Chapter 19

With the Likeness and Voice of Mentor: Mentoring Presence in Online Distance Learning

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ABSTRACT

Online distance learning environments are increasingly designed and facilitated using a Community of Inquiry framework, which promotes participant presence, encourages social interaction and exchange, and develops a sense of community. Communities of inquiry recognize the participation of real people, acknowledge their individuality, and engage them in a communal endeavor. However, sometimes communities of inquiry do not adequately meet the specific learning expectations and individual goals of participants. This chapter explores the author’s quest to enhance a community of inquiry to make it more responsive to international students, skeptical about online distance learning and acutely focused on writing their undergraduate dissertations. The solution was to embed a one-on-one mentoring facility within the learning space thereby allowing students to receive personal guidance and support. The chapter considers Communities of Inquiry, social presence, and what is considered an innovative use of e-mentoring to support individuals within a broader learning community.

INTRODUCTION

Distance learning has served many valuable social, educational, and learning purposes since it emerged in the early 19th century (Schulte, 2011; Williams, Nicholas, & Gunter, 2005). In its evolution, distance learning has continuously utilized the latest technologies available—print, radio, television, and computers—and has adopted a number of different pedagogic approaches (Anderson & Dron, 2011; Taylor, 1995, 2001). Along this evolutionary path, perhaps more particularly in the last two decades, some consider that the technologies utilized have tended to overshadow the teaching and learning practices employed (Evans & Pauling, 2010; Leer & Ivanov, 2013). Few would dispute Salmon’s (2000) observation about
online distance learning: “Millions of words have been written about the technology and its potential, but not much about what the teachers and learners actually do online” (p. 17). Since she wrote, many more millions of words have been added to the discourse and most of these have centered on technological innovation, potentials, and affordances (Daniel, 2012; Peters, 2010; Voss, 2013).

Online distance learning (ODL) environments do not exist to display technological possibilities; they come into being to facilitate human learning. Learning environments operate as systems, in which learners and technologies should interact synergistically. The technological dimension per se should neither dominate nor dictate learning activities; neither should it marginalize the learner nor the learning process. Many online distance learners appreciate the possibilities of technological connectivity; nevertheless, they struggle with making personal connections with each another, with their instructors, or with learning experience itself (Starr-Glass, 2013). A central role of the online instructor is to humanize the learning space, recognizing it as a productive place populated by real people, each with particular learning concerns, but united in the joint enterprise of co-creating new knowledge. In doing so, the instructor is faced with multiple challenges: illuminating the learning space with personal presence; projecting a sense of authentic personality; promoting socially-responsive learning and attending to a multitude of individual learning concerns (Cochrane, Antonczak, & Guinibert, 2014; Lander, 2014; Lehman & Conceição, 2010; Northcote, 2010).

In ODL environments, many instructor-facilitators attempt to develop communities of learning that support participants, reinforce their efforts, and provide a social framework for developing and elaborating knowledge (Drouin & Vartanian, 2010; Rovai, 2001; Rovai & Wighting, 2005). If an online learning community can be created, then individual participants – who are spatially distanced, perhaps even spatially isolated – might come to appreciate a sense of inclusion within a wider and supportive group. Students can share a joint academic purpose and be motivated to attain common learning outcomes. The author suggests, in this chapter, that community building online is not simply a social means to an educational end; rather, it is an attempt to engage learners more fully as people and as socially responsive human beings. In trying to create online communities of learning, many instructor-facilitators have found the Community of Inquiry framework particularly valuable (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001; Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2014; Rourke & Kanuka, 2009; Saritas, 2008).

This chapter advances a slightly different, and perhaps more contentious, proposition: Unique and individual learning trajectories can be, and should be, addressed within the community of learning, not subsumed by the commonality that the community provides. It is argued that recognition of the individual within his or her community setting contributes significantly to that learner’s sense of meaning and identity (Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000).

The present author’s own ODL practice prompted him to address the specific learning issues of his own students. He designs and facilitates distant learning environments in which students complete their capstone experience by writing an undergraduate dissertation. These students are not Americans. Most come from Central and Eastern Europe, but they all attend the international program of an American college in Prague, Czech Republic. These students bring with them a degree of skepticism about ODL, derived from their national cultural perspectives and their more traditional educational histories. In constructing an online learning space for them it was considered important that their learning concerns and their voice should be acknowledged.

The challenge for this instructor was to design and facilitate an ODL space that would accomplish two objectives: it would include all participants in a community of learning that would address their common interest of developing research questions, conducting research, and acquiring academic writing