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Publication Date

2017-06-01



Berkeley Graduate School
of Education
PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

Preparing the Online Space for Equity Centered Discussions

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June 2017

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank all of her collaborators for their contributions to our work including Kristin Alvarez, Kristin Bijur, Kelly Wilson, Viet Nguyen, Laurie Wong Roberts, Kristin Tavernetti, Greg Ko, and Audrey Amos. In addition, we would like to thank all of the PLI alumni who participated in our pilot groups. Your feedback was an invaluable resource.

Introduction

Online learning is increasingly embraced in K-12 teaching, professional development, as well as graduate education, because the interactive tools and platforms of Web 2.0 have the potential to offer learning opportunities that help transcend distance and maximize time. But how can the depth of learning and connection that is derived from face-to-face interactions be replicated in the online environment, especially when engaging in deep reflective equity centered conversations? For three years, the Principal Leadership Institute (PLI) at the University of California at Berkeley engaged in experimentation and discussion around four related questions:

- What are the barriers for equity centered discussions in the online space?
- What are the facilitation challenges and adaptations needed?
- How and when does the online space best support equity centered discussions?
- What support is needed for participants and facilitators who are new to online environments?

Through our extended experimentation, we have become convinced that under the right conditions, equity centered discussions can effectively occur in the online space. This was not, in fact, where we started in 2011. At that time, we were deeply skeptical and believed strongly that equity centered conversations would not be possible in the online space. However, we had an alumni base of over 400 educational leaders who repeatedly expressed interest in ongoing support and they identified important constraints for participation in professional learning such as childcare, transportation, and traffic challenges, as well as demanding work schedules. The convenience of online meetings is what piqued our initial interest and compelled us to interrogate the possibilities. Now, we integrate online meetings as a part of our preparation program, induction program, teacher leadership certificate, and other professional development offerings.

This paper describes our findings and strategies for optimizing the online space for equity centered discussions. We start with the assumption that the readers of this article are experienced facilitators of equity centered discussions. Therefore, we have focused on the implications of transferring discussions into the online environment rather than the nuts and bolts of facilitating the meetings themselves. Specifically, we will focus on the configurations and environments where we have had the most success, specific strategies and models for participant and facilitator support, as well as facilitation adjustments.

Synchronous Small Groups Are Best

While we have experimented at length with asynchronous learning environments such as discussion forums and social media environments, we believe that synchronous learning environments have the most potential for supporting equity centered conversations. Commonly known as group video conferencing, synchronous environments allow for a more natural dialogue pattern with immediate feedback because all participants are in the space at the same time. Additionally, participants can make both visual and verbal connections during the conversation, an important component for establishing a trusting relationship as the foundation for equity centered conversations.

When leading equity centered conversations, group size matters. This is true both in online and in-person formats. For large in-person formats, a skilled facilitator will often create opportunities for intimate small group conversations through strategies such as pair share. In the online environment, the facilitator is constrained by the platform being used. Recently, there are some new platforms that allow moderators to create small “breakout rooms.” Our program plans to transition this type of product because it will give facilitators additional flexibilities. However, short of this possibility, we recommend small groups of 6-8 participants. The pace of online

dialogues is noticeably slower than in-person dialogues, so a facilitator should plan agendas for 10 participants when conducting online meetings of 6-8.

Technical Testing and Support Are Needed

The only predictable part of using online meetings is that there will be technology problems, particularly in the beginning. The issues can originate from multiple facets – internet connection, software, hardware, or user error to name a few. During advanced testing, we try to use a variety of devices such as tablets, smartphones, and different types of laptops (PC or Apple) to anticipate some of the potential pitfalls. The best way to learn how to troubleshoot is to practice using the system under different conditions.

To proactively prevent some of the most basic technical issues, we have developed an introductory video and written tutorial for our participants to familiarize themselves with the platform in advance and to provide a practice run on the platform prior to the first meeting. These two supports help the participants to be more comfortable and prepared for online meetings. For every meeting, we recommend that the facilitator start the online meeting platform at least 15 minutes in advance so that there is time for technical problem solving. In addition, we suggest designating a second person who can provide technical troubleshooting at the start of every meeting. This will allow the facilitator to focus on the community building and content aspects of the meeting.

Facilitators Need to Adapt

Experienced facilitators of equity centered discussions know that building trusting relationships and a confidential community of support are an important part of “setting the table” for deep reflective conversations about issues such as race, class, religion, and inequality. Specific adaptations are needed in three major categories: conversation flow, perceived

confidentiality, and assessing participant engagement. Table 1 summarizes the ideas described below.

The **conversation flow** in the online space is generally slower and can initially feel more awkward. To decrease microphone feedback, most video conferencing tools recommend using the mute function when in a multi-person meeting. This slows down the conversation because participants have to unmute before speaking. Silence in a discussion online can feel longer and different than in person. There are also greater issues of “talking over.” For example, many people have a natural tendency to provide a short oral acknowledgement of agreement during a conversation such as “hmm” or “mmm.” These types of verbalizations are very disruptive in an online environment.

Each of the phenomena we identified related to conversation flow can be easily addressed and modeled by the facilitator. First and foremost, we recommend that facilitators are explicit about any perceived awkwardness, especially when the group has its initial meeting. Planning more time for each activity is critical and using protocols can help to orchestrate a more natural conversation flow. Finally, we recommend that facilitators encourage participants to create a nonverbal signal such as thumbs up or an OK sign instead.

Perceived confidentiality has different dimensions in the online space. We identified two important issues to consider. First, some participants engage in their online meetings in a public space such as a café or classroom. This may cause other participants to infer that their comments are being heard by others. Also, most video conferencing platforms have a recording function that allows for the meeting to be captured for future reference. To address each of these perceived confidentiality issues, we suggest that the facilitator encourage participants to wear headphones (which often provides better sound quality anyway) and also be transparent about

the intent to record. If there are instances when the facilitator is interested in recording the session, we suggest explaining the reasons and asking permission in advance.

Finally, there are common issues related to **assessing participant engagement**. Specific issues we identified included less opportunity and flexibility to individually check in with specific participants, limited eye contact, limited social cues, and platform distractions. In addition, when meetings are held after work hours or in the evenings, a participant might be wearing casual clothing and sitting in a more casual environment at home. These nonverbal signals might inadvertently convey an overly relaxed stance.

Facilitators in the PLI address the issues related to assessing participant engagement through a variety of strategies including checking in verbally instead of using visual cues, monitoring the chat feature for feedback, and minimizing their personal picture in the platform settings so that they stay focused on the participants. In many cases, facilitators need to rely more on explicitly naming, describing, and signaling to participants rather than relying on nonverbal cues. For example, by simply naming any initial awkwardness, a facilitator can help participants adjust to the online environment.

Table 1

Summary of facilitation shifts needed for the online space

Category	Common Phenomenon	Adaptations
Conversation Flow	Group conversations can be more awkward because there can be more “talking over” each other.	Rely on explicit protocols to avoid these issues. Develop explicit systems for creating a speaking order.
	Participants like to give a verbal cue indicating they are listening or in agreement. Sometimes nodding is hard to see.	Establish a hand signal or simple gesture that can be used. Some platforms also have emoticons that can be used for this purpose.

	Silence in an online discussion can feel different than in in-person spaces. The silence feels longer than in person.	Name the issue so that everyone is able to get used to the silence. Use a timer to protect wait time.
	To decrease microphone feedback, most video conferencing tools recommend using the mute function when in a multi-person meeting. This slows down the conversation because participants have to unmute before speaking.	Assume the need for longer response times and plan accordingly.
Perceived Confidentiality	If the participant is in an environment where other people are present, other participants might infer that their comments are being overheard by others.	Encourage participants to use headphones to ensure confidentiality.
	The recording function of the platform might cause concern.	Ask permission and explain why the facilitator plans to record the session in advance of starting the meeting.
Assessing Participant Engagement	Eye contact is more difficult because everyone is looking at their computers and there is a need to look at electronic documents in addition to the video stream.	Be more explicit about engagement, checking in verbally instead of using visual cues.
	Facilitators don't have the advantage of observing social cues related to group dynamics such as seating patterns.	Monitor the group chat feature for possible cues. Be more explicit and ask about any prior relationships through a warm up exercise.
	Depending on the platform, it can be visually distracting for the facilitator to see him/herself talking on the screen.	The facilitator can minimize the personal picture in the settings so that they are looking at the participants instead.
	When meetings are held after work hours, a participant might be wearing casual clothing and sitting in a more casual environment. These nonverbal signals might inadvertently convey an overly relaxed stance.	Acknowledge that being comfortable while participating in the meeting is one of the best affordances of the online space.

Facilitation Fluidity Comes with Practice

The simple reality is that the more comfortable the facilitator is meeting online, the more the participants will feel at ease. Therefore, it is important for facilitators who are new to the

online environment to practice until they are comfortable. One way to do this is to convert business meetings (or other meetings that are more transactional in nature) into online meetings so that the facilitator can practice the mechanics of online facilitation before being faced with the even greater challenge of facilitating equity centered discussions. Another possibility is for the facilitator to invite people who regularly have in-person equity centered meetings to move some of those meetings into the online space.

Conclusion

The mission of the Principal Leadership Institute is to prepare, induct, and support a diverse community of equity focused school leaders who will improve education for vulnerable and historically underserved students in California's public schools in support of social justice. As critical digital consumers, we can harness the affordances of new Web 2.0 tools to capitalize on new online spaces as powerful tools for deepening our commitment to equity in education. By modeling the facilitation of equity centered online discussions, we provide examples of effective learning environments to the participants – active educational leaders who are making daily decisions about improving teaching and learning. Our hope is that their experiences in these spaces as learners will inform their daily leadership practice. There is no doubt that technology tools will continue to develop and change the way we work. We hope this work is a small contribution to informing how we can continue to improve our efforts to create and lead more equitable schools.

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