

Co-Facilitated Discussions to Truly Engage Your Online Students with Course Content

April 21, 2021, [Murat Turk](#)

Asynchronous online discussions (AOD) are commonly used by online course instructors who want their students to reflect on the course content and express their personal understanding, while also responding to and interacting with their peers and/or instructors about the content (Milman et al., 2012). The idea behind asynchronous online discussions is that online learning takes place in a social-collaborative learning environment where online students can benefit and learn from each other's ideas and perspectives (Xie & Ke, 2011). There are many ways in which instructors might use AODs in their online courses, but traditionally, online students are asked in discussions to post once and respond a specific number of times. A challenge with this strategy is that once each student completes their postings and responses, they often quit reading, responding to, and engaging with what others say or think about the issue or topic under study, thus missing out on useful insights and experiences. One effective solution is to incorporate peer moderation or facilitation of online discussions, which I have been using in my own online courses since summer 2020 when I read Milman's (2014) article about co-facilitation of online discussions.

In my own online courses, I use student co-facilitation strategy in which two to four students work together to facilitate a particular online discussion each week (Milman, 2014). In each online discussion, my online students first individually post a reflective summary of the content (e.g., pdf readings, my lecture videos) with a specific question they pose at the end of their summary. All of these end-of-summary questions account for the questions to be discussed in each online discussion. Then, the co-facilitation is started by the assigned co-facilitators of that discussion thread and the co-facilitators start addressing their peers' questions and comments. The other students are not only required to respond to at least three peer comments or questions but also expected to respond to at least one co-facilitator comment or question to get full discussion participation credit. The co-facilitators close their discussion threads by first making a summary of what has been discussed and then posting their personal reflections on their co-facilitation experience (Milman, 2014).

How did my online students find this strategy? Well, for three semesters including spring 2021, my students reported going beyond what was required, gaining greater insights, and learning the content in depth when they were asked to co-facilitate an online discussion. Here is a snapshot of what they thought about co-facilitation in online discussions:

“With prior classes, I knew discussions posts could get monotonous, so I thought doing this would prevent that as well as improve the learning experience.”

“Overall, I am really glad that we got assigned co-facilitators, not only for the ease of the assignment but also for the support system that we get setup with. Overall, a wonderful experience.”

“Overall, this was a pleasant experience, I enjoyed digging a little deeper to answer my peer’s questions. Some questions were a little tougher than others, but it just added to this experience.”

“After co-facilitating, I can really see the value of the maxim ‘the best way to learn a subject is to teach it to someone else.’ It was certainly a unique challenge since I had the same foundation as my peers in this subject, yet I was tasked with engaging with my peers on a deeper level and diving further into the material. In the end, not only do I feel I had a positive impact on my peers’ learning, but I better understood the material myself.”

“I actually enjoyed being a co-facilitator because in most online class discussions, I will just try to make my comments and get the grade but this time I had to take a moment and think about not only my response but what other classmates had to say.”

If I have you convinced (hopefully to some extent) to use co-facilitated discussions in your own online courses, here’s how you can begin implementing co-facilitated discussions. Below I offer some design guidelines of co-facilitation that you can adapt to your own unique online context:

Provide an autonomy-supportive structure

At the beginning of the semester, I provide my online students (via course syllabus and intro emails) with a clear and autonomy-supportive structure guiding them step-by-step for their co-facilitation assignment. They have the full freedom and control over deciding how to co-facilitate their assigned discussions. During this planning process, I always encourage them to reach out to me if they have any questions/concerns about co-facilitating.

Basically, I expect co-facilitators to:

1. Communicate with their assigned team members, and plan and prepare for their co-facilitation by reviewing the specific content of their discussion topic
2. Equally distribute the responsibilities among themselves based on their own decisions
3. Co-facilitate their assigned discussion thread by having their peers discuss comments and questions using positive and supportive language (e.g., kindly inviting peers to discuss, posing interesting questions, making substantive

- comments to their peers' postings, offering practical solutions, encouraging peer participation, arousing curiosity etc.)
4. Model politeness and respect using netiquette
 5. Support their peers' understanding with their substantive comments and non-judgmental responses

Provide authentic examples of co-facilitation

Students ask for concrete examples of how they should be co-facilitating a discussion, what language they should use, how they should approach a peer comment or question, etc. Give them a few examples such as the following:

That's a great point! I hadn't thought of it that way. I definitely would agree that engagement is a critical issue. What about the effect of motivation on engagement?

So, to answer your question more directly, I agree that they do not create lasting effects. However, I think it gives students something to look forward to or something materialized.

If you feel like it, I invite you to look at Bob's reflection where he discussed the impact of COVID on student motivation to study.

I like how you talked about the example you learned in your history class and how that can be applied to what we have discussed so far in class. You definitely have a great understanding of this topic!

Keep your online presence alive

While the students are discussing and the co-facilitators are doing their jobs, I lean back and monitor each conversation just to make sure that everything is going right. I post once or twice in each discussion thread to indicate that I am there and reading their responses. I use postings such as:

"Wow, this seems to be a lively discussion going on with really interesting questions to be answered. Looking forward to the answers!"

I also send regular encouragement and appreciation emails to the co-facilitators (while their co-facilitation is going on) to show that their work and effort are greatly appreciated. This makes them feel recognized by the course instructor and gives them further motivation to do more throughout the course.

Since I started using this in summer 2020, co-facilitation has been an integral component of my online courses simply because almost of all my online students have reported positive reviews from it. Online discussions do not have to be one-way, fragmented, and boring monologues. You can easily turn them into meaningful, purposeful, and vibrant student conversations by using this co-facilitation strategy in

your online courses so that your students engage more meaningfully and deeply with the content. They may also find themselves interacting more purposefully with their peers and working hard to support one another during their online learning journeys. And remember, when you assign your online students as facilitating leaders of specific discussion threads, they take greater ownership of those discussions, making them much more likely to truly engage with the learning content (Picciano, 2019).

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