

Box 6.2 Take Action: What Online Facilitators Should Know and Be Able to Do

Whether you plan to train your own facilitators or involve them in external training, the following is a list of topics that are routinely covered in facilitator training before the first class or community event takes off. Online facilitators

- **Create a supportive environment that promotes trust and appropriate risk taking.** Professional growth often requires reflecting on current understandings and practices and considering whether and how to change them. This level of growth is challenging, and effective facilitators will establish a culture where the learners feel comfortable taking risks and trying new things.
- **Set norms and expectations for participation and maintain schedules.** Some people are very literal in terms of their participation and really want to know when, how often, and how much they have to participate. Help facilitators gather examples or develop guidelines to support people with these concerns.
- **Model appropriate communications.** Besides modeling accepted Netiquette standards, facilitators may need training in different expectations for communication and knowing what to do when communication goes off target. In the world of instant messaging and texting, many learners expect immediate responses to questions and may not use appropriate language for an academic setting—at first. Facilitators need to learn how to set expectations, such as replying to e-mails within 24 or 48 hours, and how text can be misinterpreted and what to do when it is. They will need strategies for dealing with inappropriate communications as well as with noncommunication, such as going offline and using the phone to address individuals personally.
- **Facilitate deep communication and interaction.** As mentioned earlier, much facilitator training focuses on how to promote deeper responses to discussions. Facilitators need to participate in online discussions and need examples or models for forming strong prompts. Facilitators may also need strategies for developing different groupings and promoting student reflection.
- **Actively engage participants in appropriate learning opportunities.** Facilitators benefit by having multiple examples of what is considered an acceptable outcome and appropriate behavior. Unfortunately, plagiarism using digital materials is a common concern, and good facilitators can design activities that rely less on copy-and-paste and more on interpretation, evaluation, and justification. A tremendous benefit of a highly skilled facilitator is the ability to differentiate the experience for the learners, whether providing flexible options in terms of activities, products, or technologies used to create them.
- **Direct participants to relevant resources and explain how to use them appropriately.** You don't have to expect your learners to access all information from your course content alone. You can incorporate other materials and technologies routinely used in professional learning, including print-based information. Facilitators need to know what resources are available, including online libraries, research databases, webconferencing software, or other technologies, as well as how learners can access them.

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- **Skillfully apply strategies to promote professional learning.** Online professional development is learning foremost, and so effective facilitators will capitalize on what we know about supporting learning by promoting collaboration; creating products of consequence; promoting higher order cognition like solving complex, real-world problems; and modeling inquiry-based strategies to encourage participants to develop self-directed learning strategies that will support a lifetime of learning.
- **Routinely monitor participation and provide prompt feedback.** Because there's less tangible feedback online, learners in these settings often crave more opportunities for feedback. Online learners may check grades or other feedback multiple times, even though they know it's updated only once a week. An effective facilitator should also be able to determine when someone is falling behind and quickly put strategies into place for getting him or her back on target. If someone is routinely late or doesn't participate in the first few weeks, you're likely to lose him or her. A skilled facilitator is your best strategy for preventing this from happening.
- **Follow approved procedures, reporting to administrators when necessary.** Your online facilitators need to know what is and isn't their obligation. Are they supposed to keep learners on task? What do they do if they aren't? What about other issues related to academic integrity, like plagiarism? Let your online facilitators know the expected procedures and consequences for these settings and how to document their efforts. Documentation is critical, but you need to show them how to do it according to your established procedures.
- **Manage responsibilities and time well.** In the beginning, facilitators may spend more time than expected getting used to their role. They'll have to juggle events and obligations to find an appropriate schedule where they are available for the learners and provide relevant and timely feedback. You may want to help online facilitators create virtual "office hours" and provide guidance or actual job aids to help them keep up with the required workload and desired schedule.