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How students can make conferencing work

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There are a lot of papers around about how lecturers and tutors can best use online conferencing for teaching. But there aren't many that look at how students can get the most out of online discussions. This paper aims to fill that gap.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction
2. Why do courses use online conferencing?
3. What's in it for me?
4. What is an effective conference like?
5. So what can I do to help my conference 'work'?
6. What sorts of things do conferences do?
7. Handling particular problems
8. Conclusion


1 Introduction

I've used online conferencing for many years - as a student, for giving and getting technical support, for communicating among distributed working groups, and most recently as a tutor on the Open University online course T171 "You, your computer and the net". Some of these conferences have worked very well, some have failed badly, and most have been somewhere in between. I'm fascinated by what makes conferences work, and have done research on how lecturers and tutors can best use online conferencing in their teaching. This paper looks at conferencing from a student perspective - if you are a student on a course that uses online conferencing, what can you do to make it work well? Conferences vary. You might be involved with a conference for a small group project, a discussion with a hundred people, or a technical support conference with thousands of people. You may have a tutor actively directing the conference, a facilitator encouraging discussion, or someone just watching out for problems. Conferencing might be an important and assessed part of your course, or it might be optional. Despite all these differences, I believe there are some general principles which will help you have an enjoyable and productive experience of online conferencing, and these are outlined below. But first, it is helpful to understand why courses use online conferencing, how you can benefit from conferencing, and know what an effective conference is like, so you can see what you are aiming towards.

2 Why do courses use online conferencing?

Feeling part of a 'community of learners' is particularly difficult for distance learners, who may only meet their fellow students occasionally, if at all. If you are working mostly or entirely on your own it can be hard to stay motivated. In the words of an OU student using an early conferencing system, conferencing "takes the distance out of distance learning". It can make a big difference to know that other people are struggling with the same issues as you, and that you can share problems and ideas at any time of day or night.

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Online conferencing is also a good way for students to work together, rather than individually. Group working is becoming an important element of many higher education courses, partly because it is also increasingly the way the workplace is organised. Employers look for evidence of group working skills. It has a sound educational basis too - educationalists believe that group working tends to promote deeper understanding of a subject and better critical thinking.

Online conferencing is a new mode of learning, very different from the traditional classroom, and both teachers and students need to learn how to do it successfully. You will encounter all sorts of differences from face-to-face learning, for example, there will be much longer time delays in a discussion, and there will be no non-verbal cues such as tone of voice or facial expression. Some aspects of these differences will be positive (e.g. you have more time to think about what you want to say) and some will be a nuisance (e.g. it's possible to misinterpret people when you only have their words).

So the next sections of this paper look at what you can get out of conferencing, what an effective conference is like, and then how to go about participating so as to achieve those things.

3 What's in it for me?

With most courses you can pass the course if you work alone, not bothering with conferencing at all, or only doing the minimum required. So why should you put time and effort into conferencing?

- You get support when you need it (in exchange for giving support to others);
- You have a richer vein of experience to draw on, because you can pool examples, references etc;
- Very often a group can produce better work than an individual. One person might put forward a thought or idea, often not completely formed or finished, someone else picks up on it and takes it forward, that sparks off more ideas in others, and between them the group creates something much better than any could have done on their own;
- Learning by 'talking' is more powerful for most people than learning by reading - you think about things more deeply, and are likely to remember things better;
- The best way to check your own understanding is to explain it to others. Explaining things for your fellow students is good practice for the kind of explanations you'll probably have to do in assignments.

4 What is an effective conference like?

How can you tell whether your conference is working well? Here is a description of an effective conference:

- Everyone participates, and everyone feels confident they will be 'listened to';
- It is a supportive community, because people have come to trust each other, and 'look out for' each other whilst respecting differences;
- The group has typically worked through shared experience and/or fought shared 'enemies' (such as software problems!);
- Everyone facilitates sometimes - taking some responsibility for discussions and activities, and for encouraging and helping others;
- Everyone takes initiative sometimes - asking questions and starting discussions, not being passive and waiting to be told what to do;
- Arguments happen - people feel safe enough to challenge and disagree, which helps everyone to think and learn;
- Everyone writes carefully, putting their points clearly and constructively, and the structure of the discussions is obvious and easy to follow;
- People trust others to respect their words, to put a good interpretation on them and not 'steal' or

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misquote them.

Clearly in real life very few conferences will have all of these characteristics all the time. But this is a 'vision' of what we are aiming for in online educational conferences.

5 So what can I do to help my conference 'work'?

You can make a big difference to the effectiveness of your conference. There are four main ways that you can help the conference work well. I will describe these first, and then look at how you can apply these principles in different kinds of conferences.

- a) Get involved and make a commitment
- b) Help people get to know you
- c) Construct your messages well
- d) Take some responsibility

a) Get involved and make a commitment

This means contributing regularly, putting in some time and effort, and 'being there' for people - reading and responding to their messages, and giving support where you can. If you are asked to do particular things in the conference, get on and do them! Making a commitment is really crucial - once you feel it is 'your' conference, you will want it to work well, and everything else will tend to follow.

If you can't be very active, let people know, e.g. "Sorry I can't be around for a while, but I'll do what I can when I get back".

b) Help people get to know you

This is particularly important in the early stages of a conference. People need to feel they can trust each other, so as to be able to 'risk' putting forward their ideas or asking 'silly' questions. Be yourself - use examples from your own experience, perhaps share a little about your life outside the course, and write more or less as you speak, rather than very formally which can come across as a bit pompous. Personalise your messages if possible, using simple things like different fonts, colours and icons, if your software allows you, or even sound. But don't overdo this and create huge messages, otherwise people will get annoyed at the time it takes to download them!

c) Construct your messages well

If you can write your messages very clearly and make it easy for people to see how they fit into the discussion, then it's more likely people will read and consider your messages, and everyone will find it easier to follow what's going on.

- Use 'threading' properly. If someone replies to a message, then someone replies to the reply, and so on, then the whole 'chain' of messages is called a thread, and the conferencing software will make it easy to follow a thread. If you are introducing a new topic or issue, don't reply to an existing message, start a new thread instead with a new and relevant subject line.
- Be clear what the point you are making is. A good way to force yourself to be clear is to put a one sentence summary at the top of a longer message, e.g. "This message is to explain why...." Keep to one subject per message. It's much better to send several messages if you have a number of topics to write about, because then people can reply to whichever topic they want and the separate discussions are in separate threads rather than being all jumbled up.
- Give reasons for your opinions. It's hard to discuss something with someone if they just state what they think without any justification. Use the word 'because' freely! Examples often help.

Invite responses to your messages, e.g. "Do you agree with me here?" or "Have I left anything out?".

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d) Take some responsibility

This is all about paying attention to the 'process' of the conference as well as the content - if everyone does this, your conference will feel like a community. The sort of thing I mean is helping to keep things going and encourage others, starting discussions without being told to, helping to summarise, and watching out for people feeling ignored or left out and trying to help.

6 What sorts of things do conferences do?

There are four different types of activities in conferences:

- a) Social conversation
- b) Getting and giving help
- c) Group work and projects
- d) Discussion

Not every conference will do all of these, but most conferences will have some elements of them all at some point. Let's see how the four principles described above can be used to help these different activities.

a) Social conversation

The social chat that happens in a conference helps the group to 'gel'. If you meet your fellow students at face-to-face tutorials, this happens naturally in corridors and during tea breaks. You chat, discover things you have in common, find out who knows about what, have a moan together and so on. The same kind of thing needs to happen among an on-line group - it's hard to write messages addressed to complete strangers. So this is where the 'help people get to know you' suggestion fits in. You should also show interest in others and offer support if needed. Obviously social conversation is not the main purpose of the conference, and you should be guided by your tutor or moderator - some may discourage socialising or prefer it to go in a separate sub-conference. But generally a bit of social chat in a conference is an excellent thing, and helps the group to work better. If your course has a face-to-face issue of which fits in", or "When we talked about we thought that but I've just seen an article which says How can we incorporate", or "What if we took the idea of and applied it to".

The experience of participating in a conference that is really 'constructing knowledge' through discussion can be amazing. You feel a greater ownership of the conference, which leads to greater commitment, which leads us to where we began in section 5, with the importance of getting involved and playing an active part in your conference.

7 Handling particular problems


When you are involved in online conferences there are various problems that you can come up against that may cause you frustration or annoyance, and decrease your motivation to participate. Below I suggest ways of handling these problems.

- a) "I don't know what to say!"
- b) "Am I saying too much?"
- c) "Not everyone is participating"
- d) "I've got behind and there's too much to read"
- e) "Nobody is saying anything"

- a) "I don't know what to say!"

It's perfectly possible to learn from what other people say without contributing anything yourself.

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After all, at a face-to-face tutorial some people won't say anything, perhaps because they feel shy. On-line you can't see other people smiling in encouragement, so it can be hard to take the plunge and join in. Sometimes this reading-but-not-contributing is called 'lurking', but I don't like the term because it has overtones of furtiveness. I prefer to call it 'hovering', because it reminds me of hanging around on the outskirts of a group hopping from foot to foot trying to think of something to say.

The good thing about online discussions is that they generally happen over a longer period, so you have plenty of time to think about what you want to say, and everyone will be able to get their points in, unlike a face to face discussion where it's possible that the only people who get heard are those who 'think on their feet' and talk loudest. And all sorts of things which can distract attention in a face-to-face discussion (e.g. gestures, accent, racial differences, disabilities) are not 'visible' online, which can be quite liberating.

Here are some suggestions to get you started with contributing to a conference:

- Look for other people's messages that you agree with, and say so, perhaps adding your own examples;
- Look for messages that gave you ideas you hadn't thought of, or that set you thinking about something, and let them know;
- Ask a question about something you don't fully understand, and hopefully someone will help you out. Don't worry about asking 'silly' questions, there will probably be several other people with the same worry, and you'll have done them a favour by asking;
- If someone asks a question you wanted to ask, help them feel less silly by saying you'd like to know the answer too;
- If someone asks something you think you know a bit about, answer it. The very best way to check you know something is to try and explain it to someone else!
- Try to be sensitive to others who may be trying to catch up with an activity that is already half-completed - it's not easy for them to join in an established group, so offer what support you can.

The good side of this is that by participating you will learn a lot more and probably do better in your course assessment than people who don't.

If you are someone who can't join in with the conference, for whatever reason (you don't have to say), let other people know so they don't wait for you. Fellow students will generally be very understanding and supportive, provided you keep them informed.


d) "I've got behind and there's too much to read"

If, for whatever reason, you join a conference later than the other participants, or are unable to be involved for a while, the prospect of joining in can be a bit daunting. There will be lots of messages you haven't read and you may feel that everyone else knows each other. The main thing to remember is that everyone will be pleased to 'see' you when you do join in, and will be helpful and supportive.

Here are some strategies you can use in this situation:

- If you don't have time to read all the messages, don't try! Use the message subjects and senders to decide which to read. Read any introductory messages explaining what the conference is about and telling you what the group is working on (generally these will be from the tutor or moderator);
- Don't worry too much about discussions or activities which have finished. Maybe read any obvious concluding or summarising messages, but concentrate on the current activities;
- Send a short message announcing your presence and apologising for the delay;
- Just read messages for a little while, so you get the feel of the conference and understand what's going on;
- If you're not quite sure what has been discussed already, acknowledge this in your messages

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e.g. "Apologies if you've already covered this, but"

e) "Nobody is saying anything!"

A conference can be quite a fragile thing. If no-one says anything for a while, it becomes harder and harder to break the silence, and no-one feels like being the first to contribute. There can be a downward spiral until the conference becomes completely dormant. Someone needs to be brave and break the spiral as soon as they realise what is happening. Here are some suggestions for things you can do at this point:

- Ask a question that prompts a response, e.g. "Can anyone explain the bit where it says...";
- Respond if anyone else tries to break the silence;
- Conspire with someone else to get an argument going - take sides on an issue and debate it vigorously, with appeals to the rest of the group to join each 'side';
- Start a discussion on something crucial to the course, e.g. how to tackle the next assignment, or prepare for an exam.

8 Conclusion

This paper has looked at what effective online educational conferences are like, and how students can contribute to making conferencing a worthwhile learning experience. It has also offered some detailed suggestions for how to join in with various different types of activities that happen in online conferences, and strategies for dealing with common problems you may encounter. I hope anyone studying on a course that uses online discussion will find at least some of the strategies and suggestions useful.

In summary, to get the most out of conferencing on your course, you need to participate fully. This will take time and effort but it's worth it! A group that helps and supports each other, brings a variety of thoughts, examples and perspectives together, and challenges and builds on each other's ideas, will make a big difference to your enjoyment and understanding of the course, and hopefully also to your achievement in the course.

The key things to remember are to

- Get involved and make a commitment;
- Help people get to know you;
- Construct your messages well, and
- Take some responsibility.

You can't do this theoretically, the only way to do it is to have a go, make mistakes and enjoy yourself in the process. In the end, the more you put in, the more you will get out.