

## Projecting Community in Web-based Courses: What to Say and How to Say What You Mean

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### Abstract

*Much of the current research in web-based learning has focused on student satisfaction and student success in the online learning environment. Ultimately the findings suggest that facilitators and instructors may have a strong impact on the degree of satisfaction and success perceived by students in web-based courses through working to develop community. This paper will review the current literature and discuss the opportunities facilitators and instructors may provide to encourage human interaction and community in web-based learning environments.*

Distance education, web-based learning, online courses - - - all offer opportunities for creating a new and exciting learning environment for students. Several recent research projects focus on not only opportunities for instructors and facilitators to make this environment both enriching and enlightening but also offer up challenges in the areas of interaction and community in creating a learning environment which will promote student success. McKenzie, professor of media and instructional technology at the State University of West Georgia has stated, "Distance instructors can make or break a distance learning course." (Kopt, 2003, p. 2) This "making or breaking" of distance courses is heavily reflected in student success. Wegerif (1998) relates the success or failure of individuals who enroll in "open university" (p. 38) courses to the degree to which they could "cross the threshold" (p. 46) from feeling like outsiders to becoming a

part of the online community. Bata-Jones, and Avery (2004) noted that the perception of some students is that “. . . online courses create a sense of isolation.” (p. 185) This perception and the transition away from this perception depends heavily on the course facilitator’s communication skills in creating student interaction. (Gueldenzoph, 2003, p. 176)

Recent discoveries through distance education research suggest that communication at several levels may be a major part of the satisfaction or dissatisfaction that students feel when participating in web-based courses. Shea, Fredericksen, Pickett, Pelz, and Swan (2000) stated, “. . . researcher argue that the structure, (Romiszowski & Cheng, 1992), transparency (Eastmond, 1995), and communication potential (Irani, 1998) of course interfaces heavily impact students’ satisfaction, learning, and retention in online courses.” (p. 3) Richardson & Ting (1999) found that students who were learning primarily through written correspondence with instructors were more concerned with instructors’ feedback. Researchers Hawisher and Pemberton (1997) compared the perceptions of two groups of students, who were involved in asynchronous learning, and contend that all interaction with instructors including instructor participation in class discussions played a key role in student success and retention in online courses. In *Implementing the Seven Principals: Technology as a Lever*, Chickering and Ehrmann (1996) lists the first principal as; “Good practice encourages contacts between students and faculty” and explains, “Frequent student-faculty contact in and out of class is a most important factor in student motivation and involvement. Faculty concern helps students get through rough times and keep on working.” (p. 4) Kearsley (2000) maintains that the web-based classroom is a special social environment and is very different from the face-to-face classroom. Picciano (1998) found that instructors’ activities were related to students’ perceived learning in online education courses.

A profound lack of “sense of community” (Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins, & Shoemaker, 2000; McCarthy, Pretty, & Catano, 1990; Morgan & Tam, 1999; Palloff & Pratt, 1999) and “feelings of isolation” (Macchia & Freedman, 2004; Morgan & Tam, 1999; & Want & Grimes, 2000) is often reported in studies. (Vonderwell, 2003, & Woods, 2002). Students often report that they are unable to connect with the instructor on a personal or professional level. Quitadamo and Brown (2001) went so far as to state that “quality of human interaction determines online learning success.” (p. 7)

These essential research findings present both opportunities and challenges in the manner in which we communicate and help to “sweep” students away from relative isolation into web-based communities and create the interaction that students need and expect from learning environments, in general. “Maslow posited a hierarchy of human needs based on two groupings: deficiency needs and growth needs. (Maslow, 1943) Within the deficiency needs, each lower need must be met before moving to the next higher level.” (Huitt, 2004, para. 1). It is within the first four levels of deficiency needs that we must look for opportunities to provide that interaction and communication in web-based courses. In level one, individuals basically relate the physiological need to having the resources to undertake the web-based learning. First tier needs may include access to an adequate computer system and the skills to use that system. It is within the next two need deficiency levels of safety and belongingness that we as instructors and facilitators have the opportunity to impact student success and retention. By providing positive interaction in web-based courses we can contribute to the “feeling of community” and in turn, to student success.

In web-based courses, two basic facilitator or instructor interpersonal skills contribute to positive interaction relationships: sending information to others and receiving information from others. For positive interpersonal relationships to form there must be appropriate amounts of both sending and receiving. For many people, one or both of the above skills may be difficult to master. Some people share information about their own ideas, reactions, and feelings easily while having particular difficulty paying attention, relating to and understanding information others may share or send. On the flip side, some people listen, understand, and sympathize; easily and comfortably comprehend existing sentence structure and tone; but find it difficult to reveal or send information about themselves.

Healy (1999) suggested that a major impact of web-based learning could be the negative effect it has on the ability of the user to achieve community. As facilitators and instructors, we have several opportunities to encourage “community” in the web-based environment. By carefully choosing what we say and how we say it, web-based courses can begin to project the learning environment which lends itself to community and to provide the personal aspect of learning that is so prevalent in face-to face courses. The following is a list of ways to foster “community” in web-based courses for students.

#### **What to Say**

### *In the Beginning*

A good beginning can set the stage for the entire web-based course, so it is vitally important to give the introduction some concentrated effort. Some facilitators like to provide students with a little humor and insight as to the usefulness of the course, along with a more formal introduction to the syllabus. Others elect to provide a syllabus, an overview of the course, and a narrative resume. This informal resume might include hobbies, favorite pets and or locations to live or visit, or an informal slant on the instructor's prior experience. This provides students with the opportunity to make connections with their own life experiences and creates a "starting point" for building a relationship with the facilitator. It is important to set the stage for peer experiences, so having peers introduce themselves in some fashion provides an opportunity for relationship development. Some instructors request that students post a peer greeting to each other in the first day or so of the web-based course, much like what happens in the first night of a face-to-face course.

### *Keep 'em Talking*

Many effective facilitators provide multiple opportunities for students to learn about each other in a personal sense and this helps establish a trusting relationship. Instructors may have students create and post their own narrative resumes including their reasons for attending the course. Students may also be required to work in teams for a project or two during the course. If time allows for two projects, students should be encouraged to work with the same team for both projects, thus providing students the opportunity to build a relationship within the team. It may also help to have students post pictures at the beginning of the course; since this step helps students visually relate to the person they are conversing with. An added benefit is to provide a designated "work space" for personal communication outside the classroom. This can easily be accomplished through the various setup functions of the chatroom. Facilitators must encourage students to share experiences or make personal connections with the course materials but should use the "what happens in Vegas---stays in Vegas" framework and remind students of confidentiality requirements. Some facilitators like to use a theme of the week in their informal conversations, such as "favorite restaurant" enabling students to share personal experiences around this theme in order to get the

“ball rolling”. These shared experiences usually take a humorous slant and may actually build on each other as the course progresses.

Effective facilitators often encourage students through constructive feedback. Students want to know not only what they did wrong in an assignment, or where they lost points, but they also want to know how they can improve in the next assignment. A sincere review of an assignment which includes a “what to do to improve” section will generally illicit a hardy “thanks” from the student to the facilitator and help forge one more bridge in the relationship connection.

#### *Wrapping It Up*

It never ends when it ends. Developing a personal connection is a difficult endeavor in any forum; much less in an online setting. This process is analogous to weaving a strong rope, the connection between the student and the facilitator must also be strong. Facilitators must provide students with an opportunity to leave contact information with others in the class. This may be as easy as mentioning the need to stay in touch or as complicated as offering to create a “signup” spreadsheet with future contact information. Some facilitators like to have a “signoff” topic in the chatroom for students to say so long to newly-acquired friends. Some facilitators provide an opportunity for students to discuss their personal programs of study and upcoming courses. This provides the opportunity for students to enroll together in upcoming web-based courses. In any case the facilitator will want to provide a “job well done” farewell on the final day as a closing activity.

#### **How to Say What You Mean**

##### *Have an Attitude*

Overcoming the deficiency of face-to-face interactions and the embedded use of oral tone and body language can be very difficult in a web-based course but there are ways in which to convey inner meanings that would normally have been conveyed through oral tone and through body language. (Tone: A matter of attitude, 2004) Overcoming this important deficiency begins by looking at the tone used in the web-based postings and written responses. Word tone is usually applied through pitch or difference in voice levels and intensity, and it serves to differentiate between word meanings. Much of the time we use tone to add meaning in oral language. Using tone in this manner is generally not possible in web-based

courses since we may not use our voice inflections, but it is possible to reflect tone or to give our writing a “voice” by selecting words carefully and through effective use of sentence structure. Word choice and sentence structure equate to tone in web-based learning and tone conveys an attitude about the course subject matter, and ultimately about the role of the student and facilitator in the course. Sentence structure should vary according to the intensity of the meaning. Short sentences may project the meaning of urgency or irritation. Longer, more complex sentence structure may convey thoughtfulness regarding the topic at hand or that full attention is being given to the topic. At any rate, both tone and sentence structure must be used effectively and must be perceived by the student as projecting a positive course atmosphere in order to promote student success and retention.

#### *Be Choosy*

If we are to help students feel a connection and a “belonging” to the class as a whole, it is important to keep the dialogue informal in order for it to represent normal everyday dialogue. “[The] basic purpose [of informal writing] is to help students to become independent, active learners by creating for themselves the language essential to their personal understanding.” (Informal writing: Uses, 2004, para. 3). Empire State College lists developing “*communal learning*:[by] encouraging, for example, open exploration and discovery in a community of inquiry, rather than isolated competition; to promote “connected,” not separated, teaching and learning;” (para. 4) as one of the purposes of informal writing.

Informal writing mimics everyday speech. It is filled with the slang, contractions, and pronouns. It is sometimes humorous, personally subjective, offhanded, zany, and experimental, while at the same time being simple and light. It also makes students feel comfortable in web-based courses because of the human characteristics it brings to the class. In order to project human characteristics in the web-based “working space,” it is important to select words which portray this warm, inviting image. For example; some facilitators might use verbs such as “give” instead of “provide” phrases such as, “let me know” instead of “make me aware” and pronouns which bring the dialogue to a personal level while sharing experiences. Postings, emails, and individual and teamwork responses should all be considered informal writing.

The pronoun, “you” cannot be overlooked when we review selections of the “right words” for web-based learning. As a facilitator of web-based courses, the use of “you:” should be kept to a minimum.

The word "you" often projects the shadow of blame and when combined with harsh personal opinions can escalate to accusations of bias and overly critical assessment between facilitator and student(s) or between student(s) and other students before the facilitator is aware of the full impact. This generally creates an ugly situation which can detract immensely from the web-based learning environment. This situation should be avoided at all cost. Reviewing and using I-messaging tools and reframing techniques can greatly alleviate this challenge. This author once wrote the following response to a student in a web-based course when the student had difficulty projecting a positive online tone when responding to others. Note the examples and the clear connection to the specific situation.

It is not the participation component that has given us trouble here; it is the online tone.

[Student name], online is much different than face-to-face because we do not get the chance to see facial expressions and that is such a drawback that we need to compensate by using our words very carefully.

Here is an example: When "you" is used in an online sentence, the person on the other end assumes you are speaking directly to him/her and not to the plural "you" of everyone in class and may have felt that individuals were being singled out. Though I did understand what you intended, others did not pick up on this. The three ways to avoid this, that I have found are: 1.) Read, reread, and reread responses again before they are sent, 2.) Read, reread, and reread again any exchanges before assuming that they are negative, and 3.) Use I-messages and plural pronouns as much as possible.

EXAMPLE: "Have you ever known that it is you that is not doing your job and not the other person." [Date]

I will agree that the week's discussions, for the most part, were positive and thought provoking --- but sometimes intimidating for many others in the class. We need to make the learning environment as safe as possible in order for others to participate. Online communication requires writing "softly." That responsibility belongs to all of us in the class. (Jackson, 2002, para. 2)

Emoticons and verticons can help project clarity of meaning into web-based course, whether it is positive or humorous, but with high levels of usage may also detract from the overall effectiveness of the facilitator. Emoticons and verticons should be used sparingly and are topics for later review.

#### *Clear Up the Muddy Water*

The old saying “clear as mud” applies here. Effective online instruction requires that the facilitator be crystal clear. By giving specific directions, by noting examples even if this results in a 22-page syllabus, and by using the student’s name in responses, the facilitator helps bring clarity to the course. In a web-based course, facilitators will be well-served to make sure that plenty of examples are noted throughout their course directions and within their responses. Furthermore students must be made aware of whom the recipient of the message should be. Many an instructional opportunity has gone poorly due to misused student names in a group conversation.

#### **Conclusion**

According to The National Center for Education Statistics (Distance education at postsecondary institutions, 2004), in 2000-01, “56 percent of all postsecondary institutions offered distance education courses -- up from 34 percent three years earlier.” (The Condition of Education 2004 in Brief, 2004, p. 18) We must consider this fast-paced expansion of web-based courses along with research which suggests that it may be more than “learning styles, patterns of learning, and students’ demographic characteristics” that have an effect on student success in Web-based learning achievement. (Shih, Ingebritsen, Pleasants, Flickinger, & Brown, 2003, p. 504). Furthermore, if we temper the above list of recommendations by respecting individual experiences, by treating each student as an important participant in the learning process, and by providing strong content coverage, we will invariably overcome the battle to bring students together as an effective learning team rather than letting them languish in the isolation which seems to be inherent in the web-based learning environment.

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