

**Keyboard Voices: Reflections on Online Facilitation and
Community Building**

Edited by Tammy Dewar
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Acknowledgements

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Introduction

I “fell into” teaching online in 1996 and, at that time, there were few web based resources to guide my way and even fewer print based resources. Since that time, the field has developed at an amazing rate and “e-learning” has become a buzzword for many people in the training and development field. There have been many books published in the last few years that speak to this new field of study.

While I was developing a course for Royal Roads University about Facilitating Online, however, I came to realize that there was a real gap in terms of the “stories” from practitioners. How do people make the transition to facilitating online? What have they learned about it? What issues do they struggle with? Why do they do it? So, I called upon a network of colleagues and invited them to share their stories. I didn’t make any suggestions about what they should write, and so you will find here a variety of approaches to this subject.

The only thing I’ve done with their stories is to cluster them into very loose themes. Brigitte, Cathy, Laurie, Dave and myself recall our challenges, insights and inspirations moving to facilitating online and so I’ve called this section “Transitioning to Online Facilitation.” Brooke, Mel, David, Norm, Dave, Barbara and Maureen, and myself all provide some very helpful tips about what we’ve learned through our experiences facilitating and learning online and so I’ve called this section “Lessons Learned.” Anne and Elizabeth share their excitement about the promise and potential of online facilitation in “Experiencing the Joys of Online Facilitation.”

Cathy and Tanis provide some provocative observations about the online world and so I’ve called this section “Diversity in Online Environments.” I end with a section on “Community Building Online” with Alex and Marilyn providing insight into what they’ve learned.

This brings me to an invitation. I’m really interested in having this e-book represent many, many voices, and continuing to add to it. If you would like to contribute a chapter to the book, email me at tammy.dewar@royalroads.ca. I look forward to hearing from many more people about their own experiences. Happy facilitating!

*Tammy Dewar
Royal Roads University
August, 2003*

Transitioning to Online Facilitation

Brigitte Harris - Making the Transition to the Online Classroom

Brigitte Harris, Ph.D. teaches online in the Master of Arts in Leadership (MALT) and Master of Arts in Distributed Learning (MADL) programs at Royal Roads University.

Knowing the Classroom

Online teachers generally “come from face-to-face teaching where they may have relied heavily on personal charisma to stimulate and hold their students’ attention” (Salmon, 2000, p. 41). While I did not rely on charisma in my classes, I developed, over time, a kind of situational knowing of the classroom, my role in it and how to teach my students effectively. As a face-to-face instructor, I looked around my class to read how things were going: how engaged, tired or bored students were, who seemed anxious, which students sat together, and who looked confused.

Online, of course, I couldn’t look around to get that sense of what was going on and adjust my responses accordingly. Instead, I sat in front of a screen reading asynchronous discussion group messages or participating in synchronous discussions. Some students readily sent out messages that conveyed how they were doing; others sent sporadic or cryptic messages or, sometimes were simply absent. Did this mean the student was confused and reticent to say so? Did it indicate that the student was experiencing technical troubles? Did it mean that the student felt that no one was out there who cared? At first, this lack of information was bewildering. I needed to develop that sense of knowing my online classroom just as I had come to know my face-to-face classroom.

Getting to Know the Online Classroom

I came to online teaching almost by accident, after years of teaching face-to-face undergraduate and graduate courses. I taught in the graduate department of a faculty of education when the issue of whether to offer online courses was raised during a faculty meeting. There was general agreement that the graduate department needed to develop online courses or risk being left behind as other postsecondary institutions innovated. Faculty members regularly traveled to satellite campuses in two other cities; indeed, many of our students lived at a distance from the main campus and some never set foot on the main campus during their program. Offering online courses made sense.

My experience of technology was decidedly limited. And yet, I saw an opportunity to try something new and to explore what was then called “the coming thing”. My experience in developing new face-to-face courses would – I hoped -- offset what I lacked in technical expertise. I volunteered to design a prototype online graduate course and negotiated with the dean for supports I would need to design and then pilot the course. I chose to pilot qualitative research methods, a course I had taught several times face-to-

face. This choice enabled me to focus on the problem of adapting to the online environment, rather than mastering new subject matter.

When we move our practice from a familiar setting – the face-to-face classroom – to a new context – an online course – we are called to question what the essence of our practice is (Mezirow et al., 1990). I asked questions like:

What best practices developed in a face-to-face setting, can I apply online?
How do I need to modify face-to-face teaching strategies to be effective online?
What is the essence of teaching and learning?
What is the essence of teaching and learning online?

As I started to research online course design, I asked students in my face-to-face classes whether they had taken online courses and what their experiences were. Most reported feeling isolated and missing the social aspects of face-to-face classes. Often they characterized online courses in terms of what was lacking compared to face-to-face courses. The literature supported their anecdotal observations and, indeed, reported alarming rates of non-completion of online courses¹. Since a cornerstone of my face-to-face teaching was promoting community and collaboration in the classroom, I felt that this approach would be crucial to avoiding the sense of isolation that many learners spoke of. Moreover, though I had not yet read Paloff and Pratt's classic work *Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace* (1999)², articles on the Internet suggested that building an online community of learners was a good strategy in online courses.

An important element in building this community was in redefining my role in it. Of course I had read about this shift – that my role would be mentor and moderator rather than a classroom authority, but knowing in theory doesn't clarify how a phenomenon will manifest itself in practice. My first lesson in this new role occurred as a result of an overloaded server. In my pilot course, the students and I had set up regular synchronous discussions. However, the first time I tried to enter a synchronous session, I could not. Coming from a face-to-face setting and being used to facilitating discussion, this felt akin to not showing up for a scheduled class! I tried and tried to enter the discussion, worried that the discussion would derail without me to facilitate it and the students would, in effect, “go home”. When I finally was able to enter, I found that the discussion had gone just fine without me. The participants had moderated for themselves.

Unlike a face-to-face seminar, where students often glance at the instructor for confirmation when they speak and look to the instructor to direct the discussion, in an online course, the students can and do manage the discussion themselves. One of my first adjustments to online teaching was to redefine my role in the classroom conversation. Initially, I had felt the need in both synchronous and asynchronous discussions to direct each discussion and to respond to every post. With hundreds of postings in an online course, this strategy is not necessary or practical. I soon learned that students often

¹ The alarming drop-out rate in online courses is still the topic of much debate. See for example, <http://chronicle.com/free/v46/i23/23a00101.htm>, accessed May 14, 2002.

² I was given this book when I began teaching online courses for Royal Roads University.

provided excellent and thought-provoking postings and responses. I could add to discussions when I was addressed directly or when I had something to clarify or add.

Conclusion

When students in my courses transition from face-to-face to online courses, they often think of online courses as poor cousins, in terms of what they are lacking. It took time for me to develop a sense of the online classroom, my place within it, and to see them in terms of strengths. I came to know the online classroom through myriads of little lessons like the one I describe here. Moreover, I'm still getting to know the online classroom just as I continue to refine and adjust the way I know the face-to-face classroom. Just as online instructors do, students coming from face-to-face classrooms need to develop a sense of the online classroom, their role and how they can learn within it. While they may still prefer the social aspects of face-to-face courses, they can become comfortable with their roles in online courses. If they do, they, too, may come to see online courses in terms of strengths rather than deficits.

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Cathy McKenzie - My Life As A Mouse

Cathy McKenzie, M.A., teaches online in the MALT program with Royal Roads University.

In the fall of 1998 I was just one of numerous “mouses” atop the store shelf, bored and pining away for a more meaningful life. I desperately wanted to live and belong in a real home. Then one day, there she was – I heard her speaking to the manager – I could tell she was a techy-novice, uncertain, middle-aged, and wary of moving into the world of online learning. She was a graduate learner in something called MALT? I felt we would be perfect for each other - after all, I was, and still am, a “Mighty Mouse” and I sensed we would make a good team! So, I sent out the vibes via my hard shell – “pick me, pick me” and sure enough it worked! The next thing I knew – plunk – I was tossed in a box, hugging the Pentium and was off to my new abode – the office of my Master. Many mouse clicks later I pondered the wisdom of my urgency as my nagging inner voice mused – “be careful what you wish for”.

I remember arriving with eager anticipation at my new pad, which was custom made with a family photo on it! As if that wasn’t splendid enough there was a warm oak desk, soft lamps, and other photos of groups of happy people with a gorgeous Castle in the backdrop. And there were books everywhere!! There was order and space and pens stacked neatly in a jar. The Pentium in the middle, phone to the left, me to the right and, miracle of miracles, adjacent to my pad, was a cheese snack! What more could a mouse ask for! Nestled nearby was a little “mug rug” for my Master’s coffee. One coiled notebook lay on the desk openly displaying a tidy list of things to do. A truly organized spirit.... my Master.... or so I thought.

All of this was some time ago now. My Master did earn her degree, with my help I might add, then she began facilitating online learning in the fall of 2000 and this is what we are here to hear!

A Mouse’s Musings in the Moments

You see I am no ordinary mouse. I have a knack for traveling long distances without moving too far from home. More importantly, my whole body is a “sensation machine”! I can “feel” human energy simply because people touch me a lot.

However, there is a limit to what one can handle and this past fall has nearly killed me. As my Master’s fingers flew with fire the result meant constant rolling and spinning for me. All this combined with her outbursts of “oh my God, 400 more postings to read” and her shrieks of joy over the magic of emergent learning, well, quite frankly, the journey at times became an exercise in stamina and courage identified by one simple and predictable event - sleepless nights.

Sometimes I fear for my life, as I have known it. All I ever wanted to be was a cute little rolling wheel of support for my Master because as you see for the most part I am truly fond of her. She has always spent quality time with me, lovingly caressing me several times during the day as she went about her work. Her pace was relaxed; she took time to write using me to guide her through the documents. She always took breaks to read, hang out with her family, have fun, and go for walks. But that all changed when she became an online facilitator for graduate learners. Many days I was her only friend and let me tell you that was a huge responsibility! I was the link to the nerve-wracking send button – the vehicle for assessments and evaluations - the final CLICK!

Her little mug rug that she uses for coffee/wine is often now lost under layers of papers and assignments so sometimes she puts her coffee down on my pad! I worry that the moisture will hinder my ability to roll and THEN what will she do? Days and nights merge and blend into one marathon of pecking away on the keys.

God she was rough with me last night – she seems to have lost her tenderness – so much for the combination of “high touch” and “high tech” – with me she is just constant touch. Oh how I long for her gentle pace. When she does give me a rest it is usually to take up with another of my desktop friends – the phone – then I hear her talking with these MALT folks about learning, competencies, leadership, A’s, B’s and IP’s, stress, and on and on it goes.... I guess the reality is that sometimes I am just not enough for her. I long for the days when I had her all to myself – sharing in our rhythm of words.

I try my best to understand just what it is that keeps her in the game. Good thing I come from a long line of *scurryers* because together, my Master and I do a lot of that! We zip from assignments and postings and emails and evaluations and merging files and copying and pasting and competencies (whatever the hell those are) and man, those competencies cause her huge stress! I can feel her hesitating clicking me as she massages her feedback yet one more time. She talks a lot out loud (must be a learning style), asking herself, “I wonder if my feedback is encouraging, honest, fair, kind, worthy, helpful, specific, and will it challenge the learner to reach his or her own highest potential”?

Quite frankly, I can’t see just what all the fuss is about. Who ARE these learner people who live in far away places? Why are they so intent on this journey and what on earth drives my Master to continue this marathon? Being a mouse, I can handle a fairly frenetic pace but this is ridiculous. I wear the stains of perspiration and luckily exhilaration too ☺ but everyone, especially a wee mouse needs a holiday sometime. Besides, my pad is torn and tattered and I have no idea “Who Moved My Cheese” through all of this either.

I tend to worry about my Master yet I know something important is happening here in the work she and I are doing. I am afraid at times it seems beyond my grasp of understanding. Some nights she cries out of fatigue, care, celebration, joy, or frustration – her tears slipping over my back – a gentle wash – I don’t mind really. Her right arm

goes numb – I *know* this because I can feel the burning shoulder pain radiating into her fingertips and in those moments she bounces from cursor to cursor. On long shifts I hear her yell to her husband in desperation, “remind me never to do this again – it is too much work” yet somehow her mood shifts and she quietly finds a renewed rhythm – tapping away at the keys in response to a unique word, a precious moment or a stunning story from the learners that fills her with awe. She is often full of inspiration and pride as she listens to those people we never see.

One night around 4am I realize the answer to all my questions. Even though she gets stressed as her energy races through me – over, back, up, down, side to endless side – she thinks of herself as an instrument of learning. For my part - I get it – I am the guide, in the “mouse maze” and the “virtual maze” hoping to avoid the inevitable traps, and after all I do have some history with that! Something amazing is happening to my Master, amidst the excessive and constant attention to these other learners – I sense she feels complete somehow in the unseen spaces of these far away faces. When they learn she learns and meaning abounds. She lived it in 98 and knows what it feels like to be – on the other side. I just knew there was a reason I was chosen to live here. It is about shared meaning.

Alas, it is Dec. 20th and we rest. What an amazing journey – how many clicks have we traveled together – my Master and I? There have been numerous insights. Humans call those special moments “Ahas” but I call them “Mouse Magic”! In the end Master raises a glass of Merlot to the screen, centers me on my pad and wearily reaches for the off button for one last time. I think I have learned enough from this experience to write another story one day. Perhaps I will call it “Of Mice and MALTS” so stay tuned...!

Laurie Hillis - Laurie Relearns Her ABC's - Or.. Practical Ideas to Transition from Face-to-Face to On-Line Facilitation

Laurie Hillis, M.A., a MALT grad 1999, co-developed MALT's LT535 Module in collaboration with Tammy Dewar and Nancy Greer in the spring and summer of 2001. She facilitated her first on-line course for RRU in the fall of 2001.

I remember well the joy of being invited to teach in my first on-line course for Royal Roads' MALT program, in the spring of 2001. Why do I remember it so well? Because the joy I felt was immediately replaced by a deep sense of trepidation, imposter syndrome and abject fear – fear that I wouldn't have all that it took to successfully transition from the safety of face-to-face to the virtual medium I was about to explore.

Having enjoyed my distance learning experiences, including tele-conferencing, correspondence learning and on-line learning for more than ten years, I was very comfortable with the process of being an on-line learner. It was the thought of being an on-line facilitator that caused me a sleepless night or two.

The good news? I survived and thoroughly enjoyed my initial experience. By sharing with you some practical strategies I employed, I hope you too might feel a sense of encouragement to take your own leap of faith. Here, then are my on-line ABC's.

- A** Ask for help when you start. I was a “newbie” and I knew it. I sought help from colleagues, friends, mentors and authors who'd preceded me into this new medium.
- B** Be authentic with the learning community. I was up-front with the community about my own learning curve. In our introductory activity learners shared their hopes, fears and dreams about the course. I shared my feelings honestly which enhanced a sense of bonding in the community.
- C** Creativity. I was travelling across Canada almost entirely during the ten weeks of teaching on-line. To share some of my travelling experiences, I used a digital camera to send a 15-second video clip to the learning community as a way of keeping in touch and personalizing our shared learning. The learners loved it!
- D** Don't feel bad if you don't always “get it right” the first time. Be gentle with yourself and remember leaders need to be learners.
- E** Effort is required. A different type of effort was required for me. As a strongly extroverted facilitator, I found a new energy emerged as I developed more of my introverted preference on-line. Some illuminating learning and reflection resulted from this experience.

- F** Find a way to transfer some of your face-to-face techniques into the virtual world. As a passionate Myers-Briggs (MBTI®) advocate, I used my knowledge of this tool to understand the learning styles, challenges and needs of the learners. By sharing “Type” in our community we were able to establish a sense of openness to others’ needs.
- G** Give feedback and ask for feedback, both in the large community and when appropriate, 1:1 when you know learners need an additional boost or support.
- H** Hold off jumping into the community too much with your comments. How much is too much? You’ll need to decide this for yourself. Remember the purpose of on-line learning is to encourage self-directedness in the learners.
- I** Integrity. Be who you are and enjoy developing your own on-line facilitating personality.
- J** Joy. Allow yourself to experience the same joy you see occurring in the learning community.
- K** Knowledge – acquire it using many the many resources available, both on-line and the more traditional paper-based. Two of my favourite books were by authors Palloff and Pratt: Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace and Lessons from the Cyberspace Classroom.
- L** Leverage your strengths. In my fifteen or so years as a face-to-face facilitator, I’ve had reams of feedback to help me refine my style and impact. I used those identified strengths in helping me in my transition. Skills which helped me were: building relationships, showing empathy, providing balanced feedback, acknowledging input and risk taking, and asking questions.
- M** Make time. I found on-line facilitation took much more time than I initially expected. I estimate my average weekly time was 12-14 hours as a newbie teaching my first on-line module.
- N** Notes to help me keep track of the burgeoning information that emerged in the learning community. I set up a Word document with a section for each learner. I kept track of each learner’s hopes, dreams, fears, growth, and feedback I wanted to ensure I offered to them at the appropriate time. Cutting and pasting from the newsgroups to the Word document was effortless and kept me organized.
- O** Own your own anxieties (and yes, you’ll have them). Be careful not to “infect” the community with your own concerns.
- P** Patience is needed. You’ll need to be patient with those learners who are new to on-line learning and to technology. Some learners [like some faculty] take longer and will require patience.
- Q** Quiet workspace is optimal. Just like the learners need to have a quiet, comfortable and accessible work space, so will you.

- R **Resist** the urge to “rescue” learners too quickly. There is a learning curve learners will need to progress through and you’ll need to balance the need to rescue them with the need for them to explore and problem solve on their own, both with the technology and the learning process.
- S **Summarize** weekly. It was helpful for me and for the learners to look back and synthesize the week’s key themes and learnings and feed this back to the community as a way of closing one week before moving into new learning. Encouraging learners to offer their weekly summary thoughts added another level of community sharing and richness.
- T **Treats** for you! To get you through those long “bottom numbing” nights, particularly during assessment weeks. My personal favourites include: cappuccinos and jube jubes.
- U **Understanding** is needed for all the learners and for yourself.
- V **Validate** the learners, particularly in assessing first assignments to encourage them for the future and to build confidence.
- W **Wine** – part of “treats” above ~ my reward for a great week!
- X **Xellent** (sic). Don’t be afraid to say it to the learners, again to encourage, coach and build their esteem.
- Y **You** will learn as much as the learners in the community if you stay open to the learning.
- Z **Zeal**. Have it, share it and encourage it in others.

I hope your experience will be as rewarding and fulfilling as mine was and that this article helps you to develop your own new ABC’s.

Tammy Dewar and Dave Whittington: Learning New Skills

Tammy designs online courses and facilitates online for the University of Calgary and Royal Roads University in the Master of Arts in Leadership and Training program and the Master of Arts in Distributed Learning. Dave designs online courses and facilitates online at Royal Roads University in the Master of Arts in Leadership and Training program and the Master of Arts in Distributed Learning.

NOTE: This article is adapted from a paper given at the Working Knowledge - Productive Learning at Work Conference in Sydney in December 2000.

Introduction

Dave and I have been designing and facilitating online since 1996. We've learned a lot in that time, and we've also been lucky enough to squeeze a few research projects about learning and facilitating online into our rather hectic schedules. We like Gilly Salmon's (2000) competency framework for e-moderators and use that as an organizer for our thoughts in this paper. Interspersed throughout the paper will be our practical experience and recent research into the actual experiences of online learners (Dewar and Whittington, 2000). 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.

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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Lessons Learned

Brooke Broadbent - A Failed Webcast

Brooke Broadbent teaches in the MADL Program at Royal Roads University.

In Utopia there would be no failed Webcasts. Every article in this book would gush e-learning success stories. Sorry, it's not that way. Problems happen. This story is not meant to embarrass the people who tried to demonstrate the effectiveness of a Webcast. We are trying to show you what can happen, so that you can learn from what went wrong.

The plan was to conduct a 90-minute webcast on a Wednesday at 12 noon. The purpose of the online seminar was to examine issues associated with converting traditional classroom teaching to online courses. The presenter, let's call her Helga, was setting out to advise viewers of both pros and cons from the end-user's perspective, as well as from the instructor and IT service viewpoints.

It promised to be an intriguing play within a play. Using e-learning to explain e-learning. Invitations were sent out to members of two distance learning organizations. The topics sparked considerable interest and some people received half-a-dozen notices forwarded from others, right up to the time the session was to start. And that was the beginning of the problem. Too many people tried to participate.

Somewhere in the neighborhood of 175 people registered for the webcast by transmission time. Plus, at webcast time, some 325 additional people tried to join the session. As a result, the bandwidth could not handle the traffic. People who were logged on were cut off and forced to reload. The snowballing effect was such that precious few saw the complete presentation. Some hapless cybernauts saw only three minutes out of an hour-long webcast.

A discussion forum had been set up for post-session discussion. Needless to say, all of the discussion was about the technology—or lack of adequate technology.

Lessons Learned

A number of administrative actions could have been taken to manage the technology, from simply limiting the number of participants to creating an archival video to run from participants' hard drives later. These and other suggestions from the project team for effectively managing a webcast are summarized in the table below.

Issue	Response
unexpected large numbers of participants clogged the system	hold your webcast at a time of the day when Web traffic is typically lowest control the number of registrants by having people sign up in advance; limit the number of people who can sign up do not allow any registration during the session
the quality of the webcast video was dubious	consider archiving a video and having people view the archived version that runs asynchronously from their hard drive, not through a synchronous webcast; advise instructors to reduce their body movement when they speak on a video that will be communicated over the Web on online
the online discussion after the session was short-lived and not productive	register all participants in the online discussion through a listserv appoint an animator to facilitate the discussion
once the webcast started there were network problems	work closely with support people, e.g., IS department or software developers, to anticipate network problems and develop contingency plans for real-time resolution
the entire project was done with volunteers	recognize webcasts as a specialty area and be prepared to invest money, or plenty of time to learn about it
there were unforeseen glitches everywhere	Practice, practice, practice with the tools during development; pilot thoroughly before you try real participants

Table 1 - Learnings from a failed Webcast

Source: Interviews of people involved in the failed Webcast

Mel MacLeod - Communication - Communication - Communication

Mel MacLeod teaches online in the MALT and MBA programs at Royal Roads University.

As anyone who has facilitated online knows, communication can be quite challenging when all you have is the printed word. A posting that may seem very straightforward to you may not get interpreted that way. You then try to clarify the communication in a humorous way, which may lead to other interpretations. My story begins with a posting I made after a class working in teams had established a learning organization framework which they were then to use as individuals in assessing their own organizations. In my posting, I wanted them to reflect on the process they used in coming up with their own framework as well as to reflect on the process they were going to use to select a framework to study their own organization. I wrote the posting with the personal pronoun "I" so learners would get the experience of asking themselves the reflective questions.

From: Mel MacLeod
Sent: Wednesday, March 20, 2002 1:55 PM
Subject: Points to Ponder

As I review the frameworks that have been posted.....

1. How do I measure the "completeness" of a framework?
2. As I reflect back on our team process for designing the framework, what form of team decision making did we use? In what way is team decision making similar to or different from individual decision making?
3. If I was to repeat this exercise, what would I do differently as a team member?
4. What criteria will I use to guide my decision making in selecting a framework which will best determine whether the organization that I work for is a learning organization or not?
5. What role, if any, will my learning style play in that decision making?
6. For those team members involved in the actual putting together of the framework, what role, if any, do you feel your learning style played in the format of the end result?
7. If our class was doing this activity in a f2f environment, would there be more similarity, the same as, or less similarity than was exhibited by the present frameworks designed in an online environment?

8. I would like to share the following resources in the Unit 6 Q & A which I came across on learning organizations that are not listed in the resources for this unit.

Having posted the above "Points to Ponder", I received the following e-mail from a learner (I received permission from this learner to share this example and I have used a pseudonym).

From: Tom
To: Mel MacLeod
Sent: March 20, 2002 11:05 PM
Subject: Re: Points to Ponder

Is it too late...is that why I don't see the resources listed?
Or, do you mean the Senge video?...as listed in the unit 6 q & a?
It must just be my thick head. I would greatly appreciate an elaboration on where I can find them.
Thanx
Tom,

Obviously the learner read # 8 as being from the facilitator - where could he find the resources that I had shared in Unit 6 Question & Answer (Q & A). So I responded with the following e-mail.

From: Mel MacLeod
To: Tom
Sent: Wednesday, March 20, 2002 11:09 PM
Subject: Re: Points to Ponder

I was puzzled and then I laughed out loud - this online "thing" can reach out and bite you!!!! I made the reflections personal for the reader i.e. that is you - so I wanted the team members to share any resources they may have come across - however I can certainly understand how you could switch the pronoun to me in # 8 - I've shared mine already in the binder!!!!
Should I post a clarification to the whole class?
Mel

Tom replied with the following e-mail:

From: Tom
To: Mel MacLeod
Sent: March 21, 2002 11:31 AM
Subject: Re: Points to Ponder

Oh!!! Now I get you! #6 was in the 3rd person, so I thought you had converted to yourself at that time.... ummmm...maybe I'm the only one that took it that way....

Well, I'm glad at least I could give you a laugh!

Tom

It was that last line that gave me pause. I hoped that Tom didn't think I was laughing at him making the error - should I let it drop? Should I send a clarifying e-mail? Those thoughts circulated in my head for longer than I wanted which told me - I think you better send a clarifying e-mail.

From: Mel MacLeod
To: Tom
Sent: Thursday, March 21, 2002 12:45 PM
Subject: Re: Points to Ponder

Just clarifying that the laugh was "with you", not "at you".
Facilitating online is such an ongoing learning for me - just when I think I'm getting the hang of it - something else happens that I hadn't anticipated. Don't get me wrong - I'm not making a big thing out of this - When I went back to re-read the posting, your interpretation would be quite easy to come to. So an "aha" for me. And thank you for the question or I'd never be aware.
Mel

Fortunately, I didn't have to wait too long before an answer came back through cyberspace from Tom who responded in the body of my e-mail as follows:

From: Tom
To: Mel MacLeod
Sent: March 21, 2002 2:32 PM
Subject: Re: Points to Ponder

Just clarifying that the laugh was "with you", not "at you". **I never thought of it any other way. For some reason I'm always laughing, so I like it when others do too.**
Facilitating online is such an ongoing learning for me - just when I think I'm getting the hang of it - something else happens that I hadn't anticipated. Don't get me wrong - I'm not making a big thing out of this - When I went back to re-read the posting, your interpretation would be quite easy to come to. So an "aha" for me. And thank you for the question or I'd never be aware.
Mel

I share the above example as an illustration of how communication in written form without any kind of nonverbal cues could get misinterpreted. As was the case here, neither the instructor nor the learner had ever met in person and only knew each other through written communication. In f2f, nonverbal clues including facial expression help to communicate the real meaning and intention of what the person is saying. When communicating online, extra time and effort is needed to determine if what is being written could be misinterpreted by someone with a different viewpoint.

David E. Regan - High Tech – High Touch - “The Power of Caring”

David E. Reagan, Ed.D., teaches online for the MALT program at Royal Roads University.

“For a list of all the ways technology has failed to improve the quality of life, please press three.” - **Alice Kahn**

The quote from Alice Kahn nicely captures my deepest concern about using technology in education: Will we be able to maintain quality? After teaching online courses for several years I know it is definitely possible to offer learners a quality on line experience. For me the key to maintaining quality is balancing High Tech with High Touch. The technology is provided to us; we, as faculty, must provide the online High Touch. My online high touch comes a through genuine caring for my learners.

To confirm that my online caring makes a difference, I humbly share the following comments from learners in my online courses:

“David. Your unique ability to encourage both the mind and the heart is a true gift to learners. Thank you for this opportunity to learn from you.”

“David. After my father died I just didn’t want to continue in the program. It was your support and encouragement that made all the difference.

“David I wouldn’t be here at graduation if it weren’t for your support during my illness. Your flexibility and your caring gave me the strength to continue in the program. Thank you.”

Never compromising academic standards, I use the following five rules for online teaching that creates an environment where learners feel my caring and learners continually exceed my expectations of their academic work:

The Five Practices of Caring for Online Education:

Start the Course with an “I CARE” Message: I always have a very positive and friendly greeting waiting for learners when they log-on to my courses. I explain in my message that we are all adults in a learning community and that I never compromise my academic standards and at the same time I will do everything I can to help them succeed in the course. I let them know I care about their success in the course.

Build Confidence: I always start with a moderately challenging assignment that lets the learners know this is a graduate level course and at the same time it gives them confidence they can succeed. If the assignment is too easy you will lose their interest; if the assignment is too difficult you will frighten the majority of them away. Once they develop confidence the final assignment can be extremely challenging and they will do well because of the confidence they have developed through your caring.

Two Compliments, Two Constructive Recommendations, and Two Compliments. I have developed an assessment formula that includes using two compliments, two constructive recommendations, and two compliments when evaluating assignments. Many learners are fearful that their assignment will not be satisfactory, fearful that they don't belong in a graduate course. They are relieved when they see that I have started my feedback with one or two compliments (e.g., thanking them for an engaging introduction, an excellent quote, an excellent reference.) I then move to constructive recommendations (e.g., the need for more references, the need for a better introduction to their essay, the need to support their thesis better.) The constructive recommendations are always very specific and very concrete. I am also very careful to offer the constructive recommendations in a positive and supportive fashion. I then conclude with one or two compliments (e.g., an excellent summary, an excellent list of references, proper citing of references.) This 2-2-2 formula maintains academic standards in a very positive and caring environment. (Note: I am not rigid about a 2-2-2 formula. It may be 2-4-1. I simply start with a positive and end with a positive. In between the positives I hold them to the academic rigor of the course.

The Unexpected Email. I keep a notebook of my learners who are struggling and who are facing life challenges (e.g., job stress/loss, sick elderly parent, or personal illness) and I send them an email of encouragement from time to time. I remind them that I will never compromise the academic standards of the course and that I can be quite flexible when it comes to due dates and additional support (e.g., read a draft, help locate references, talk on the telephone.) The response to these "unexpected emails" has been overwhelming. I know these are learners who are experiencing a real low point in life. Any gesture of kindness is a gift. I think the following quote from Leo Buscaglia captures it best:

"Too often we under estimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around." **Leo Buscaglia**

5. **Post Notes of Encouragement.** At key times in the course (e.g., a week before a major assignment is due; when a local, national or international tragedy has occurred) I post a positive and encouraging note to the discussion groups or through the group email address for the course. Many learners respond by letting me the note of encouragement was like getting their "second wind" when running or comforting in a time of concern and fear. It is this sense of genuine caring that motivates my learners to move forward to do to their best. The following quote from Lao Tzu nicely captures my sincerity in my

teaching and why I teach. I want my learners to learn and I want them to know I care. My deepest hope is that they will carry this practice forward in their lives and perhaps we can all live in a world that is just a bit more caring; it can have incredible results.

When pure sincerity forms within, it is outwardly realized in other people's hearts.

Lao Tzu, 6th century B.C.

Norm Vaughn - Designing Online Learning Activities: Applying the Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education

Norm Vaughn, M.Ed., is Manager of the Academic Development Centre at Mount Royal College in Calgary. He also teaches in the MADL program.

In my work at Mount Royal College, I work with face-to-face(f2f) undergraduate instructors who are looking to supplement their practice with some online learning. In this article, I explore the seven principles of good practice in undergraduate education, and apply these to suggested online activities that can supplement a f2f program.

Seven Principles of Good Practice:

- Encourages contacts between students and teachers
- Develops reciprocity and cooperation among students
- Uses active learning techniques
- Gives prompt feedback
- Emphasizes time on task
- Communicates high expectations
- Respects diverse talents and ways of learning

Resources:

Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education
(Chickering and Gamson, 1987)

http://aitt.acadiau.ca/research/Best_Teaching/sevenprinciples.pdf

Implementing the Seven Principles: Technology as a Lever
(Chickering and Ehrmann, 1997)

<http://www.tltgroup.org/programs/seven.html>

Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education – Suggestions for Implementation

(Brigham Young University)

<http://www.byu.edu/fc/pages/tchlrnpages/7princip.html>

Pedagogical Strengths of a Computer:

- Visualization
- Communication
- Collaboration
- Construction
- Organization
- Problem Solving
- Research
- Calculation
- Immediacy

"Doing it again thoughtfully"
 Repetition

Online Learning Activities

Methods	Activity Examples	Good Practice
Posting Instructional Material	Instructor notes and announcements Tutorials and assignments for students Study guides PowerPoint presentations Images that enhance understanding Material compiled or produced by students (e.g. student home pages) Electronic glossaries	makes time for deeper exploration in class helps visual learners active learning
Creating Web Based Resource Links	Links to academic papers on the web, subject-specific resources, institutions (e.g., NASA), libraries, museums, supplemental textbook material, other courses on the web student link-harvesting: students gather and evaluate web resources	bring authentic resources into classroom active learning, critical thinking skills
Multimedia (learning) Objects	animations, video, audio Merlot (www.merlot.org)	respects different learning styles
Email (asynchronous)	Q & A with instructor Electronic study partners or mentors	faculty-student contact student-student contact
Threaded Discussion Forums (asynchronous)	Online discussion topics and issues Student-led discussions (students monitor and summarize) critiques, debates, seminars Q & A with "guest lecturer" who is an expert in the field	active learning student-student critical thinking authentic resources
Chat Rooms (synchronous)	Virtual office hours Web tours Student presentations Guest speakers	faculty-student contact prompt feedback visual learners active learning
Document Sharing / Group Work	Collaborative research projects Group writing activities Construction of a student-led glossary Shared calendars Digital drop boxes Small group presentation tools	student-student active learning time on task
Journals	Personal reflections on topic Alternative assessment tool	respects diverse ways of knowing

	Reports on virtual experiences (e.g., after touring an online museum)	active learning synthesis of material
Assessments	Preview quiz – on preparatory textbook, article or online readings Review quiz – on lecture content Collaborative quiz – online discussion about the questions and answers on a quiz Students developing their own quiz questions – learning how to design tests Online grade books Online quizzes - Integrity test question – Did you do this quiz on your own?	makes time for deeper exploration in class prompt feedback student-student critical thinking active learning

Dave Whittington - Etivities or Learning Objects?

Dave designs online courses and teaches online at Royal Roads University in the Master of Arts in Leadership and Training program and the Master of Arts in Distributed Learning.

I was at a flexible learning conference during 2002 in the Midlands of England. One of the keynotes was presenting statistics that had been collected by Forrester Research; apparently, the most important obstacle to the take up of e-learning was its lack of interactivity. Now I thought this was really interesting (if not somewhat obvious), and worth talking about. So I started to write this paper for the first edition of the Keyboard Voices book. Since then, all sorts of things have happened to me and not much has changed in e-learning. I'm now finishing off the last few edits nearly one year after I started writing! It's written very informally, in the style I'd use as an e-tutor. Feedback would be welcome ... and apologies for the misuse of the English language :)

First of all, what is interactivity? I'm sure (well at least I hope) that we're not just talking about button clicking and page turning. For interactivity to have anything to do with learning it must surely involve *thoughtful* interaction? The word interactivity has been used in so many different ways in different contexts that it might be useful to use a different word to refer to online learning interactivity, or the interactivity that makes e-learning engaging.

Etivity is a term that I first heard from Dr Gilly Salmon of the UK's Open University. An etivity is an online activity that engages a learner in learning ... well that's my definition anyway! I guess I believe in active learning, and when Forrester Research discusses lack of interactivity I'm sure that what they are talking about is the lack of learning activities that are being built into many (but not all) online courses. Now I'm not saying that page-turners have no activity at all. Even reading text from a screen could be called a learning activity. The real problem comes when there's little or no variation in the activity. If all the learner does is absorb information from the screen, whether it's textual, graphic, audio or video, then unless it's produced at a quality similar to the very best TV, it can all get a bit boring. I really believe variety is the spice of life.

Why is this an issue for online course developers and facilitators? You only have to listen to so-called e-learning "gurus" for a short time (especially if they're from a technical or training background) before they'll start talking about Learning Objects and Content Management Systems. The whole focus is on content, content management and content delivery. It's as if learners and learning have been forgotten. Perhaps this is an unfortunate feature of the so-called knowledge economy, where somehow knowledge has been disembodied and is now a commodity that can be bundled into an object and traded in a marketplace. In my experience this content delivery model of learning pervades much of the online learning infrastructure that course developers and facilitators have to work within. Tools are being developed with very sophisticated systems for managing

content, delivering the right content to the right learner at the right time ... but most of these systems only provide discussion groups and chat rooms as a means to support meaningful activity.

Now before I go on, I should say that I do believe that there's a massive amount of variety possible using just discussion groups and email. I've seen many examples and facilitated courses that have been hugely successful and yet only used very basic technology. It's not that discussion groups are bad, it's just that we tend to be limited in the way we use them. Also, there are some activities that cannot be supported by the standard toolkit that we have available. Perhaps a couple of examples would help?

I've often heard facilitators and course designers ask how to encourage participation in discussion groups. They tell me tales of how they set up a discussion area but no one came along. Colleagues sometimes argue that unless the participation is assessed then one can't really expect anyone to turn up. My feeling is that unless the participation is meaningful, then how can we expect anyone to turn up? Now you can make it meaningful by making participation mandatory and something that is assessed ... but this is a stick with no carrot. If participation were meaningful in terms of the learner's needs then we'd have a stick and a carrot. So discussion groups need to be used to support a learning task of some sort. All too often learners are given insufficient guidance as to the purpose of the discussion group. It is then little wonder participation is patchy and often unfocused.

I've ranted for long enough ... you can see what I'm saying. If e-learning is to fulfil its full potential course developers must start thinking as much about activity (activity) as they do about content. There are a couple of books that recognize this and I would recommend to anyone interested in the topic.

The first is Gilly Salmon's *Activities: The Key to Active Online Learning*, published by Kogan Page in 2002. The book is divided into two parts. Part I introduces that concept of activities, online activities that engage learners, are easy to set up, and are, in the main, content independent. This first part also reviews some of the content of Gilly's first book and discusses the important role of e-moderators; these are the tutors, teachers, facilitators (whatever they may be called in your context) who work with learners online. In part two Gilly presents a range of resources to help practitioners develop and deploy their own activities. Many of the ideas in part two are ready to use, and would be a great help to anyone who wants to develop engaging learning experiences online. Although this is a very practical book, it is based on solid research and is well referenced. Anyone who is enthusiastic about the quality of facilitated online learning will enjoy this book and find it useful.

The second book I'd like to mention was also published by Kogan Page (no I'm not on a commission!) in 2003. *Reusing Online Resources: A Sustainable Approach to E-learning* is a collection of chapters from around the world edited by Alison Littlejohn. I like it especially because it begins to bridge the space between the content centric view of

e-learning, the economic necessity to reuse resources as much as we can, and the need to build engaging activities into our online courses.

I congratulate you on wading through my various rantings and wish you all the best with your e-learning, whether it be as a learner, facilitator or developer. Let reading this be a reminder (in which ever way you like) of the importance of engaging interaction.

Barbara J. Winter and Maureen L. Leyland, Post-Modern Facilitation Voices

Barbara Winter: teaches in totally online, blended mode and face to face courses in the Department of Archaeology at Simon Fraser University and in the MA Distributed Learning Program at Royal Roads University. She is a frequent contributor to the SFU Learning and Instructional Development Excellence in Teaching workshop series.

Maureen Leyland: is completing her MADL degree and recently observed Barb's facilitation of a MADL course at Royal Roads. She has had extensive experience facilitating face-to-face groups as a social worker, counselor and family therapist. She works at BC Children's Hospital, Vancouver Canada, where she is in the process of helping nurses and social workers learn how to facilitate online educational and support forums for parents of sick children.

One of the most important aspects of online facilitation is its personal situated-ness. Each person in an online learning environment has a specific background, previous experience, suite of attitudes, frustration level and motivation. Some are fascinated simply by the medium, enjoying the online experience and the freedom it permits. Some are able to see the course in its broad structure, some concentrate on the minutiae of content or procedure. The student, the course author, the facilitator of a course s/he did not create, an observer, an administrator and a systems support person will all have different experiences and different visions of the course. Within this post-modern context of inevitably different and even potentially conflicting perspectives, we would like to offer our thoughts on course facilitation.

Facilitation of an online course is critical to the course's success. A good course that is clumsily administered will cause confusion and frustration, interfering with learning. A poorly designed course may occasionally be carried by adept facilitation that smoothes the way for learners. Success at facilitation is partly personal style, partly confidence and a lot of paying attention to nuance. Facilitation is the voice of the course; it brings the course material alive by injecting enthusiasm, personality and a guiding hand. As online learning develops and becomes more widespread, facilitation skills will become ever more important. For as Salmon (2000) says, "whatever happens to course and program structures, we can be sure that the human factor – the e-moderator- will be critical in the acceptability and success of online learning communities." (p.92)

Facilitation is done within the context of the many participants' multiple perspectives on the same course material. Using the basis of one shared platform, all participants experience the course in different ways. A post modern perspective of facilitation recognizes that each not only brings their own background and experiences to mold their construction of learning from the material, but that the effect of the learning as a constructed phenomenon is directed by each participant. Thus, the facilitator must

recognize the situated-ness of each participant, must discern the background and context of the learner's take on the subject at hand and interact with the learner with that in mind.

This paper is based on the experience of two people who participated as learners, then as a course designer, instructor, facilitator and observer in a series of courses that formed part of the Masters of Arts in Distributed Learning at Royal Roads University, Canada. The program of study provided a self-reflexive platform in which we explored the many aspects of online learning and facilitation. The primary mode of participation and evaluation was team based discussion groups, collaborative projects and individual assignments. Our experiences have led us to several conclusions on how best to facilitate so as to experience the joys of the online environment.

Gaining Perspective

Perhaps the best preparation a person can take in becoming an instructor or facilitator in an online environment is to actually enroll and take an online course, preferably in a subject similar to the course one plans to facilitate online. It is important to really take the course; to be truly subject to the stresses, deadlines, frustrations and fun of collaboration and to the anxiety of submitting assignments and receiving the evaluative feedback, both formative and summative. Auditing or observing a course is not the same.

The online learning environment can be intimidating and alienating for many learners. If you have been an online learner, when facilitating online you can remember your own online learning experiences. This can lead to a great deal more patience with learners who from the keyboard-vantage-point may seem uncertain about how to proceed. For example, in one recent class a learner sent panicked emails that read as though they were in code. She opened one discussion with:

“(No subject)
‘Should we post it to the other place?’
(No signature)”

In a face-to-face class some of the meaning could have been deduced from context, but sitting at a desk, having just deleted dozens of Spam messages, this message almost got deleted! It took several days of exchanges to penetrate this learner's cryptic writing style, fill out the context of her query and answer the question. To her, from the perspective of her immediate experience sitting at her computer, the email made perfect sense. After a full semester of seeking clarification, and modeling context-rich email communication and feedback, the learner's communication style became less cryptic. This is just one illustration of the postmodern concept of multiple perspectives: in more traditional learning contexts this learner could have been criticized for lack of clarity or failure to comply with some 'other-decided' norms. Through recognition of her personal situated-ness and her anxieties about the medium, her path through the course was facilitated, or "smoothed".

If one has truly experienced the emotional responses of yourself and fellow learners to facilitator posts that seemed abrupt or critical, even rude, you will be more aware of the impact of your posts on learners. One writer even suggests that a facilitator should, “always write as if you ‘know’ the learner is having a bad day and needs encouragement. It is the safest approach.” (Cottell, 2002, p.31)

Experiencing an online course as a learner will influence not only facilitation skills but also course design/layout skills. After experiencing the frustration of not knowing how to hand in an assignment, a course designer can see the need for very clear and straightforward instructions regarding assignment drop boxes. When one finds three different end dates in online course materials for an activity or an assignment, it prompts the use of a well-constructed calendar. To help minimize conflicts over instructions and deadlines, these should be placed in one location and one location only. Thus when a course is revised by either the primary course designer or another facilitator, there are minimum essential changes to be made. Updating and revising are much easier, if transient information is in one place. Any course facilitator can easily change due dates from September to January or from April to December, and modify assignment expectations/instructions to best suit the needs of each group of learners taking the course. Palloff and Pratt (2001) say that, “the most critical issue in the use of a course created by another instructor is the ability to adjust it...the central issue in customizing an online course is knowing what is involved with its successful facilitation and what elements should be considered when revising and adapting it.” (p.95)

One way of familiarizing oneself to online facilitation would be to observe, with the permission of the learners and the support of administration, a skilled facilitator “on the job.” Just as trainee schoolteachers need to complete a practicum experience, often observing a classroom teacher in action before participating themselves in the teaching process, online facilitators can learn too by observation and ongoing dialogue. As the importance of facilitation skills becomes increasingly recognized, such an “apprenticeship” model might become the norm. Through observing and then discussing with the facilitator why s/he did X, said Y and chose to do Z, a trainee facilitator can begin to build a practice framework of her/his own. This process of observing offers a ‘deep learning’ opportunity whereby the observer does not have the duties of being either a facilitator or a learner of the course content. An observer’s duties are to reflect on the interactions, discuss them with the facilitator, consider how s/he might have interacted as a facilitator and, if asked, to offer some of her/his own knowledge to the ongoing and developing course knowledge base.

Such observation and dialogue also provides an opportunity for a course facilitator to reflect on her/his own practice. This can be especially helpful if difficult moments occur, as they often do. Most adult online learners are skilled consumers who are expecting to “get value for money.” They are expecting and will demand quality instructional design and facilitation. Most conflicts that arise during the first four weeks of a 12 week course are related to uncertain expectations regarding assignments. In our experience, some conflicts can be dealt with proactively if the course facilitators had had their facilitation observed. As facilitator/observer, we were able to smooth several learner anxieties

through promising that we would immediately review the course materials and clarify assignment expectations. Which we did! Again from a post-modern framework, what had appeared “clear” to us in the course content, proved “unclear” to a majority of learners and we needed to respond quickly.

Another way of learning online facilitation skills would be to co-facilitate. Ideally, facilitators new to the online environment should co-facilitate with someone more experienced in the process. The online facilitator should be proficient in the content of the course. In this way their familiarity and comfort level with the content allows them to focus on the process of the facilitation. How best to respond to different postings? How best to “smooth” the journey through the course content and its assimilation by the learners? Co-facilitation, being similar to some team-teaching, demands a frequent level of interaction between facilitators but the rewards to both, and to the learners, can be great. Feedback from co-facilitation experiences both as learners and through co-facilitation exercises indicate that the learners enjoy the benefits of two facilitators’ thoughts and experiences. The cliché “two heads are better one” proves to be true! In terms of a postmodern framework, co-facilitation again shows the benefits to all of different perspectives on similar issues and topics arising from course content and dialogue. This modeling can free up learners to be more open with their own different perspectives, which in turn facilitates more critical thinking and genuine dialogue and even debate. On a practical level, co-facilitation can offer learners the benefits of ongoing facilitation in the event of one facilitator being unable to meet facilitation duties due to unforeseen circumstances, such as sickness.

Contextualizing

Online facilitators need to be aware of the broader program of study of which their course is a part. Is the course being facilitated one of several required courses in a degree or certificate program? Or is it a “stand-alone” course? An elective? If possible, if the course is one of two, or more, being taken by learners at the same time, the timing of major assignments should be co-coordinated to minimize learner stress and facilitate deeper learning of course content in both/all courses. If learners feel they have to ‘produce’ all the time, the fun of depth learning succumbs to the pressure of breadth and shallowness. Many adults wish to take online courses to devote some genuine ‘time’ to their deeper learning in a time-strapped world of work and personal demands. Online facilitators need to ensure they offer learners this opportunity.

Online facilitators also need to know whether the learners are part of a cohort who know each other already (either through face to face residencies or other online courses). Sometimes, a richly-bonded cohort or team can be quite intimidating to an online facilitator and any new classmates. The cohort or team already has its own dynamics. If the course admits new other learners, skilled facilitation is needed to smooth their entry so a new learning community can develop.

Facilitators need to remember that in any learning situation, they are “paid content-expert guides” along the learner’s journey. The importance of this privilege should not be overlooked. Even though a facilitator may no longer be acting as the clichéd “sage on the stage,” a savvy, consumer-driven learner will still expect a high degree of competence and expertise in the course content. If one is learning how to ski, one expects the instructor to be a skilled skier AND a patient, encouraging teacher! The sage may have become the guide but s/he still better know the content thoroughly.

Complaints procedures

Taking a proactive approach to complaints helps create a positive learning environment. A facilitator who clearly outlines a procedure for online etiquette, queries, confusions and complaints in the first week following general introductions will probably find the number of crises will drop dramatically. This is common practice in many non-traditional learning forums such as therapeutic groups and business training sessions. It can be seen as similar to the “safety features and emergency procedures” talk before any commercial air flight – repetitive, but essential just in case.....

By recognizing that in the postmodern world of multiple perspectives some perspectives will be conflicting, a facilitator is simultaneously acknowledging this process and giving a direction for dealing with it. For example, facilitators may think their course design is “totally clear” or that their use of humor during the beginning phases of a course is ‘fine’ and be oblivious to learner dismay or shock. Outlining a staged complaint procedure with first contact to the facilitator via email or discussion group keeps the facilitator ‘in the loop’. Facilitators need to promise to take any issues seriously and deal with them promptly. It should be stated that if a learner is not satisfied with the solution proposed by the facilitator, then s/he should contact the program chair or administrator. It has been our experience that adult learners, as savvy consumers, have few hesitations in complaining to an administrator with early frustrations about courses and facilitators. They will go to the program chair or administrator with complaints anyway. By creating a protocol that ensured the facilitator was the first stop in the complaint procedure, many issues were resolved at that level. Issues that were raised immediately in several courses we have taken could have been resolved more quickly and openly using this process. In the course we facilitated and observed such issues did arise, as they seem to in all courses. In this latter experience the issues primarily had to do with course content and timing of assignments. Dealing with them promptly through discussion with each other as facilitator and observer, quickly reduced learner tension and stress and allowed the learning community to develop.

Signposts

Using multiple methods of communication will help a facilitator keep on top of student participation in the course. ‘Signpost’ messages can be e-mailed to every learner at the beginning of each week or at paced critical junctures in the course content. These should

outline expectations, expectations of where in the course all learners should now be, what material should have been covered already, what is currently on the table, and what deadlines are coming up in the next two weeks. These signposts can also be posted in the 'Class Bulletins' Discussion Group. As many learners develop routine paths through a course, duplicating this type of content in several places and email ensures it is seen.

Using e-mail for these signposts provides a direct contact with all learners. This can be invaluable for reaching out to learners who may not, for whatever reason, have been participating in the online discussion groups. In our recent work together, one learner experienced several non-course related crises in her life and had not entered the class web site or the discussions in two weeks. When she got two direct signpost emails, she realized she was getting behind. Alternate arrangements were then made that enabled her to complete the course, learn the material, but not have to participate in all the group activities. Without these signposts, she may well have fallen too far behind in the first few weeks and have been unable to finish.

Assessment and evaluation

The metaphors for the instructor in the online environment may well have changed to reflect a more facilitative guidance role and process. Guide, director, learning companion, - all of these are used to describe the online facilitator. Yet assessment and evaluation still remain firmly in the territory of the facilitator. Yes, personal reflection by learners is encouraged. Yes, peer assessments of team members are encouraged. Yes, self-assessments can occur. However the final say over grades remains, in most courses, with the facilitator. In this sense the power of judgment and ultimately the learner's ability to enter into the "community of practice" of the profession to which the courses grant access, still remains firmly in the hand of the course facilitator.

What may have changed is that the summative grade a learner receives should **not** be a surprise if the formative feedback has been thoroughly done. Clear guidelines must be given throughout the course on how learners can continue to demonstrate, or better demonstrate their understanding of the course content and its application.

Thus formative assessment and evaluation must be thorough and timely. Individual feedback on assignments is one of the few ways a facilitator becomes personal to a learner. By commenting on assignments constructively and at length a facilitator encourages the learner to integrate the course material into the assignments, think about the broader applications of the material and extend critical thinking. Connecting with some learners through an extended email exchange can provide learners who need it with extra personal guidance. Occasionally a facilitator can suggest moving these personal discussions to the discussion group forum to enable other class members to participate in a constructivist, learner to learner model.

One of the most challenging types of feedback to the whole class should be done at the end of each assignment. After the assignments are read, commented on (extensively!),

graded and returned, a facilitator should attempt a synthetic analysis of the class's grasp on the subject. This can be done without reference to individuals, but should give the class an idea of their thinking as a whole. This type of formative feedback during a course provokes further critical thinking, encourages class members with less ability to persist and go further with their thinking and helps create a community of learning. This encourages reflexive thinking, which is a valuable part of adult learning.

The Prime Directive

Finally we would like to raise a point of discussion about the Prime Directive. As every 'Star Trek' fan knows no Starfleet personnel may interfere with the healthy development of alien life and culture¹. As each online team develops its own modes of interaction, its own 'culture', a facilitator must judge the benefit or danger of participating in a team's semi-private discussion threads. Is it better to get involved, to be very present in the team discussions, actively directing the learning? Or is there benefit to maintaining a distance and allowing the learners room to discuss, argue, reflect and learn from each other? When should a facilitator become active in a discussion, inevitably changing the direction of interaction?

In a recent course, the directions to one assignment were quite vague. In order to give adult learners at a graduate level the freedom to create an assignment format of their own choice, the course author deliberately left some aspects of the requirements open ended. (For example, if course instructions dictate a paper with a defined word count, all students will turn in a paper of more or less the 'correct' length. If no word count is specified, a student may entertain the possibility of submitting a video, web site or PowerPoint presentation to satisfy the requirements of this assignment.) This led to a great deal of debate amongst some learners around the precise nature of the requirements and expressions of frustration over vague directions. In such a situation, should the facilitator jump in to clarify requirements, or let the learning that is unfolding through the discussion take its own course? Would ending the discussion by answering the question pre-empt a learning opportunity? On the other hand, do the learners just want to get the assignment done and handed in? Can their frustration impede this process?

A facilitator could be tempted to contribute to such conversations. In this case, the discussion presented an opportunity to discuss the design of the course in the context of a course whose topic was instructional design. Team members have good experiences to share. Such discussions are visible through online discussion groups to not just the team

¹ The actual wording of the 'Prime Directive' or General Order One was never formally decreed in the television series or films, but a version has been posted in several books and on several Trek web sites. The Prime Directive is; "As the right of each sentient species to live in accordance with its normal cultural evolution is considered sacred, no Starfleet personnel may interfere with the healthy development of alien life and culture. Starfleet personnel may not violate this Prime Directive, even to save their lives and/or their ship, unless they are acting to right an earlier violation or an accidental contamination of said culture. This directive takes precedence over any and all other considerations, and carries with it the highest moral obligation." Originally published in Star Trek: The Next Generation First Year Sourcebook, published by FASA, ISBN 0-931787-38-6 (out of print).

members but also any facilitator and observer. This highlights the “lurking” or “potentially always-under-observation” nature of the online environment. What is posted can be viewed by all with access to that discussion. As learners, we had wondered how many of the postings the facilitator(s) actually read. How were postings and discussions being assessed by the facilitator(s)? If a facilitator posts to such discussion, team members become more aware that their team process and discussion has in fact been continually observed.

However it is this “public” nature of online learning, whereby any facilitator/observer clearly has open access to team conversations that distinguishes online learning from the face-to-face classroom. In well-functioning teams, the prime directive non-interventionist solution to the above dilemma is self-evident: why intervene if one believes the team is on-track for solving its own teamwork challenges? In the example above the learners concluded that working as a team to create their own parameters had been the most important part of the course!

However, this kind of open access can allow the facilitator to intervene if it appears necessary, such as when the team seems to have reached an impasse that is preventing them from completing an assignment. Trial and error may be the only way of knowing when to abide by the Prime Directive or to be interventionist.

The future of facilitation

So far most online facilitation occurs through the written word in course content, discussion groups, written assessments and e-mail. However, as broadband becomes more prevalent for a majority of online learners and courses begin to use far more multi-media for the dissemination of course content, how might facilitation change? Facilitators will need to refine their skills to include audio and/or video feedback. Multi-media will broaden the range and depth of assignments and allow alternative, non-written submissions. Keyboard voices will become multi-media voices.

Conclusions

Facilitation requires more than a thorough knowledge of the course’s subject matter and a willingness to guide learners through the material in an online medium. A facilitator must also understand the ‘situated-ness’ of the learner and understand the phenomenology of learner experience and perspectives. With a sensitivity to nuance and interpersonal relationships and a sympathetic approach to learner concerns, a facilitator can smooth the way.

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Tammy Dewar - Gypsy Scholars¹

Tammy designs online courses and facilitates online for the University of Calgary and Royal Roads University in the Master of Arts in Leadership and Training program and the Master of Arts in Distributed Learning.

I started my educational career teaching high school English in small town Alberta in the early 80's. I burned out after 2 years at the tender age of 26, and thought that I might be doomed to bartending for the rest of my life (having made my living quite successfully and happily for many years as a bartender while putting myself through university). I am happy to say that this challenging life event led to a productive "time-out", and my transition to a career in adult and distance education has been meaningful.

I have not really had a full-time job since I left teaching, however. I've had short contracts that were full-time, but for well over 15 years I have been flying from organization to organization (sometimes quite literally!), landing here and there, trying to design and/or facilitate meaningful learning for the short time I'm there. When people ask me what I do or for whom I work, I often stare blankly at them because to explain my work life is messy and would take too long than the expected 60-second cocktail party sound bite. When Peter Norman, a colleague of mine at Royal Roads University, called the group of us teaching in the Master of Arts in Leadership and Training (MALT) program gypsy scholars, I felt that at last some language captured my experience as a part-time educator. As Hester Hedges says in her poem,

*Square pegs in round holes
yet ready for what life unfolds
we know what the future holds
for the Gypsies
it is the gift for precious few
but the Gypsies know,
Move on, that's what the Gypsies will do.*

Many of us who facilitate online are indeed "square pegs" in round holes (or perhaps it's actually we are round pegs in "square" institutions!), and I think we know that eventually we will move on. While I've not seen any worldwide quantitative data about the characteristics of online educators, I know that at the institutions I'm familiar with in western Canada, the vast majority are gypsies, or associate faculty, or sessional instructors, or part-time faculty, or whatever language that particular institution uses. So what does this mean for us?

For me, and I would imagine for many of the contributors in this book, it creates highly paradoxical tensions and expectations between creating community (which most of us believe is the key to meaningful online learning) and looking after oneself. "You'll never

¹ I would like to thank a colleague of mine, Peter Norman, for his "naming" of the hundreds (perhaps thousands) of educators who don't have a full time position with any educational institution.

make money teaching online” or “Teaching online takes up all of my emotional energy” are sentiments expressed, sometimes in jest and sometimes quite seriously. Many of the contributors of this book (as of August 2003) are no longer teaching online.

There is a growing restlessness among gypsy scholars who teach online as we share our frustrations, joys, and concerns, usually outside of any formal institutional support, and make decisions to stop teaching online. The gypsy metaphor becomes more meaningful. As Károly Bari says, “Gypsies, with their uniquely free lifestyle, their authentic traditions and folkways, their refusal to accept society’s harness, always had an air of mystery about them. Their communities, closed and mistrustful because of constant persecution, remained completely unknown to the outside world.” I’m not sure that we gypsy scholars are under constant persecution, but I know that we are certainly marginalized, and I know we’re unknown to the outside world. Unless you have taught online, you have no idea how seductive and consuming it can be.

I remember reading an article called “The 24-Hour Professor” a year ago, [<http://chronicle.com/free/v48/i38/38a03101.htm>] which resonated very deeply for me and, at the same time, disturbed me a great deal. In the article, a number of online educators talk about their 24/7 online presence in glowing terms, citing the flexibility of integrating work and personal life into one’s own schedule. I was one of those enthusiastic early adopters who said the same things. But a few more cautious educators are also quoted in the article. As Kathleen Kelm says, “It’s an invasion of personal time, and it presses the bigger issue -- which is, to what level are we allowed to be private citizens?”

Indeed. While “personal boundaries” has been a concept often discussed in personal development or counseling settings for many years, I have found myself saying more and more these last couple of years, “we need to create some boundaries about what we do as online facilitators.” While I used to be very proud of the fact that I turned around emails from learners in a matter of hours (sometimes even minutes!), I am now starting to wonder what message my behavior is sending. I realize that speedy feedback is absolutely essential for creating community and facilitating learning for mid career learners. Can I be an effective online educator and still have a life?

The only answer is yes and I’ve found my solution in taking complete breaks from teaching online (I haven’t taught a course online for a full year now after almost 6 years of full time online teaching.), and experimenting with saying “no” or at least “give me a day or so”. I do not need to be driven by learner needs, as they are endless. It’s like trying to have an email inbox that is empty. The more I have experimented with saying no to how much time I’m available for learners (and this includes f2f instruction as well), the more surprised I’ve been and the more I’ve had to alter some of my mental models about what constitutes good facilitation. My adult learners appreciate and respect the boundaries I’ve set. They also tell me that they feel I’m there for them and supporting them. The only thing we need to do ... is tell them what those boundaries are. This is very simple stuff in theory, but extremely difficult in practice, especially when we may not be feeling entirely confident about our effectiveness as educators.

My observations are true for any educator, maybe even especially those in full time tenured positions ... with the exception of one very important reality. If we need to leave our jobs because we've let ourselves burn out, there is no institutional support or sick leave to bail us out. Gypsy scholars are on their own. We owe it to ourselves to be clear about the role online teaching will have in our lives ... because the institutions for which we teach will not necessarily be there to pick up the pieces.

Experiencing the Joys of Online Facilitation

Anne Perodeau - A Two-by-Four to the Heart

Ann Perodeau, M.A., is an online instructor with Royal Roads University and the University of Calgary.

There are times when life hits you with a glorious, joyful "two by four" - a smack between the eyes to both head and heart. My most recent experience in online instruction came with two such hard-hitting lessons. The first lesson was a surprise discovery in self directed learning and building community; the second was the impact of offering meaningful, values-based assignments.

Some historical background is necessary. I came to this particular online course, Communicating Electronically, through two personal frailties, an insatiable curiosity and the inability to decline requests framed as opportunities to help. Blindsided by these, I found myself developing and delivering an online course³ for which I had very little technical knowledge. With the diligent assistance of the department, who were able to find an excellent text, and careful attention to the design, it all looked doable in theory. There was no avoiding, however, the reality that I was not an expert in this subject area and would be of very little assistance to my learners as a resource.

This impacted community building so powerfully, that well before the end of the course, I would find myself reading the newsgroup postings with profound amazement. In response to my honest disclosure that I would support their learning in whatever way I could, but that the finer technical aspects were beyond my capability, they became very resourceful and mutually supportive.

Each individual learner became tenacious in attempting to navigate and become conversant with newsgroups, chat rooms, online research, website development basics and even "blogs". When truly stuck, they would ask for help and it was always immediately forthcoming from one or more people in the group who had jumped that particular hurdle before them. There was a joyous sharing of resources and emotional as well as technical support. Humour blossomed. Individual leadership and concern for the community flowered as well.

For example, early in the course, a required activity was to use the site (WebCT) chat room to experience synchronous electronic communication and report on the experience. The group established the appointed time and date themselves. As often happens, not everyone was able to log on at the appointed time. Those present experienced frustration with several of the limitations of chat rooms and reported on that in the discussion forum. I was delighted to note their framing and response to the

³ Management Certificates, Faculty of Continuing Education, The University of Calgary

experience. Rather than react, "we did that - don't like it - time to move on", they determined to find a process that would make chat room communication more effective for them and booked several other times for chat throughout the remainder of the course.

The other heart-warming part of their community building was that they worked authentically at being inclusive. When someone was unavailable for a given date, they would simply ask, "when is the best time for you?", book a second time, and commit to some of the group being online at one or both times. All of these ideas and actions were initiated from the group itself without prompting. Their inclusiveness and mutual support extended to the excitement of sharing resources, and online "finds" that they thought might be of particular use in someone's project or work.

That was the first "two-by-four": how honesty and the nature of the circumstances served to promote self-directed learning and community. The second joyful *whack* to the head and heart came from mixed motives and a deliberate strategy. I was sufficiently selfish to want to avoid being inundated with dry assignments burrowing to a level of technical detail that would produce pain and cause my undivided, enthusiastic attention to wither. Perhaps because there was an ethics component in this course and I was also teaching an organizational ethics course concurrently, I devised a strategy that I hoped would enable them to integrate the course concepts, while producing a product that would provide motivation for us all.

The final two-part assignment was to "choose a topic to research online that involves some future change for the better through Communicating Electronically". The first part asked for their experiences and learning from engaging in the online research for the project. The second part consisted of the project itself. A downloadable attachment provided further details, below:

Choose a topic to research online that involves some future change for the better through Communicating Electronically.

This is an opportunity to pull together all or some of the sections of the course. Choose an area that interests you - perhaps related to your work, hobbies or a social concern - and design a PLAN for a website that would include several of the components that we have been studying. You may actually develop a website if you have the time and inclination. However, this is an ambitious undertaking.

It is sufficient for the purposes of this course that you do what you can within reason to acquaint yourself with the nature of website development and focus your primary attention on using your knowledge of communicating online to apply to your topic choice. This will have

something (however broadly) to do with some future change for the better through communicating electronically. Hence the idea that the change initiative itself would be, if it were "real" presented as a website or other electronic medium.

For this project, you will need to:

- Identify what it is you want to achieve and why
- Have a site title and statement of purpose
- Include email and a newsgroup in your plan

- Describe the purposes of the communication tools you use, how you plan to integrate them into the website (real or imagined) and your considerations for the users.

- Include some specific discussion of the ethics of this project as you see them.

Each learner chose an area of strong personal or professional interest. Some developed true websites. Most used WORD with such skill that the visual impact was very similar to "the real thing". The topics themselves included proposed websites for a wide variety of projects. As they submitted their assignments, most learners also posted them to the bulletin board, for their peers to view. This further strengthened the community as the well-deserved appreciative feedback and excitement poured in, contributing to ending the course on a genuine "high", generated by the community itself. A few learners chose a more traditional, academic route, and did not share their projects. The projects that did follow the spirit and format of the assignment are briefly described below:

"Disasters in our Village" A global site for disaster relief: news, newsgroup, relief efforts/fundraising and registering survivors for connecting with their families.

"Reporting Child Abuse" - an educational and resource site with live links to the police service and other agencies active in this area.

"Maintenance Enforcement Information": an interactive site to provide information and payment records and services for child support, including a "deadbeat" search function.

"Communicability: 'YES WE CAN'": a user-friendly meeting place on-line for the disabled, and their caregivers, and their family and friends. It includes resource links, news, donations, a library of useful articles, profiles of ordinary and famous people "demonstrating the potential for surmounting one's limitations".

"Alberta Sportfishing": All you need to know to fish in Alberta, with photos, links to regulatory and activity sites, fishing laws and ethics and environmental considerations.

"Virtual Trade Shows": Allows small business to connect to buyers through the site which manages registration, display, email contact, lectures, media access, and more.

"Funeral Info.ca": a non-biased information tool for those seeking information about the funeral industry". Also included on the site: listings of service providers, library, gift store, FAQ's, services for churches, resources, search engine and "consumer watch" for unethical practices.

"Canadian Gamer": a virtual international community for board game fans with the purpose of strengthening the gaming hobby and bringing together those individuals who share gaming as their passion.

"One World": found at <http://www.geocities.com/tooraj66/page5.html> and dedicated to "create an environment on the Internet through web portals and other electronic communication tools to allow cooperation of people from developing countries and developed nations to help each other in humanitarian efforts that focus on improving well being and physical and social conditions of people, especially children". At the time of writing, this site was posted on the web, complete with elegant design, links, logo, mailing address, sample conferences and a very realistic online conference registration form.

Without shame, I confess to being moved to tears with many of these projects. They were impressive in the expressed values and evidence of caring and compassion of each learner. They were creative. Many of the projects were worthy of being implemented. No, I'll go farther; they *cried out* to be implemented. The evidence of engagement in the learning and the levels of planning, research and refinement of details went well beyond my expectations. As an instructor, this is a dream realized: to be presented with meaningful, top quality work, for which it is a pleasure to give high marks and to be inspired and uplifted I the process.

As a human being, living in the greater community, it is an honour to be associated with these learners and have a small, instigator role in this kind of blossoming. It just doesn't get any better than this.

Elizabeth Childs: Teaching Online: A Sure-fire Way to Procrastinate While Doing Your PhD

Elizabeth teaches in a number of distance formats for the University of Calgary, Simon Fraser University and Royal Roads University.

I had a plan, a supervisor and a topic. My PhD from the outset was looking like a straightforward research project leaving me guilt free as I vacationed my way around Vancouver Island prior to starting my first year as a PhD student. As we drove down the Malahat into Victoria, an innocent call came in asking if I would like to teach a course in the Master's program via distance at the University of Calgary. I responded an enthusiastic "yes" to such an exciting opportunity.

Given that at this point in my consulting career I had yet to run across the need to build any online courseware and was skeptical of its value and complexity, the opportunity to teach via audio conference seemed like an interesting and straightforward way to supplement my PhD experience. Little did I know that this initial request would turn into six years of teaching in what was an audio conference setting to what is now a BlackBoard driven, Elluminate supported asynchronous and synchronous learning environment. It would also lead to an expanding of my knowledge and skills into the distributed learning realm and would end up being a key component of my business. It would lead to developing online courseware and e-learning strategies for both public and private sector clients and facilitating an e-learning institute for Simon Fraser University. It would afford the opportunity to develop and teach in the Master's of Arts in Distributed Learning at Royal Roads University and work with companies across Canada faced with the challenging decisions of online courseware and training. But first back to the story.....

During my audio conference début I had my first experience with what many refer to in the literature as "the social connection". Despite my telephone ramblings and perhaps somewhat scattered approach, there was a connection forged with the learners taking the course and I found myself following up with them and them with me, after the course was over with items they might find useful in their setting. This initial experience sparked an interest to explore this delivery medium further and coupled with a certain naiveté about the technology, a willingness to act as the "pilot" faculty for WebCT, Centra and other emerging distance technologies. Through these experiences, the patience of my students and the technical support at U of C, we learned a variety of techniques and strategies in our efforts to make the technology transparent to the learning and laughed frequently in the process.

It was through my experience piloting Centra that I really began to appreciate the value of distributed learning technologies for bridging the distance and providing access to something people in large urban centres take for granted. We worked with a group in Barrhead, Alberta to teach a course in Instructional Design with faculty who were stretched across Canada. At one point, the principle in Barrhead was in Guatemala on

vacation. He paid the owner of the Internet café to download the Centra client on their machine so that he could participate in the class: his audio was as clear as if I was speaking to him in the same room.

As I continue to teach via distance at the University of Calgary, I am continually amazed at how this connection to learners serves to bring the realities of the large world in which we live in a little bit closer to home. Many of my students check in from a variety of locations ranging within the city limits to as far away as Nunavut, Halifax, 100 Mile House, Guatemala and UAE to name a few. I myself have called or dialled in from places as remote as Buckhorn and Cranberry Lake, Ontario while home visiting family, and multiple hotel rooms across North America while on the road for business.

The flexibility for both learner and facilitator that distributed learning technologies provide grants a certain freedom to the process of learning and teaching. It also fosters a new and very real appreciation for the “learn anywhere, anytime” jingle touted by e-learning enthusiasts. In my opinion, it is this flexibility over time and place that is one of the single most valuable features of distributed learning. From the travelling businesswo/man to the teacher in a urban or remote locations, I have seen distributed learning technologies *and* a learner centred course span the isolation cultivated by location and schedules to create a dynamic and engaging learning experience.

For me, the magnitude and impact of the inherent flexibility of time and place that distributed learning technologies afford as well as the social connection that can be created if both parties are willing was poignantly realized when I acted as a co-supervisor for an M.Ed. thesis of one of my initial University of Calgary students. This student started the Master’s program with my audio conference debut, completed the coursework and successfully defended the thesis without us meeting face-to-face. Going on to co-design, build and teach with this student in a new iteration (read: platform change) was a wonderful experience. Since then I have supervised many other students through their Master’s via distance, some of whom I have had the privilege of meeting face-to-face at their defence and others that I have worked with from afar. In each instance, it has been a joy to have the experience of getting to know both the person and their writing on a subject near to their hearts.

Now, in case you are beginning to get the impression that there have been no down sides or disasters in my experience or that technology always runs smoothly, let me assure you that is not the case. There has been many a frustrating night when the synchronous tools let me down and many a frustrated learner emailing about the learning platform or a flaky Internet connection. Piles of email, assignments to read and review and the social side of learning to cultivate and respond to all added up to a wonderful procrastination tool on my PhD journey. However, that said, without these experiences and many others not mentioned, I would not be able to help the clients that I work with today. I would also not be writing my dissertation on a topic that has so determinedly woven its way into my life over the past six years.

My enthusiastic “yes” to the phone call driving down the Malahat has serendipitously provided me with the opportunity to work with a wide variety of people in all sectors on how to design, develop, build and facilitate online courses. A deep appreciation for these experiences and the realities and challenges of the various settings coupled with a chance meeting with a new professor at the University of Calgary resulted in a honing in of my PhD topic. Consequently I am now able to bring to bear my experience and lessons learned from the past six years onto a research question that has a very practical application; how do you prepare teachers to build and teach online? And on that note I must get back to analyzing my data and writing up this exciting research so that people who are doing this work and those of you who are considering this work can benefit from the research findings and the experience of teachers who are online educators.

One last thought before I get back to work. Why do I continue to teach online and work with others who are attempting to incorporate online learning and education into their setting? It comes from a deep seated belief that there are a variety of ways to teach and to learn; no one is better than another but rather when used in multiple combinations they have the capability to reach a wide array of people at all locations, stages and places in their life whatever their motivation to learn may be. Being a part of this is an exciting and rewarding experience.

To all my students who have joined me on my adventure into online learning, thank you!

Diversity in Online Environments

Cathy Bray - Coming out in bites and pieces: self-identification online

Cathy Bray, Ph.D., has facilitated online for RRU in the MALT program since 2001 and also works online as a faculty member for Athabasca University in Alberta.

As a feminist educator, I adhere to the tenet “the personal is political”. For me, this means that I do not obscure my personal identity – I judiciously make my values, interests, politics, capacities, heritage and preferences known, using this knowledge as a teaching/learning tool. I also encourage the learners who I work with online to do the same.

Without venturing into the enormous discussion of why it’s important to be yourself as a teacher, I will summarize by saying that personalizing my teaching allows me: to offer pertinent and interesting examples; to make myself accessible in both group and one-on-one environments; and to be more authentic and honest. If I am interesting, accessible and honest, I am more able to frame the connections between (my)self and others. This self/other connection is the cornerstone of political relationships (relationships that can empower or dis-empower), including teaching.

One aspect of making the personal political and the political personal - for me as a gender critic - is “coming out” (indicating my lesbian identity). I have tried various ways of doing this in the research methods, adult learning and women’s studies courses I teach online: I’ve announced my family status (e.g. discussing “my partner Annette” in introductory remarks); I’ve made judicious use of the word “we” in commentary on homosexuality, and I’ve come out directly by saying “as a lesbian” in pertinent discussions. Such discussions arise, for instance, when talk of the ethics of inclusion of vulnerable persons in ones research arise. I believe it is dishonourable, for example, to *not* come out (in my research methods course) when I discuss an often-cited unethical researcher who surreptitiously infiltrated a gay men’s meeting place. Similarly, when a learner comes out online, I too come out in response, often supporting and sometimes countering the learner’s arguments about gay issues.

Prior to coming out in a face-to-face learning environment, I have been able to gauge the readiness of learners through assessment of both verbal and nonverbal cues. In the non-virtual environment I have also been able to respond to both types of cues after I come out. However, in the online environment, silence (the only nonverbal cue used with any frequency without accompanying text ☺) can mean so many different things – absence, lurking, disdainful presence, disregard, awkward uncertain ignorance, or supportive quiet accompaniment. Assumptions about the meaning of silence arise online, and these assumptions are often mistaken.

Mistaken assumptions affect more than judgements about sexuality and sexual preference, of course: they pertain to *all* aspects of self-identity. Online discourse often leads to false impressions about class, race, ethnicity, disability, age and other important features of oneself. When working online, people with disabilities are faced with the choice to come out as “differently-abled”; First Nations people must often overcome assumptions that they are white; young or old people often reiterate their youth or their age; sometimes women or men feel they must assert their gender, etc. All folks who do not fit the straight white middle-class, expected-aged, able-bodied standard are faced with the choice of either ignoring potentially inaccurate assumptions about themselves (due to lack of visual cues), or naming their “difference”.

This forced choice faced by people from marginalized groups in the online environment can be mitigated or even overcome in two ways. First, a teacher/facilitator can instigate careful introductory discussions that ask all online course participants to personally and specifically identify themselves. For instance, white able-bodied middle-aged teachers can “come out” as white, able-bodied, middle aged etc. – and recognise their social privilege. “Coming out” as a straight teacher (or as “normal” in other ways) highlights the fact that “normal” ethnicity, sexuality, physical ability etc. should not be assumed. If a teacher comes out, this also invites all learners, whether “normal” or not, to come out. Such shared discussion puts everyone on a more equal footing, while still allowing participants the choice of what to say about oneself.

Secondly, a teacher who wants to do more than merely equalize the situation can direct some of his or her introductory remarks to the politics of the online classroom. S/he can, for instance, point out: the effects of silence on both dominant and marginalized participants; the mistaken assumptions that are often made due to silence; and the harms that arise because of mistaken assumptions. Online teachers can stress that learners benefit from honest, authentic self-disclosure about power and privilege. Teachers can emphasize the social power that some groups have over others. They can encourage all learners and teachers to recognize that the personal is political, and that overt efforts to end unfair discrimination are necessary in our social institutions. Such overt critique of power relationships in the online classroom can help create political change.

Tanis Doe - Distance Questions, Instant Answers?

Tanis Doe, Ph.D., teaches online in the MALT program at Royal Roads University.

“I’m having a problem, could you please phone me at

This was the beginning of a long and fruitful exchange between a Masters learner and me. As the instructor of a research methods course at Royal Roads University in Victoria I had told the learners to feel free to contact me through email as I check it obsessively. But I had not given instructions on how to reach me by phone, for good reason. My response to this learner was as follows:

“I could phone you through a relay service, but as I am Deaf it will still be text based conversation, do you want to try Instant Messaging?”

The learner had not realized that I didn’t hear on the phone and was really hoping for some immediate answers to questions. I did phone through a relay service where the operator types to me what the other person is saying. I explained how Instant Messaging (IM) worked and set the learner up with a screen name. Within ten minutes we were on line and talking, (er, technically typing). The immediate discussion was about how to write a proposal for a research question that was both manageable and acceptable to the employer/sponsor. This was a common question for the adult learners who were pursuing a Masters of Arts in Leadership and Training. Several learners had not conducted research before and because of the distance format that was some anxiety around submitting drafts.

There are two most popular forms of IM and many forms of SMS (short messaging service). Instant messages can be used through AOL <http://www.aim.com/> (without being an AOL member) and it is free (yes, free, no costs involved) or through MSN. <http://messenger.msn.com/>. There is also a less popular Canadian version by Sympatico <http://im.sympatico.ca/>. To use instant messaging, you need to be on line already- either through a network or phone line and then with software or applets you communicate directly with the other users. (I have been known to have as many as 4 windows open and going at the same time).

SMS is short messaging service that is available on many cell phones and pagers. They all operate on the same basis of two-way real time delivery of messages between the users. They are usually limited to two sentences hence the name Short Messaging Service. You can type to each other in full words or short cuts. Can you tell me where to find the RRU style guide? Or R U OK? CU L8R ☺.

Instant Messaging means you are talking to each other like being on a phone. You can even type at the same time as each other. Western industrial society has become more accepting of email now, as a regular form of communication and it makes text messaging more palatable for even the neophyte. Some people may be able to conceptualize IM as a

private form of a chat room, and there are options to allow conversations among more than two parties if you so choose.

While email provides a chance to edit, think through and even append messages, it is also less spontaneous in both its sending and receiving. IM and SMS provide a more impulsive form of messaging. There is such a qualitative difference between email and IM. Synchronicity is primary. There are also little add-ons like graphic smilies, colours and fonts to choose to emphasize words. It really provides an alternative to the more flat and asynchronous email option.

As a solution to the original problem, IM was very effective. The learner was fine after discussing the course time line and confirming the assignment requirements, but the anxiety was relieved by the instant nature of the communication. We agreed to use IM to talk to each other when email wasn't satisfying the need for speed. This was the beginning of a very efficient on-line teaching relationship.

This learner wasn't the first and won't be the last to want immediate communication. Several learners used it after I made a posting to the discussion board that explained my deafness and how I accommodate it through technology. Three other learners from a previous year's masters program also used this system. As the supervisor for their major projects we spoke daily sometimes three times a day. These were mostly short conversations but sometimes critical ones about interpreting data, using software or complying with ethics policies. The communication allowed the learners and I to communicate outside of email and outside of telephones- for free. Perhaps surprisingly the use of IM did not reduce our communication on email. It seemed to increase it but also increased the effectiveness of email because we could refer to the short chats we had and share an understanding of what was expected in the email. Even though I use the IM process in part because I am Deaf, there is a growing population who has found text messaging to be a fast and private way to exchange messages (instead of or in addition to cell phones and email).

One thing you may have noticed, (or perhaps you did not) is that to this point you do not know my gender, or the gender of the learners involved. This is one of the other aspects of on line teaching that can be problematic. Does it matter to you if I am female or male? Does it matter what gender the learners were? Does it matter at all? Another thing you would not know from this article and the learners cannot tell from my introduction is that I have other disabilities. You also do not know my ethnicity. Learners' racial and facial features are masked by teaching on line.

When I teach on line the learners do not see the wheelchair that I use, and do not realize I communicate in sign language with other learners when I teach on campus. The same masking of race and gender applies also to disability. The broader question of difference on line needs to be added to our discussion. Do on-line interactions increase, decrease or moderate stereotypes? Do on-line identities reflect cultural biases and individual defenses? Are we safe(r) on-line? On line I can choose when and how to disclose my disabilities and so can the learners. I have found that learners are hesitant to speak of their

disabilities- physical, emotional or learning- until I have disclosed my disability and then there is an opening to discuss “issues”. Perhaps the opportunity for sharing experiences releases them from the normal confines of stigma. But at the same time, the use of online communication masks the important visual messages about confidence, questioning and need. Gender may be important to serving the needs of learners, age and ethnicity may be relevant to their learning styles. Although age, gender and race should not be eliminated from consideration, our personal opinions or biases may be less implicated if we do not know (but could try to guess) these characteristics. Should not every learner be treated as an individual? Or does individuality include and necessitate disclosure of germane identity issues?

From a previous course related to learning, learners were aware of, and sensitive to, their learning needs, and the needs of others. Because of this, text based communication was of limited support to auditory learners, or learners who need to sit face to face and communicate non-verbally. The nature of on-line learning as text-based is limited only by cost and technical capabilities. Over wide band networks, anywhere in the world, we can exchange voice communication, photographs, graphics and even real time video. But these were not offered as part of the on-line course through Royal Roads University. Learners had to post their messages or email and read through the comments made by peers and instructors. This certainly put some learners at a disadvantage if their first language was not English, if they were not visual learners and if perhaps the computer was alienating to them.

We have to acknowledge that even high speed internet access does not solve all the social inequalities that we have constructed in our lives. Throwing technology at problems can be helpful, but the fundamental problems are political and economic and rooted in human nature. A tool is not the task, and often the invisible, social, non-physical aspects of a technological regime make all the difference.

When teachers are on line with learners they may not even know that their learners are using Braille output, speech synthesizers or specialized keyboards for data entry. Unless the learner discloses the disability, difference, or learning style or the instructor met the person physically (rather than virtually) many of these characteristics are covert. For many people with disabilities, computers have enabled them to complete advanced education. As a Deaf instructor it has allowed me to teach many more learners than I might have with a sign language interpreter. Learners who have difficulty in a classroom setting, mothers with young children, people with jobs and a whole host of other people can benefit from distance education no matter where they physically or geographically are.

Perhaps the message of this article is not so much that instant messaging and email as a form of communication in course work is better than traditional classes but that the online nature introduces issues that need to be addressed differently. Ask yourself if the gender of your learners is important for you to know, their ethnicities, their disabilities. Could it be important to them to know your background? If the answer is yes, or even maybe, we need to develop a positive and non-intrusive way to inquire and to accommodate learning

needs and differences in style. I for one will continue to be open and disclose to my learners issues that I think they should understand to be effective in communicating with me. I believe that openness enables them to share with me what might otherwise be kept silent.

The distance request for help led to some virtually instant solutions. “I’m having a problem, could you please phone me at

Community Building Online

Alex Kuskis - Promoting Community in Asynchronous Online Courses

Alex Kuskis, MA, Med, PhD Candidate at OISE/University of Toronto teaches online in the MADL Program with Royal Roads University.

Fernback & Thompson (1995) define virtual community as: “social relationships forged in cyberspace through repeated contact within a specified boundary or place (e.g. a conference or chat line) that is symbolically delineated by topic of interest”. It is clear that such social relationships can benefit learning in asynchronous online courses, because, as Henschel (1996) affirms, learning is fundamentally social, and knowledge and expertise are a function of participation in communities of practice (COP’s). Furthermore, the constructivist underpinnings of virtual learning communities are underlined by Savery & Duffy (1995), who stress that: “Knowledge evolves through social negotiation and through the evaluation of the viability of individual understandings.”

There are numerous pedagogical benefits of community in online learning, including the following:

- Reduced attrition, because students support each other in a variety of ways.
- Reduced learner isolation, which has been a traditional weakness of distance education.
- Peer-assisted learning, in which students help solve each other’s learning problems and share ideas and experiences.
- Transformative learning, based on reflection and the interpretation of ideas, experiences and assumptions gained through prior learning and life experience, which gets shared.
- Dialogue as inquiry, through learner-to-learner interaction. Boga (no date) stresses that: “Dialogue ... carries a flow of meaning between participants. In a dialogue all participants are open to the idea of reconstructing their mental models.”
- Interdependence, which Covey (1989) defines as “the paradigm of **we** – **we** can do it; **we** can cooperate; **we** can combine our talents and abilities and create something greater together.” Interdependence is a higher order skill than independence, and on a maturity spectrum, there is a progression from dependence to independence to interdependence.
- Collaborative learning, in which students work individually, but share their knowledge with each other in mutually helpful discussions.
- Cooperative learning, in which students work together on intellectual tasks, such as projects or essays, which are then jointly submitted.

- Self-actualization, in Maslow’s sense, in which self-actualization, the highest of all human needs, can only occur through interaction with others and in the context of others, namely within a community.

But, how can community be achieved in a 12-week asynchronous online course? Communities of practice typically take much longer to form. Online community development is of course made easier in a cohort-based program like MADL, with its 3-weeks of residency at the beginning, that specifically emphasizes community formation. Still, each successive course has a different instructor, and possibly a subset of the full cohort’s students, as some enroll in elective courses. Therefore, every course represents a new social dynamic, with a new configuration of students and instructors and usually different collaborative teams. Therefore community cannot be taken for granted and must be re-established each and every time.

Community formation is an art rather than a science and there is no clear-cut formula for establishing community in online courses. An instructor has only two ways of influencing online community formation, first, through instructional design features, assuming that s/he has the freedom to influence the course design, and second, through facilitation techniques used during the delivery of the course itself.

In determining the instructional design features and facilitation techniques to use, I am presently guided by Tuckman’s (1965) Group Development Theory, which holds that face-to-face leaderless groups evolve through five stages: Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing, Adjourning (this fifth stage wasn’t added by Tuckman until 1977). Figure I describes these stages:

	<i>NAME</i>	<i>DESCRIPTION</i>
1	Forming	Members become oriented to each other & the task at hand. Dependency on the leader & testing of behaviour appear.
2	Storming	Members find themselves in conflict & its management becomes the focus. Antagonism & turmoil appear.
3	Norming	Rules of behaviour appropriate to the group, & necessary for the task are spelled out. Period of cohesion & cooperation appears.
4	Performing	Group works as a unit to achieve goals & accomplish the task. Solutions appear.
5	Adjourning	Termination of tasks & disengagement from relationships. Group disbands.

Figure I
Tuckman’s (1965, 1977) Group Development Theory

However, I differ with Palloff & Pratt (1999, p. 26), who accept Tuckman whole and without qualification, writing that: “Our work with online groups has shown us that these groups go through the same stages as face-to-face groups and communities, even if they do not work together face to face.”

The problem with applying Tuckman whole to online communities is that his theory is derived from studying mainly face-to-face leaderless therapy groups, which have wholly different goals and dynamics than instructor-facilitated online courses. Conflict or dissent, labeled by Tuckman as “Storming”, for example, is likely to be more prevalent in the kinds of face-to-face group therapy sessions that Tuckman was studying, than in online courses in which learners are, for the most part, governed by netiquette, institutional acceptable use policies (AUP’s) and are well-behaved and learning task-oriented. Still, disagreement is important in online academic discourse, is part of the learning process, and might be “necessary in order to achieve group cohesiveness and intimacy” (Palloff & Pratt, 1999: 27). Therefore, although instructors should be prepared for it, Storming cannot really be defined as a “stage” of online community development, like Tuckman’s other stages.

Social Scaffolding Provided by Instructional Design

Kim (no date) calls those features that can be built into an online site to help promote community “social scaffolding”. Such social scaffolding promotes learners becoming progressively more involved in the community, because we learn from the company we keep. The instructional design features that can be applied at each stage, Storming excluded, are as follows:

Forming

Forming is a critical stage at the start of the course, usually a function of the first 2 or 3 weeks, that provides a foundation for the learning and performing to come. Features that can be built into an online course to support community formation include:

- Defined Learning Objectives – Define the community’s purpose in terms of course learning objectives up front.
- Learner Profiles – Learning Management Systems such as WebCT have places where students can create personal homepages, defining their personal interests and backgrounds, sometimes accompanied by digital photos of themselves. These become important when students later form smaller learning teams.
- Spatial Metaphors - Use metaphors to define spaces for different kinds of learner-to-learner interactions. E.g. the “porch”, the “watercooler”, etc.
- Social Discussion Area – Provide an online “Coffee Shop” or “Pub”, a “Hanging out” area where discussion is mainly social and not course-related. Social discourse helps promote online community.
- Icebreakers – Any online course, like face-to-face courses, will start out with learners introducing themselves, stating their backgrounds and interests, and

why they're enrolled in this particular course. Students should be encouraged to include information about their personal, as well as professional interests. A good icebreaker exercise involves pairing off learners, having them interview each other via email, and then introduce each other to the rest of the group.

- Detailed Instructor Information – The instructor should have his or her own homepage, detailing background, professional interests, instructional philosophy, and including a picture.
- Defining Online “Office Hours” – These can be either synchronous or asynchronous. An instructor may choose to share Instant Messaging contact information (Microsoft Messenger or IRC) with students, enabling contact online in real time. However, students should be cautioned about when they can contact the instructor, so that this privilege does not become overly intrusive.
- Synchronous Chat Session – A synchronous chat session in real time can help students get to know each other and the instructor. This is difficult if the enrollment is high (over 20), or if students are distributed in many time zones.
- Employ Different Media – for different parts of the program: synchronous chat, asynchronous postings, email, external group work spaces such as CommunityZero.com.

Norming

Norming is governed at the macro level by the institution's Acceptable Use Policy (AUP), which defines the kinds of actions and behaviours that are permitted (just about anything that supports learning and research) and forbidden (any form of injury to people or damage to online systems). There should also be an established netiquette (network etiquette) policy at the course level, which defines the ways that learners should interact with each other for the benefit of everyone. It might be necessary to discuss netiquette with the learners, so that it is reinforced, early in a program or course, and when discussed early in a course, Norming happens more or less concurrently with Forming.

Performing

Performing, which in online courses has to do with learning by meeting course objectives and competencies, happens during the central 8 to 10 weeks of a 12-week course. It can be promoted through features such as:

- Sustained Dialogue as Inquiry
- Framework for Collaborative Learning – Requiring students to grapple with team roles, protocols for working in teams and mutual support and accountability.

- Established Smaller Project Teams – Students should be allowed to form their own project teams of 3 to 5, if time permits. If time does not permit this, they should be assigned to teams.
- Major Course Project – Should be a group project
- Multiple Ways for Students to Interact – Private asynchronous work space, synchronous chat rooms, within the LMS or outside of it. e.g. email, listservs, synchronous chat, free online group sites such as <http://www.communityzero.com> . Student project teams also sometimes choose to communicate through daisy chained group telephone calls in real time, making group decision-making more rapid.
- Shared Resources – An area for learners to share URL's, articles, titles and other kinds of course-related information.
- Mentoring and Peer-to-Peer Learning

Adjourning

Adjourning happens during the final week of a course, and a place should be provided for students to bid farewell, make final comments, and take leave of the learning community.

Online Facilitation Techniques to Support Community Formation

Most important, if the instructor's background has been one of teaching in the classroom, a new instructional mindset is needed, as Kimball (2001) relates:

From	To
Face-to-face is the best environment for learning & anything else is a compromise	Different kinds of environments can support high quality learning. What matters is how you use them.
Learning is what happens when teachers interact with students at a fixed time & place	Learning happens in an ongoing, boundaryless way & includes what learners do independently of teachers
Being people-oriented is incompatible with technology	Using distance learning technology in a people-oriented way is possible & desirable
When the learning process breaks down, blame the technology	When the learning process breaks down, evaluate the teaching strategies, not just the technical tools
Learning to manage distance learning is about learning how to use the technology	Learning to manage distance learning is about understanding more about the learning process

The following instructor facilitation techniques can be used to support community formation online:

- Keep in mind Tuckman's group formation stages – Forming, Norming, Performing, Adjourning – and adjust instructional techniques and presence accordingly. For example, the instructor will usually need to have a more active presence in courses during the early Forming and Norming stages and less of a presence during Performing.
- Although Storming is not usually an online community development stage, conflict between learners can happen and instructors need to be prepared for it if it does. When conflict between learners occurs, the instructor should intervene only to support resolution between the learners themselves. Imposed solutions should only be applied as a last resort.
- Model appropriate online communication style and presence.
- Be flexible and adjust to emerging course circumstances; flexibility is essential. Using a sailing versus motor boating metaphor, an online course can be likened to a sailboat moving towards a destination to windward, adjusting sails, direction, crew positioning, and tacking, all the while avoiding shoals and adverse currents, to get to the desired destination. An online instructor must guide his course like a sailor, rather than a motorboat driver, usual able to just directly point his craft towards his destination.
- Provide students assistance with course and time management, schedules, and time-based guideposts, for example what assignments are due and when. Provide CSM, “could, should, must” messages. Indicate what students should be doing at any particular time.
- Be aware of the concept of a “rolling present”, due to differences in learner's perceptions of what is current in the course (based on different log-on schedules; some students log on once a week, some 3 or 4 times a day).
- Provide regular “weaving” summaries of discussion threads, or, better yet, get students to do them.
- Post expansive and open-ended questions to direct online discussions.
- There were simple roles in old paradigm learning: teacher, student. Online learning communities support a diversity of roles for learners: tech support, mentors, media specialists, knowledge archivists, discussion thread summarizers, students as facilitators.

- Because online learning is process-oriented, much more feedback is needed to help learners adjust their participation and expectations. And the instructor needs regular feedback too, so that s/he can correct anything that isn't working.

Conclusion

An online course can be exciting and intellectually compelling for students and instructors alike. Recent learning theory suggests that learning communities provide many benefits. When the design and facilitation are conducive to community formation, students can become socially and intellectually engaged, so that “deep”, as opposed to “shallow” learning can take place. Realizing that online courses proceed through a number of phases can guide instructional design and course facilitation, which are the only two ways by which an instructor can promote online community formation in asynchronous courses.

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Marilyn Hamilton - Exploring Qualities of Online Connectedness

Marilyn Hamilton, Ph.D. teaches online in the MALT Program at Royal Roads University.

How do mental models of connectedness impact an online community?

Mental models of connectedness for online communities are complex and personal. In 1997, I researched a seven-month global online community, the “Berkana Online Community of Conversations” (BCC – which was co-created by co-authors Meg Wheatley and Myron Kellner-Rogers, et al), in the contexts of learning and leadership in a self-organizing system.

I observed that that most of the connections in BCC happened at the bottom (most basic connections, like greetings) and top end (most advanced level of holistic communication) of the four developmental scales which were used to map the conversation. This appeared to occur because of:

- the demographics of the group (highly educated consultants, skewing the connections to an advanced intellectual exchange); and
- the email medium (which precluded non-written, less complex verbal connections).

Thus many participants lamented often about the absence of non-verbal cues, and the “skinny medium”. The lack of face-to-face contact seemed to reinforce their longing for stories, descriptions, pictures, phone calls and meetings to round out the narrow experience of connectedness via the email medium of BCC.

One of the community members, summarized an evolution of connecting modes, (through the senses, face-to-face, letters, telephone, email, emoticons) and speculated how connectivity may be improved by becoming more aware of its qualities, sub-modalities and the relationship of parts to the whole. He summarized the themes and images of connectivity that he had noticed in the community in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of BC Connectivity Themes & Images

Theme	Images/Mental Models Used
What we have learned and experienced is not easy to put into words.	Meeting of souls You had to be there Sanctuary Operate from heart Don't have means to communicate effectively Jump in the blue deep Engage more deeply

	Profound Contain one another Clarify and experience our universal nature
Going through transformational changes strengthen connectivity.	Transformational change Emotional and spiritual content Support and feedback ... moved me Emotions ... pain or joy ... increase connectivity
Acknowledging each other strengthens connectivity.	Rich and spontaneous affirmations ... new ways of reaching out to one another. Seeing differences ... gifts Empowered to participate when you ... call my name Personal response ... make(s) silver thread
Imagery strengthens connectivity.	Images, poems, emotions Energy field ... rainbow circle Blue ... golden ... purple ... rose resonate Rainbow Circle, Rainbow Sanctuary, Rainbow Cathedral Magical Energy webs
A caring community can be built through the email medium.	Build learning communities Span the globe Ebb and flow to the process of building Interconnected(ness) [allows] access to Love Live in community ... life online
Pros and cons of an email community.	Reflective thought at a deeper level Freedom to enter conversation greater Can take our time in digesting Being heard and amplified ... the whole is immanent in each part More poetic [expression] This is a skinny medium Loss of "non-verbals" [is major disadvantage]

As can be seen by a review of the images in the table above, many participants held images of connecting that were consciousness based; i.e. spiritual or group consciousness. This was supported by 55% of respondents who answered "Yes" to the Survey question, "Did you experience spiritual connectedness?"

One can conjecture that these mental models of connectedness may have influenced the development (and/or appreciation) of the leadership skills of self-management, self-disclosure, vulnerability, acknowledgement, listening, questioning, developing a belief system, respect for differences and the relationship of a leader to the group.

For some participants, like the researcher, the mental models of connection seemed to emerge throughout the seven month experiment. I noted that my own inquiry into the influence of connections, was marked by periodic inquiry into the nature and impact of connections on leadership skills and organizational/community development.

I summarized my own process of noticing connections throughout the experiment in Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of the Evolution of Researcher’s Connectivity Questions

Date/ BCC Listserve Source	Researcher’s Questions
April 28, 1997 BC Connectivity	Is it possible our natural condition is to connect? And that we have closed off the natural pre-disposition to connect because of hurts and pains? Why do I disconnect? Why don’t I connect?
May 1, 1997 BC Commons, BC Connectivity	<p>How many ways can I feel or experience connection (eg. spiritually, viscerally, intellectually, emotionally)?</p> <p>Do we have different “gates” of connection? (perhaps like gates of learning? – visual, auditory, kinesthetic, multiplex). Can we open more gates of connection by practice? What kind of conditions and/or permission do we have to give ourselves and others to open new gates of connection? What causes us to close gates of connection? (disrespect, being ignored, pain, anger, fear?)</p> <p>Do I have different capacities for connection; i.e. can I get over connected and short circuit? Do these capacities change over time and under different circumstances?</p> <p>Why do I have different experiences of connection in my Home Circle, Special Interest Listserves, and the Commons?</p> <p>Does recognition by others (i.e.; specifically being named in conversations) always increase my experience of connection? Therefore, is it important to recognize by name those who have not connected through conversation so that they are encouraged to connect?</p> <p>Do individuals realize the power of “unused connection potential” (kind of like an energy power held back behind a dam, held in suspense) that they exert on others in a circle, when they are present but have not been moved to speak?</p> <p>Many people have commented on how they have mapped identities in circles externally (drawn diagrams, posted names, etc.). How many ways can we map connectivity (relationships) externally? And do people have ways of mapping connections internally (say in their hearts or emotions)?</p>
August 21, 1997 Sanctuary, Theory In Action	<p>Perhaps our capacity to find new ways to love one another, depends on the level of awareness of our connectivity. ...</p> <p>Perhaps our level of awareness, depends on our willingness/readiness/capacity to reflect on what we are experiencing. Say we have five levels:</p> <p>Level 1: 3rd person reflection: the I perceive the world around me</p>

	<p>Level 2: 2nd person reflection: the way you affect me Level 3: 1st person conceptual: the way I think about me Level 4: 1st person emotional: the way I feel about me Level 5: 1st person plural: the way I feel about being part of us</p> <p>I wonder if our ability to maintain the flow of energy through the structure of community ... depends on our willingness/readiness to work together to overcome the natural ebbs and flows ...</p> <p>Recognizing that I need to ask for connection (love) when I need it is a very humbling experience for me. It is hard to do. I need to remember it is just as hard for others and when I am in my “flow” be open to connecting whenever I can ... perhaps we are designed to need each other to support us in the fullness of our humanity.</p>
Sept. 15, 1997 Commons	<p>... community is a holarchy of four processes (states of being?). In the first one it's a state of mind – where I am conscious of connecting on an intellectual, emotional, psychological continuum with others ... In the second holarchy, community is a biological connectedness – I feel this sense of community when I am with my biological family In the third holarchy, community is a social connectedness – I have felt this sense of community when working on projects of a grand scale involving significant percentages of a geographical community In the fourth holarchy, community is a cultural or worldview connectedness. I have shared it in ... personal development programs ... workshops ... church ... travel ... in Berkana Community of Conversations (BCC). ... individual experience within those holarchies has an ebb and flow to it ... maybe to do with levels of energy (what I attend to) and reflection (what I choose to pay attention to).</p>
Feb. 1998 Post BCC	<p>Researcher develops mapping system with four quadrants and three kinds of connections (exploratory, transformational, linking) to trace connections through the BCC Archives.</p>

I concluded that the development of connections in such a community is vital because connections are:

- the pre-cursors to pattern recognition
- the basis of generativity and creativity
- the basis of relationships.

In short, I came to the conclusion that the capacity to notice and/or develop connections in a self-organizing online community system like BCC was not only tied directly to the emergence of learning, but also to the emergence of leadership capacity.