigned to all in 3 groups. This was depicted in the diary in three different font colors. Progress of the group activity was mentioned in the MD and feedback was given on the group dynamics of different groups. Instructions were also shared in the MD to provide feedback in a structured manner on the group work of others.
| Month: November | Theme: CBME | Moderator: Manasee & Soum |
|-----------------|-------------|---------------------------|
| Date: 9-11-12   | Sub Theme: CBME experience: Institutional & Fellow’s perspective |
| Important issue/query raised yesterday | Time devoted for CBME at various institutions, impact of CBME & any strategy to make it more productive |

**Respondents**
- Dr Bharti
- Soum
- Anu
- Dilar
- Madhuri K
- Neerja
- Sabya

**Common agreeable Points:**
Only three have shared the current CBME as practiced in their institutions and have mentioned about the hours of posting but all are requested to write in detail what the students are doing in the community posting (as described in Soum’s post).

**Points not agreed/least agreeable**
Not emerged during yesterday’s discussion; but we noticed variability in CBME at their respective institutions stated by 3 fellows. Will look forward to more inputs today for further analysis.

**Important matters erupted through discussion**
- Lack of logistics at PHC/CHC
- Promoting research activities by students during CBME
- Improving communication skills & instilling professionalism among them.
- Availability of Family Physician and 2 years intense internship period is helping graduates here to be more holistic in their approach, unlike PG mania from FINAL YEAR itself in India
- But all systems failed as per policy patient has right to choose and there is no referral system
- Students feel that there is no one to take guidance from while prescribing the treatment.

**Moderator’s Message/Query/Comment**
Like Anu has described, you can forward the views of students/interns.

Note: Try to elaborate on types of community exposure.

*The structured question: Institutional experience asked by us as WHAT?, on IMPACT may be theSO WHAT? & last query on further strategy as NOW WHAT? (As suggestion from Sao Paulo)*

*We EXTEND THIS SEGMENT till 11th....keep sharing thoughts.....*
To continue the flow of discussion and involve all the participants queries were asked in the MD in between as shown in Box -3 basing on the responses of the participants on previous days’ questions.

*Fig2. Another sample of one day’s ‘Moderator diary’ during an online group activity of Listserve discussion*
All the mails exchanged in the month were read along with the contents of the MD subsequently by the moderators to know the response of the participants about the MD and how MD had helped in effective e-moderation.

**Observations**

Total academic participation in the month was by 31 fellows (100% for the 1st year and 53% for the 2nd year). MD was introduced on the morning of the 2nd day of the moderation by the moderators along with the reasons for introducing it and continued until the end of the month. On the evening of the last day the final MD was released with summary of each thread. Thus a total of 30 MDs were released & 330 mails pertaining to academic discussion were exchanged during the month.

The responses of the participants towards MD were collected and analyzed (Box 4).

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**Box 4: The responses of the participants towards MD**

| Theme                        | Examples of Participants’ comments                                                                                                                                 |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| MD as a stimulant for discussion | "Moderators surprised us with MD, an admired new innovation which summarized daily discussion, acknowledging the respondents, any queries of the day and moderators stimulation for next discussion."  
"I have fallen in love with your daily diary."                                                                                       |
| MD as a ready reckoner.     | "The MD effectively summarizes the previous day’s discussion and was food for thought for the current discussion. It also saved a lot of time in case and kept one abreast of the daily happenings in the group." |
| MD as motivating             | "I felt satisfied when my name was in the row in some of the moderator’s diary, ya...hooo... I too contributed good stuff."  
"It also helps us to place ourselves in the frame on a first look, like respondents name."  
"...there was a sense of immediate acknowledgement of ones contribution on reading ones name mentioned in it." |

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| MD providing direction to the flow of discussion | "It gives instant idea of where the discussion is going and where it was, with new emerging themes and daily queries."
Important highlights of the day and moderators message clicked my mind. Oh! What next is expected from me? Since I could not catch up with previous one. |
| MD helping in focused search thereby avoiding duplications | "Layout of MD gave me clear picture of discussion topic what was specified by my friends and what more had to be searched & discussed on the forum."
| MD making the discussion enriched | "Our online discussions were more robust as a result of the moderator’s diary and the daily new questions in it set a very dynamic pace to the discussions."
"It helped us deriving more queries to enrich the discussion."
| MD helping in group activity | "It helped us to coordinate group activities more effectively."
| MD in conceptualizing the topic under discussion | "Discussion became crystal clear, extracting all the major points which had emerged in the whole day and giving food for thought. The constant acknowledgement, reminders and encouragement was well coordinated."

Some of the key words extracted are ‘great innovation’, ‘recapitulating essence of discussion’, ‘summarizing tool’, ‘provoking interest’, ‘staying connected’, ‘channelizing concepts’ etc. Words with similar meanings were grouped into emergent major codes such as attractive, motivate, connecting information directive, channelizing, conceptualizing, thought provoking, inquisitive, inventive. The major codes were further classified into two categories such as thought provoking instrument & quick reference guide of the previous discussion. This categorization subsequently led to the emergence of a major theme for the educational concept ‘Moderator Diary’ as a tool to summarize and channelize the asynchronous online discussion in broader perspective. (Fig 3.)
Discussion

The idea of introducing MD was to have effective e-moderation with rich discussion during the month. Studies have highlighted that discussions could be unfocused unless the moderator exercises a strong guiding influence on the conversation with prompts, cues, and suggestions (Norcini et al 2005). This was reflected in our study with moderators’ comments & queries depicted in MD. Many challenges were observed during previous month’s discussion regarding effective e-moderation mentioned in the Box 2. Hence moderators were motivated to introduce MD to overcome the challenges. The rationale for creating MD is depicted in Box 5.

Each section was planned with a purpose. Along with the name of the moderators, in one section the previous day’s query was mentioned to remind the participants to post their answers. Other sections were meant for mentioning the
participant's names who had already responded, agreeable points, non-agreeable points, emerging theme for subsequent discussion, queries by moderators, upcoming task and sometimes motivating Quotes.

| Box -5 Rationale for creating Moderator Diary |
|---------------------------------------------|
| **Problem identified**                      | **Solutions sought**                               |
| 1. Participants remain aloof after answering their quota. No discussion/interaction with other responses | 1. To identify aggregable & non-aggregable points during discussion, initiating lateral discussion |
| 2. Difficult to bring silent members to board especially when plethora of mail posts in the thread | 2. Making conceptualization of topic easier through daily summary of discussion |
| 3. Difficult to synchronize the discussion with duplication of answers to discussion question | 3. Help respondents to avoid duplication thereby guiding a focused literature search |
| 4. Difficult to maintain a connectivity to the flow of discussion | 4. Getting the additional queries by moderators well noticed through template |
| 5. Need for motivation for the discussants | 5. Identifying the respondents of a particular day motivates non-responders |

It is a fact that moderating network dialogues can be considered as an art. Each individual is free to interpret and experiment in order to cultivate their own, unique style (Havard.edu 1994) as can be noticed from our innovation. Literature has identified interest, relevance, expectancy and satisfaction as four essential components of an effective e-learning strategy, which can be found from the reflection of the participants on MD. Interest involves raising awareness and facilitating debate (Keller J et al 1993). For this reason, in the MD, some queries were asked as a sub-theme relating to CBME which helped the participants to be involved in discussion pertaining to different aspects of the subject and to maintain a focused discussion. Similar suggestions were also given by authors on e-moderation. Furthermore it has been found that e-moderators should initiate discussions with predetermined queries and summative discussions at regular intervals (Stratfold M 1999). In the present study, moderators prepared the blueprint for discussion in the internal thread much ahead of the actual discussion.

Names of fellows who had responded to the queries were mentioned in the MD to acknowledge their participation, and was also indirectly a message to others to respond. And it proved effective as one had reflected "It also helps us to place ourselves in the frame on a first look, like respondents name."

One study compared the use of asynchronous discussions with and without the presence of tutors and reported that the only contextual element which appeared to influence engagement with online discussions in any significant way was the moderator (Oliver M & Shaw GP 2003). Literature also reports that the lack of e-moderator activity could lead to virtual closure of discussion boards and students may stop posting with a few ultimately leaving the course half way (Pakham G 2004). To avoid these, MD focused on summarizing the inputs on a daily basis and highlighting the important points as a reinforcement. The disagreements were continuously reflected on in the MD to invite more comments.
Through MD, moderators had tried to improve effective communication, effective organization, effective focus discussion and adequate understanding of the subject, the success of which has been reflected by the description of the participants.

**Implications:**

These ideas can be used for peer moderating in student centered discussions in online courses as the prime goal was to help participants think deeply about content and potentially use this fast hand information to guide their future thoughts and actions. By utilizing this tool, we believe the students can be more focused toward discussion and construct knowledge in a more structured way with the help of peer moderators.

**Take Home Messages**

- Asynchronous online discussion environments are important platforms to support learning
- A moderator plays a very important role in e-learning
- Successful online moderation includes encouraging introductory messages, clear guidelines, intermittent summaries and refocusing of discussion
- Moderator Diary could possibly improve effective communication, effective organization, effective focus discussion and adequate understanding of the subject

**Notes On Contributors**

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Appendices

Declarations

The author has declared that there are no conflicts of interest.

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