TECHNOLOGY-ENHANCED LEARNING
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E.D.G.E.

"... due to the difficulty of the subject matter and the need to reflect deeply, I have chosen to use online discussion forums to provide students with the opportunity to share their views in between our meetings in class ... "

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Designing Effective Online Discussions for Blended Learning

In this issue of E.D.G.E., CTE caught up with Seow Hon to find out how she uses online discussions to engage her students to think critically about current issues.

Consider
Classroom Context

In Legal Theory and Philosophy, an upper year core law course taught by Seow Hon, students discuss and share their views on the legal and political theories in class in the context of current real-world issues. Seow Hon uses a blended learning approach for her course. After attending her lessons, students share their opinions and develop arguments in support of such opinions using the eLearn discussion forum. By doing so, she is able to conduct more in-depth discussions in addition to what occurs in class, and provide more opportunities for students to apply theory to current practical debates. This blended learning approach lends itself well to courses where oral participation in class may be limited by the difficulty of philosophical theories.

Students appreciate the way Seow Hon actively participates in their online discussions and this motivates them to contribute further. Many felt that they were engaged at various levels of intellectual discourse which enabled them to think critically about current issues. As part of active citizenry, Seow Hon's students also had letters published in local newspapers which demonstrated the impact of how their school work could make a difference to society.

" … students who may have no qualms expressing their opinions on social media tend to be far more cautious on formal class discussion forums when they know their posts are also being used for assessment purposes…"

As Seow Hon reflects on her students' participation in online discussions, she considers if there are ways to encourage reticent students to start posting with the intent of learning from one another.

In the next section, CTE introduces the Community of Inquiry (COI) framework and shares strategies that build upon Seow Hon's approaches in encouraging students to contribute ideas as part of a learning community that advances knowledge collectively.

Explore

Tips, Techniques and Tools

1. Community of Inquiry (COI) Framework

Based on the COI framework^, building strong teaching, cognitive, and social presences is central to a successful online educational experience.
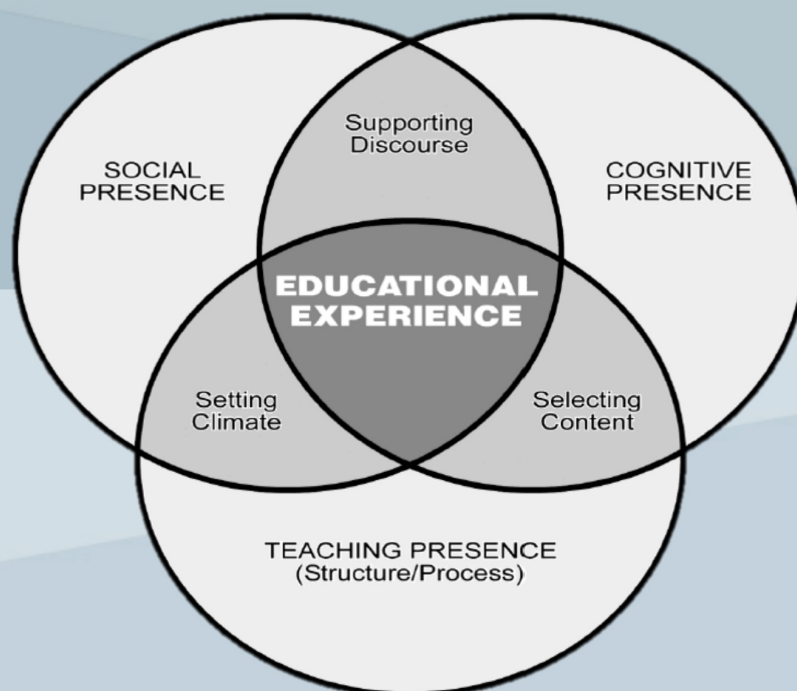
^ Source: Garrison, D. R., & Vaughan, N. (2008). Blended learning in higher education: framework, principles, and guidelines. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
The e-book can be accessed from the SMU Library database. The hardcopy is also available in the Li Ka Shing Library.

Teaching presence

Teaching presence comes from the instructor's role in designing the course, as well as facilitating and assessing learning. This is achieved via guiding students through course materials, reinforcing key concepts and fostering student engagement. For reticent students, it may mean encouraging or acknowledging their contribution, focusing on the discussion, injecting knowledge or diagnosing misperceptions.

☑Tips and Techniques:

Set authentic tasks that reflect real-life issues which students can relate to and hence, find it easy to participate.

Sub-divide your topics and assign separate readings to small groups of students so that they can contribute confidently to the sub-topics.

Create small group discussions to facilitate and monitor the quantity and quality of the contributions. Larger group class discussions tend to discourage reticent students from participating when certain students disproportionately dominate the discussion (Akcaoglu & Lee, 2016).

Assign roles for each student in their respective groups and rotate their roles throughout the course. Roles may include:

Coordinator : Keeps group focused on the task

Counter-advocate : Provides an alternative perspective

Moderator : Watches for negative tones and to enhance positive social interaction

Constantly check in with each group to affirm or clarify misconceptions.

Invite groups to comment on at least one other group's posts (with the view to clarify, challenge, support) and encourage active exchange.

Allow anonymous postings to encourage reticent students to post their views freely.

Social presence

Social presence occurs when participants establish social connections within the class by projecting their individual personalities to communicate purposefully in a safe environment. Students often find online classes impersonal and support for learning and affirmation of contributions lacking, as compared with face-to-face interactions. A strong sense of social presence supports the discourse necessary for cognitive presence to take place.

☑Tips and Techniques:

Explain to your students that the discussion forum in your course is to promote collaborative group learning among peers and not about competing with one another.

Group cohesion is about building a sense of belonging to a group. Foster a culture of peer learning by viewing, responding to the work of others and making time for in-depth reflection.

Share personal and professional anecdotes.

Open communication is about recognising, respecting, and fully attending to an individual's contributions, enabling risk-free exchanges.

Cognitive presence

Cognitive presence enables students to construct meaning through reflection and discourse. By setting appropriately challenging tasks, students are guided through the learning process as they individually explore issues and formulate solutions through divergent ideas. This is followed by students working in groups to reach some convergence by connecting ideas, identifying relationships and proposing solutions. The entire group then comes together to apply and test solutions in real-world scenarios. Students are expected to defend their solutions with reasoning. Reticent students will be able to overcome their fear of posting their views online when they are guided through the learning process and have their responses affirmed at each stage.

☑ Tips and Techniques:

Role playing strategies: Students read and analyse a case related to the course content, and assume roles in the case to represent different perspectives of issues. Students can have face-to-face discussions in small groups to clarify their thoughts prior to posting in the discussion forum.

Questioning: The instructor assumes a challenging stance in the discussion to probe students to think deeper. Questions could be asked in the following manner:

"Can you share with us additional readings/ evidence that could be used to support your thinking about …. ?"

"What assumptions are you making about ….. ? How would your analysis/ interpretation be different with an alternate set of assumptions?"

"How might you consider this issue from another perspective and provide an example to clarify it?"

2. Assessing Students' Participation and Learning in Online Discussion

The inclusion of graded discussions as part of the course work can motivate students to participate more in online discussions and increase their sense of community.

If the postings in discussion forums are for assessment purposes, share your expectations and grading rubrics with your students.

☑ Tips and Techniques:

Establish ground rules by providing clear requirements for participation, (e.g. minimum and maximum number of posts, quality of contributions) by creating an online discussion guideline document (rubrics) for students to refer to.

Highlight examples of good and average posts contributed by students from past semesters.

Technology Tool

The discussion tool in eLearn enables students to post, read and reply to messages on different topics, share thoughts about course materials, ask questions, or conduct group discussions for assignments / projects.

For more information, you may wish to contact IITS' Learning Systems and Technologies team at elearn@smu.edu.sg.

Links to Examples of Online Discussions Rubrics

University of Wisconsin

The rubrics in the article can be used for self-assessment and peer assessment.

Queensland University of Technology

Table 2 in the article 'Assessment of Online Discussion Forums for Law Students' shows an assessment rubric for online discussions in the context of an undergraduate law course.

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