

Teaching Online: A New Skill Set

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Abstract

Given the changing role and importance of information technology in all work contexts, educators are under increasing pressure to develop their own working knowledge of how to facilitate learning in this changing environment. Drawing on their practical experience and recent research into online learning, the authors address this changing paradigm and discuss the new skills and attitudes required of educators.

Introduction

According to an NUA Internet Survey, 70% of all higher educational institutions offer some kind of online distance learning, but professors express mixed feelings about its effectiveness and their willingness to engage in it. 54% of the faculty at Florida Gulf Coast University, for example, felt that distance learning was not an effective alternative. They complained that much more time was required to teach, particularly on e-mails to students.

Utilizing technology to reproduce and reinforce traditional teacher-student relationships in interaction with a set curriculum, examples of which can be found in almost every institution, is becoming problematic. Those engaged in delivering online learning are realizing that they need to transform their own paradigm of teaching, and learn new skills in order to function more efficiently. Palloff and Pratt (1999) say of this new paradigm, "The development of community as part of the learning process helps to create a learning experience that is empowering and rich. It is essential to impart the importance of this process to faculty in order to maximize the use of the electronic medium in education. Without it, we are simply recreating our tried and true educational model and calling it innovative, without fully exploring the potential this medium holds." (p. 20)

Facilitating this paradigm shift and the development of new skills is not often considered in the recruitment and preparation of online educators. In this paper, we provide a framework for educators who are and will be faced with facilitating online learning, by introducing the ideas of other online educators that we have found valuable. Interspersed with this will be our practical experience and recent research into the actual experiences of online learners (Dewar and Whittington, in press). The quotations that introduce each section of the paper are compilations drawn from our own experience. We introduce direct quotes from the research we are currently doing in other sections of the paper.

Developing a Framework

The majority of our online teaching experience has been with mature adult learners pursuing graduate degrees, and our approach has been informed by adult education concepts. In that regard we faced many of the same challenges that any adult educator, regardless of context, faces. Helping learners discover how their own thinking plays a role in determining a rewarding and successful learning experience is central; the facilitation and development of self directed learning is certainly another. We are also concerned with developing a supportive learning community. In our experience, the online environment is one which forces these issues to the surface more quickly and powerfully than most face to face (f2f) settings.

Several recently published works introduce similar concepts and perspectives. *Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace* by Rena Palloff and Keith Pratt (1999) is an engaging, provocative and practical look at the complex realities of facilitating learning in online environments. Drawing on community theory, constructivist learning, transformational learning, and their own research and practice as online learners and educators, they discuss how to create an online learning community that fosters

collaboration, dialogue, reflection and transformational learning. They suggest that successful facilitation online requires honesty, responsiveness, relevance, respect, openness, and empowerment, and provide numerous examples of how this can be done.

Gilly Salmon's (2000) *E-Moderating: The Key to Teaching and Learning Online* is another excellent text. Salmon's book is based upon her experience and expertise developed while working for the UK's Open University. The book covers issues of recruitment, training and development of "e-moderators" along with over 70 pages of extremely useful "Resources for practitioners". Her competency matrix of skills required by online educators (page 40) addresses dimensions, such as technical skills, not discussed by Palloff and Pratt. The vertical axis of her matrix lists the qualities or characteristics of an e-moderator; these include an understanding of online process, technical skills, online communication skills, content expertise, and personal characteristics. The horizontal axis represents developmental levels; these include confident, constructive, developmental, facilitating, knowledge sharing, and creative. She suggests recruiting for columns 1-2 (horizontal axis), training to columns 3-4 and developing online tutors to columns 5-6.

We use Salmon's characteristics as a framework to introduce our observations and experiences.

Understanding Of Online Process

Fear is getting in the way of me connecting with other people. It feels so public to post notes. I'm not sure I have anything of value to add to the conversations, and everyone else seems so much smarter and articulate than I am. (an online learner)

I didn't realize until halfway through the course that we hadn't even spent time at the beginning introducing ourselves. No wonder it still feels like we are a group of strangers. (an online facilitator)

Taking an online course as a learner first is probably the most effective way to understand the online process. Educators who don't have this experience firsthand can underestimate the chaos and confusion that accompanies one's first foray into online learning. We've found that the imposter syndrome (Brookfield, 1990) referred to in the opening quote, and fear of computers almost paralyzes some online learners. Also, many learners assume that the online environment will be cold and isolating and not that effective; challenging them to reframe their assumptions, and being patient with their insecurities during the first part of a course is critical. Similarly, developing a warm and engaging personal style of communication is central to easing the anxiety learners will bring. Some online educators make the mistake of composing conference notes that emulate their academic writing style; this is doomed to reinforce the beliefs that learners have about a cold and impersonal learning environment.

We've also noticed that some learners have a difficult time developing a "public voice" with which to communicate effectively online. Many learners will rewrite notes, only to never send them because they are unsure about the value of what they're saying. Other learners will quickly "disappear" if no one personally answers a message they have posted. Palloff and Pratt (1999) address a similar concept in their discussion of developing an electronic personality as a necessary component of becoming a successful online learner. In our research, some learners comment on the issue of trust as it relates to developing a comfort in communicating online. As one person noted, "How one establishes trust in an environment that is largely anonymous or hidden and may mask all sorts of data, would seem to be the \$64 question."

Closely related to developing the confidence to post one's ideas online, is to offer conflicting or constructive feedback online. While educators definitely have a role in providing honest and constructive feedback, how it is done online requires more sensitivity. Our research suggests that how a learner responds to feedback may be related to one's overall learning style and personality. One learner noted that, "... and it was the instructors' comments ... just not knowing them made me sensitive to whatever they said - it wasn't necessarily that it was negative - it was just the fact that I hadn't met them face to face that made it harder for me to accept the feedback they were giving me." Other learners suggested that this was not an issue for them.

There is one other factor that has begun to influence the successes of our online classes in recent years. While not directly related to the online environment, it often gets blamed on it. Many of our learners are mid career professionals taking master's degrees part-time. A number of these learners have full time jobs, are parents, and continue with volunteer work. They then add two online courses per semester to their lives, without necessarily taking away any other responsibilities. We've had many conversations with learners who "hate the online environment" only to discover that it is actually their lack of time that is creating the stress for them.

Technical Skills

I've already gone through two toner cartridges printing all of the messages from the course. By the time I print everything out, and read through the messages making notes on them, it's midnight. I haven't even begun to compose my required postings for the week. (an online learner)

Someone showed me how to use Newsgroups and gave me a course outline from the previous semester. The day after the class started, I checked into the introductions newsgroup and found 30 messages. Well, I just turned off the machine and wondered what in the heck I had gotten myself into. (an online facilitator)

Palloff and Pratt (1999) suggest that teaching online takes three times as long as f2f does. Many practitioners reinforce this notion; some universities consider teaching one course online to be the equivalent of teaching two f2f courses. When we question educators as to their technical skills, we sometimes find that they have not developed the online skills that would help them effectively deliver an online course. The following is a list of skills we recommend all online educators have; we also suggest our learners develop these skills.

Keyboarding

This is an obvious first skill, but often overlooked and not recruited for in our experience. Being able to touch type is not a luxury; it is a requirement for success in the online environment. An additional skill is being able to compose online. Many of us may have learned to type, but wrote things out longhand and then typed them. The advent of word processors and subsequently personal computers encouraged many of us to save time by learning to "think and compose" directly onto a keyboard. Since reliable and efficient voice recognition software is still some time off, learning to compose online is something we suggest learners and facilitators alike develop before they go online.

One learner in our research noted of her process

In the beginning, in my first course, I was quite nervous about putting my stuff out – and I'd spend my whole weekend tearing my hair out and writing and writing - and I would write it out, because I needed to do it by hand to be able to think, I guess. And so I would write it all out and I would write and write and write, and then I'd put it on the computer and then I would print it and then I would go over it again and I would slash and burn and then I would rewrite. I would have to do that several times – it would take me a whole day sometimes just to do you know, like this 150 or 350 words that we had to do. And part of it was learning, as you said, it's learning to just be that concise and to get what you wanted to get across.

Taking Running Notes and The Copy and Paste Function

Participating in an online course requires that our contributions to a group discussion be written out instead of spoken. While our discussion skills in f2f environments are quite developed, the skills needed to "discuss" in an online environment may take some time to develop. A useful approach is to keep a word processor open when reading through a document online or reading the contributions others have made to a discussion, and copying and pasting information from online documents to the word processor. (Windows Notepad is effective as it doesn't take a lot of memory to run.) Moving back and forth between the notepad and whatever is being read to make running notes facilitates composing a response later that incorporates and builds upon the contributions of several people. It also ensures that messages aren't "lost" by composing directly into a conferencing system; as most of us know, systems can and do crash.

To Print or not to Print

There is considerable debate in most online circles about the printing issue. Despite the resistance and cries of “my learning style requires hard copy”, those learners of ours who have taken this challenge seriously, have found it of tremendous value. Learning to read, annotate and respond online saves hours (and trees). In order to facilitate going paperless, one also has to develop and use an organized electronic filing system and utilize the annotation features of word processors. Many of us now advise graduate learners at a distance. Developing this skill also facilitates effective time management while reviewing drafts of projects and theses.

Those learners who take up the challenge to develop these online skills tell us it has been difficult, but worth it. They suggest that it has helped them get “settled” and begin to focus on the content and learning experience of the course.

Online Communication Skills

What still concerns me is that some institutions and educators think that the technology replaces the need for humanness. I think more conscious effort needs to be extended so that the technology fades into the background and we communicate with people more personally and humanly. (an online learner)

I have been surprised at some of the notes I receive from learners. I doubt that they would ever say such things to me f2f. Learners need to recognize that there are real people behind the email, and learn to deal with their frustrations and emotions in a more effective way. (an online facilitator)

Communicating online is clearly different from communicating face to face. Body language, hand movements, other visual cues and tone of voice are all missing from an online message. Often dialog can become stilted, over polite and lack any depth of feeling. The reverse is also true; people forget that there are real people behind the messages and compose notes that are overly harsh or critical. As one of our research participants noted, “What I think I need to develop to better work with the online environment is to temper my somewhat brutal style with respect and consideration for the ideas of others.”

If online communication is to support the development of trust and community then the educator has the very difficult task of encouraging freedom of expression (and freedom of thought) while at the same time ensuring that the dialog remains respectful and constructive. Using a personal tone and emoticons and acronyms can model effective communication for learners. Educators can also help develop personal and meaningful communication by not worrying too much about the way messages are written. Forcing word counts and correct use of English can inhibit free flowing, constructive dialog. Remembering that people do not speak in grammatically correct ways while engaged in dialog in f2f settings helps put this issue in context.

Reframing Feedback

We have become quite accustomed to almost instant feedback in f2f learning situations. If we make a comment, we usually make eye contact with other members of the class and see them acknowledge us non-verbally. We also get pretty instant verbal feedback to our contributions.

This is not so in the online world. It’s common to not hear back on contributions for several days. This is very disconcerting for facilitators and learners new to the online world. They wonder if anyone has read their posting, what they thought, if they agreed/disagreed, did people think they made a thoughtful contribution and so on. So, part of getting used to the online environment is reframing the feedback/response time.

The other challenge is that it is not possible for everyone (and especially the facilitator) to acknowledge every comment that people make. Again, in a f2f situation, by making eye contact and other non-verbals people come to know they’ve been heard. There really isn’t an equivalent in the online world (the only

solution would be for everyone to send a note saying, “I read this” to everyone else .. this simply isn’t feasible).

Some conferencing software will deal with the issue of whether or not something has been read through a type of “history” function. We would recommend that educators clearly outline response times to learners (eg. Personal email is responded to within 2 days), so they know what to expect. For learners and facilitators alike, however, it may be useful to think of our conversations within a context of days, instead of minutes. Returning to the art of writing and sending letters, with the inherent time delays, is a reminder of how we might view online communication.

Content Expertise

This independent student centered learning is all very well, but I really appreciated the input, expertise and direction of the facilitator. (an online learner)

I am amazed at what my learners find on the WWW. What I have to offer them simply because I’m the facilitator doesn’t mean much anymore. I have to acknowledge what they bring to the course, and help them develop the skills to determine the validity of what they are reading and learning online. (an online facilitator)

Of course, along with online facilitation skills it’s important that online educators have expertise and confidence in the subject matter. Learners need to be reassured that a knowledgeable facilitator is leading them. It is clearly important to be able to ask probing questions, engage the learners in authentic knowledge building tasks and give reassurance when they have understood a concept. In the online context, content expertise also includes knowledge of useful online resources and how best to use them to support a community of learners. This will involve creating tasks for students to engage in, either individually or in groups, that will help them fully understand the material being studied.

If online educators are involved in formally assessing learners’ contributions then clearly it is important for them to have the confidence of the learners. This is sometimes harder to develop in an online context. In formal educational settings the esteem of the educator is often explicit; for example, via visible signs of academic status. These cues do not exist in online courses and it is important for educators to remember that respect must be earned again and again.

Personal characteristics

Some personal habits such as getting overly frustrated, giving up too easily, taking things too seriously and expecting the facilitator to tell me what to do are probably getting in the way of my enjoyment and quality of learning in the online environment. (an online learner)

My experience teaching online has humbled me. I didn’t realize the kinds of inaccurate assumptions I held about my own learning (and that of the learners) until I started facilitating online. (an online facilitator)

Developing online skills and, in particular becoming paperless, requires a fundamental paradigm shift. Our experience and that of our learners is that the online environment is often a catalyst for examining how we REALLY learn. Many of our learners note that they learned more about learning online in their first course than the actual course content.

Learning to learn (or metacognition as it is also called) is probably one of the most important personal characteristics of an effective online educator. Our understanding of learning to learn is that it is a continual process of action, reflection, self-insight and interaction with others. According to Candy (1990), there is no agreed upon definition of learning to learn. Rather, learning to learn is defined according to how one has framed the concept, and this varies across discipline and philosophical orientation. He provides the following compilation of definitions:

Smith (1982) states that “learning-how-to-learn involves possessing, or acquiring, the knowledge and skill to learn effectively in whatever learning situation one encounters,” (p.19).

Kolb, renowned for his work on learning styles, states that “continuous, lifelong learning requires learning how to learn, and this involves appreciation of and competence in diverse approaches to creating, manipulating and communicating knowledge”(1981, p. 8).

Brown, Campione, and Day (1981) address the skills of learning in these terms: “In order to become expert learners, students must develop some of the same insights as the psychologist into the demands of the situation. They must learn about their own cognitive characteristics, their available learning strategies, the demands of the various learning tasks and the inherent structure of the material. They must tailor their activities finely to the competing demands of all these forces in order to become flexible and effective learners” (p.16).

Candy goes on to suggest that there are common learning to learn features:

- lifelong process
- developmental process
- involves an acquisition of a repertoire of skills, understandings, attitudes
- involves entering into the deep meaning structures of material
- in advanced forms it leads to critical awareness of assumptions, rules, conventions and social expectations

Finally, Candy suggests there is one axiomatic principle - it is the perspective of the learner that counts. He points out that:

Ironically, therefore, a person who has come to define himself or herself as lacking ability will bring the same mind-set and self-image to bear in acquiring new learning approaches, which may further reinforce a sense of inadequacy and failure. One of the greatest challenges confronting those with an interest in learning to learn is to transcend such self-imposed limitations and to give learners, as Archimedes put it, a new place to stand from which they can move their respective worlds. (p. 57)

In our view, Candy’s observation is especially true for adults moving into online learning and education. How many of us grew up with computers and had opportunities to experiment with new technology? How many of us have said, “I can’t program my VCR.” How many of us (and how many times!) have said during a new online experience, “I’m not very good at this. I don’t know anything about computers. I don’t understand this. This is too impersonal and frustrating. This is too complicated. There are too many problems with the technology.” and so on. Changing this type of self-image is exactly what Candy is talking about.

Robert Smith (1991) suggests that learning to learn involves both intrapersonal and interpersonal processes of awareness, self-monitoring and reflection. The ongoing development of these skills leads to:

active, confident, self-aware learners who carefully monitor learning-related activities and continually reflect on outcomes and possible adjustments in tactics. They demonstrate flexibility....are open to new ideas and experience...skills in transferring what is learned to other situations....can identify personal rules and myths...have learned to think critically and to review assumptions about learning and knowledge. (p. 11)

Peter Vaill (1996) suggests that continual learning today demands that learners adopt a reflective beginner approach. Many adults have high expectations of how quickly or painlessly they should develop a new skill. They often do not permit themselves to be beginners. This is especially true of educators moving into the online environment. Because they have considerable f2f experience they assume they should move painlessly into the online environment instead of maintaining a sense of humour about their sometimes “lamentable state of beginnerhood” (Vaill, 1996). Vaill provides a helpful list of characteristics of reflective beginners in his book.

Related to the notion of being a beginner is the ability to not take things too seriously, in essence to return to childlike tendencies of “playing”. Many of our learners have commented that their children approach the computer as they would anything else, with a sense of adventure and play. They aren’t afraid to take risks and experiment if things don’t work out. Online facilitators and learners need to develop a similar approach.

Conclusion

Our experience is that teaching and learning online requires patience and the willingness to learn different skills. As was already mentioned, we recommend taking a course as a learner first. Assuming that teaching online is a new skill set instead of an adaptation of existing f2f skills is helpful. Developing online technical skills and being prepared to deal with a “shifting learning paradigm” will ease the transition into online facilitation. Finally, reading what others have researched and written is important. We highly recommend both Palloff and Pratt (1999) and Salmon (2000).

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