

The University of Manchester

CEEBL

'Centre for Excellence in Enquiry Based Learning'

A Guide to Online Facilitation

By Kate Jones



A Guide to Online Facilitation



Why Have Online Modules?

The stereotypical view of a lecture-based university education is becoming a thing of the past with many universities adopting a more student-led approach to teaching. Such change is welcomed by students as it offers newfound control of their learning without the classroom constraints of traditional methods of teaching. By allowing a greater level of student control over higher education experiences universities are providing students with invaluable opportunities to develop transferable life skills that are essential for any future career.

Online modules are a great vehicle which universities can use to integrate this new philosophy of tutoring as they add flexibility to the student experience. They lend themselves particularly well to an Enquiry-Based Learning ethos as they encourage the creation of a student focused curriculum and the development of transferable skill. This also means that they often encourage group work where students can gain knowledge from each other without timetabling issues, usually under the guidance of an academic facilitator.

Furthermore many students passionately believe that they deserve more resources (including contact hours, books and lecture material) as they are paying increasing amounts for their tuition. This issue has bred an increasingly consumerist attitude amongst students with regards to higher education. Online modules provide an important tool in new university educational programmes as they allow for student led learning without the timetabling issues of traditional lecture based learning.

About This Guide

This guide will outline the importance of facilitation in an online setting by identifying potential communicative issues that students may experience in this distance communication. The guide contains:

	A brief introduction as to why facilitation is necessary in online modules	
	Key topics for thought with regards to online facilitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• thinking points relating to why facilitation is necessary
	Top Tips for Online Facilitation	
	A 'Quick Quotes' Section	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• to provide a starting point for feedback

The Role of Facilitation in Online Modules

Despite the nature of online modules being to save university time and to allow students to take control of their learning, facilitation is a key aspect of the experience - especially with undergraduate students. A key aspect of the student online module experience involves staff having well defined roles within the modules structure. This gives students a strong base from which they can begin their learning journey as they have a strong support network present which gives them the confidence to express their full potential within the modules capacity. However, my experience has taught me that it is not always possible for module facilitators to dedicate time to facilitating a group fully. This presents a problem which may prevent online modules from moving forward in a student-accepted manner.

However, facilitation can occur in a range of ways and this guide hopes to make it a more manageable task for the limited time windows often give to staff involvement in online monitoring.



Key Topics for Thought

Thinking points relating to why facilitation is necessary and how far to take it



Including:

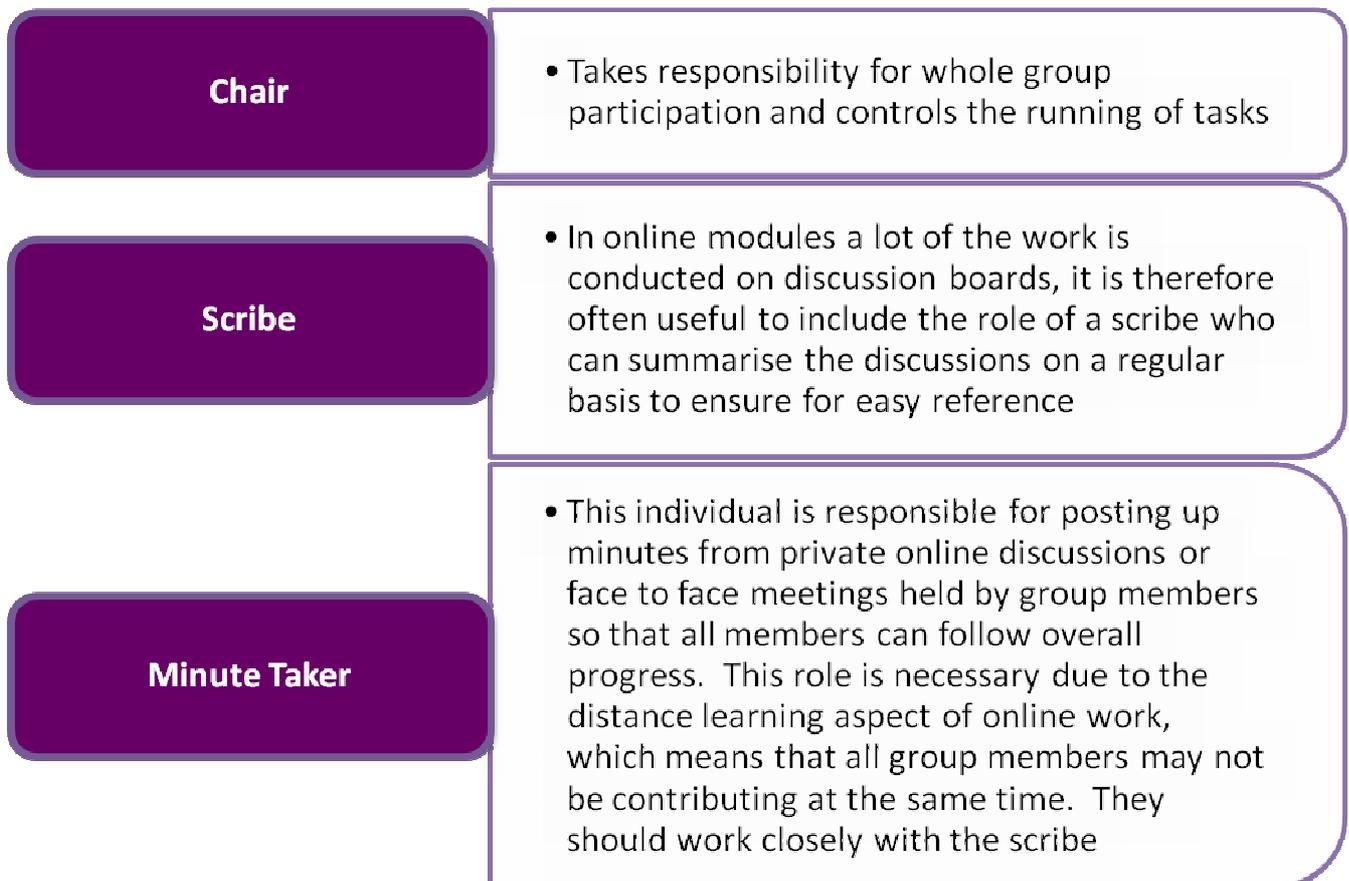
- ✓ Initial Online Group Formation
- ✓ Communication Barriers
- ✓ Language barriers
- ✓ Offense Issues

✓ Group dynamics barriers

Initial Online Group Formation

In any group work it is initially it is important for students to identify and define group roles or 'jobs' and divide them up accordingly. This is particularly essential in online group work due to the aspect of distance learning which it naturally involves.

Such roles can be dynamic and rotated around the group to encourage a varied participation or they can be designated to specific individuals, they include:



Having such defined roles provides students with a web of responsibility, within which they can work coherently to develop firstly their group dynamics and then their group projects. Benne and Sheats state that the identification of group roles is essential for the development of group centred attitudes, group project orientation as well as the maintenance and perpetuation of group centred behaviour. Although their research is based around face to face meetings, there is strong possible application to the online setting as long as the additional communication barriers are accounted for.

Communication barriers

In a face to face interaction, more than 70% of communication is visual and consists of body language, positioning (e.g. does the person step into your personal space whilst talking) and gestures. Communication online can be difficult as the removal of visual stimuli and feedback can introduce many barriers to this process which do not exist with traditional face to face communication. Jensen et al emphasised the relationship between communication and cooperation in an online environment. This heightens the importance of breaking down such barriers to allow efficient cooperation and collaboration on the groups' module task.

As the face to face element is removed during online communication, there is no opportunity for visual explanation or visual feedback which can then lead to misinterpretation and misunderstandings.

How to combat this with facilitation...

- encourage the group to get to know each other in an attempt to eliminate any embarrassment issues when misunderstandings arise
- encourage the group to use professional language on discussion boards e.g. avoid text language.

Language Barriers

With the increasing globalisation of University admissions, University cohorts are becoming fantastically ethnically diverse and multi-lingual. Despite the obvious benefits of encouraging a culturally diverse student population, there will be increasing issues with regards to language barriers. With proper handling this need not be an issue as additional support can be offered. However the problem is often exaggerated with online modules as the removal of visual cues can prevent the identification of the initial problem and may mean that the language barrier can remain unnoticed for a considerable amount of time. This may be encouraged by student embarrassment as many students are unwilling to admit that there is an issue in understanding as they don't want to cause offense.

Online communication can also be difficult for groups of students with certain learning difficulties e.g. dyslexia where written communication can be challenging and may cause students some level of anxiety.

How to combat this with facilitation...

- Encourage the group to get to know each other on a personal level, this will allow for any language issues to be brought to the surface in a friendly manner
- Encourage students with known learning difficulties to alert other group members if they experience any issues - this is a specific reason why identifying a chair person can be useful during initial group formation.

Offense Issues

The removal of an individual from a physical situation can lead to abnormal behaviour and people can be more likely to become argumentative. An exaggerated form of this can be seen with the recent identification of the levels bullying on social networking sites. The remote aspect of online communication can partially remove individuals from the reality of a situation and make them feel less responsible for their actions. Again, the lack of visual feedback from your team can mean that upset is caused accidentally as written words are taken more literally than verbal communication.

How to combat this with facilitation...

- Here it is useful to encourage students to design a set of group ground rules e.g.
 - treat others with respect
 - be polite
 - be honest
 - allow others to express their opinion
 - only be critical if it is constructive
- This way the students can police their own group without needing too much guidance from you. If everyone designs the guidelines together then it is easy for the chair to remind people who are not engaging of their original agreement



Group Dynamics Barriers

It can be difficult to get to know the rest of a group in an online setting as often there is no opportunity for an ice breaker session. It is essential for group members to get to know the strengths of other members as this allows the efficient and successful allocation of tasks. This means that the tasks will be done well and the group will feel comfortable that all assignments can be competently completed. Again, the removal of the face to face element enhances the issue here on a number of levels:

- * Sometimes participants do not see themselves as members of a group so do not make the effort to communicate on a personal level with other members.

- * Also it can be difficult for people to express empathy, feelings and emotions in an online setting which can in turn add to this barrier.
- * On a fundamental level, due to the distance aspect of online modules, it is likely that group members will not know each other so more work is needed initially in the form of introductions.

How to combat this with facilitation...

- Encourage the agreement of a set of group guidelines that the whole group will stick too. This is useful as there is a mutual understanding of the groups expectations from the minute these guidelines are set.
- Group photo are fantastic at encouraging a feeling of togetherness, if there is an opportunity e.g. at an initial face to face session then this can be highly successful.
- If the group do not meet and the module is 100% online then profile pictures are often useful as it allows for a feeling of community and identification with other members. Obviously it is up to the group itself whether such action is appropriate.



Top Tips for Online Facilitation

Introduce yourself to the students via a short post - here you should outline your time commitment to the module and your planned involvement with their work e.g. 'I will be checking the discussions weekly to monitor your progress but will not comment unless I feel it is needed, feel free to contact me if you need to'

Encourage an ice-breaker exercise e.g. as the first task get the students to post up an interesting fact about themselves or to find something that the entire group has in common - this encourages the development of a group relationship

Encourage students to post a 'summary' discussion at appropriate intervals, e.g. this may be once a week or at the end of every assignment - this makes it much easier and quicker to monitor what they are doing

Be honest about your planned contribution and time commitment to the module - students will accept your role however you define it as long as it has been explained or outlined to them e.g. I will only comment if you are heading off track on the discussion, but I will be monitoring your work or I will not be logging on unless someone alerts me to an issue

Assign a 'student facilitator', this is a member of the group who facilitates discussion without inputting their opinion too much - this role should be rotated around the group so that everyone gets the experience and also has the opportunity to contribute as a 'normal' group member

Ensure that the group members exchange contact details with each other in a manner in which they are comfortable e.g. some students may not be comfortable sharing phone numbers but may accept sharing email addresses, this means that you are not acting as a go between for the group members if someone needs to be contacted outside of the online learning space

‘Quick Quotes’



To provide a starting point for feedback

Great Summary of the weeks work – looks like you are all on the right track!

Have you thought about using a range of resources for your research? This could include:

- * Journals
- * Books
- * Citations
- * Accredited websites
- * Expert opinions
- * Case studies
- * Randomised controlled trials
- * Television or film documentaries

Make sure you take the time to get to know each other, it is important that you feel like a group and it is also useful to get to know each others' strengths so you can allocate tasks effectively

It is useful if you all post up weekly descriptions of the contributions that you have made to the task. These contributions can then be collated by the assigned scribe. This allows you to monitor what everyone in the group is doing so you can make sure you are all on track and it also means that I can look over your work easier, which will allow me to provide feedback on your work.

It is important for you to decide on group roles so allocate a chair, a scribe and a minute taker. You can rotate these roles or fix them to specific people.

As you may not have worked together before as an 'ice-breaker' post up an interesting fact about yourself and then try to find something which the whole group has in common.



Kate Jones

CEEBL MHS Intern June 2010

Benne and Sheats: Kenneth D Benne and Paul Sheats, 'Functional Roles of Group Members', Journal of Social Issues, Vol 4 No 2 pp 41-49 Reprinted by permission of the society for the psychological study of social issues. Accessed on: March 2010. Accessed from:

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