

Building that Human Touch into Your Web-Based Course

What do you picture when you consider web-based instruction? Is it a student sitting in front of her computer in her nightgown clicking through a series of web sites, reading the material, and doing endless exercises? Is it a series of individual readings and reflective papers? Are you (the teacher) sitting before the computer screen flooded with student e-mail asking the same low-level questions over and over? Do you see teachers and students who never get to "know" each other because they never meet face-to-face? Learning via the Web doesn't have to be sterile, foreboding or isolated. Filmmaker George Lucas recently observed, "Nothing is as powerful as the human touch in education." (quoted in Page & Rivero, 2000, p. 56) This philosophy is part of what attracted most of us to enter the field of education. Creating opportunities to interact with people and to share our own knowledge with others to build learning communities are powerful motivators for many educators. Students and faculty can share quality learning experiences in any kind of learning environment – but it doesn't just happen. We have to work at it and try new strategies to meet the needs of 21st century students.

Gary Miller, Penn State University's Associate Vice President for Distance Learning says that students need human support at three distinct times throughout the course of their distance learning experience:

- When considering if a web-based course is the proper learning modality,
- When the learner begins a course of study, and
- During the course for support and socialization. (Fister, 2000)

Choosing to take a web-based course is a critical decision for many students, requiring both guidance and support. That guidance and support can be offered through traditional admission/advisement functions, but is becoming increasingly web based. The Illinois Virtual Campus offers support online at <http://online.parkland.cc.il.us/ivc/module/>. Here prospective students can preview the skills and competencies that improve their chances for success, identify hardware and software requirements, and complete a short test to evaluate readiness for online learning. A similar questionnaire designed for high school students is available at the Kentucky Virtual High School site, <http://www.kvhs.org/>. At this site prospective students use an online "browser test" to check the capabilities of their system. A more thorough diagnostic instrument (20 questions) is available at <http://www.buccc.cc.ks.us/webcrs/onlinelearn.htm>, although this is paper-based rather than online. While that might seem ironic, don't forget that many potential web-based course students are novices who might be much more

comfortable with the familiar medium of print! The Penn State World Campus <http://www.worldcampus.psu.edu/wc101/> includes a diagnostics page to enable the prospective student to test his computer for certain operational functions and provides contact information for students in several modalities (e- and snail mail, phone, fax, and in person). UCLA's Onlinelearning.net, <http://www.onlinelearning.net/>, also provides a thorough diagnostic and support section. Taking customer service to the next level, UCLA's Course Management Team refers to themselves as the student's concierge service! In business settings, where employees use company-provided equipment to access company-sponsored training, Human Resources Managers will serve as the guidance/support system, with the assistance of company tech personnel. Making this interface easy-to-use and non-threatening is a critical step in any business movement to web or intranet-based training.

In any situation, students need additional support before the course of study begins. Everyone should have a pre-course tutorial about available resources and course policies and procedures. Items of interest may be

- How to access and utilize information and support resources at the course web site;
- Use of the course management software (BlackBoard, WebCT, WebBoard, etc.);

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- Course policies and procedures such as the length of time to complete the course, methods of submitting assignments, policies on late work, test administration, etc.;
- Fundamental troubleshooting;
- Time management tips; and
- What data will be collected and how that data will be used (including use of data/course completion for items like bonuses, promotion and fulfilling continuing education requirements).

The Virtual High School (<http://vhs.concord.org/home.htm>) uses a demo net course format to introduce the course structure to students. After a brief introduction to the basics of navigation and tools, students can practice using these tools in a mock AP English Literature and Composition class. Another interesting feature of this site is "A Day in the Life," where interested students or faculty can read diaries of a virtual high school student, teacher, and site coordinator. Boise State University provides a particularly ambitious series of preparation activities that have been described in an earlier "Chalk Dust" column. Another innovative approach is the use of peer mentors. Drake University hires "Web Learner Consultants" from the ranks of students previously successful in online courses. These peer consultants act as mentors and additional support for students making the transition to online learning. (Moyer, 2000).

The most difficult item to address on the list above has to be time management tips. For students used to the structure of a face-to-face class, online learning is really a brave new self-directed world! While many students enroll in classes already possessing good time management skills, other students may naively believe that they will be able to "find" time to complete course work in days and weeks already filled with work, family and personal responsibilities. Online learning is NOT the answer for students who say they can't find time to take a tra-

ditional class. Time management becomes an issue for web-based instructors as well, who may find that responding to e-mail takes a lot more time than expected. The immediacy of e-mail and online learning also promote unrealistic expectations. Students working on an assignment at 2 a.m. on a Sunday morning may expect an instant answer to an e-mail question. As an instructor, make sure that you specify reasonable guidelines about these kinds of procedural matters to students before a course begins and provide gentle reminders as due dates approach.

Once the student decides to take the course and is introduced to the course tools and technologies, the instructor's next challenge is to address the feeling of isolation that comes with distance learning. At this point teaching becomes very much an "art," not a science. The art of teaching online operates at two levels: meeting the needs of individual learners and building a collaborative learning community.

At the individual level, problems become very personal and some (maybe many) students feel as if difficulties stem from something that they are doing improperly and nobody else has the same problem. One way to counteract this is through a good helpdesk function. Students need to be able to depend on the helpdesk to be responsive, efficient, and personable. A great helpdesk that is only available from 8am-5pm is not very useful to most non-traditional students who make up a large percentage of the web-based learning market. The helpdesk must be available via differing modalities - phone, fax, and e-mail as well as surface mail. Conventional paper-based or CD-based instructions should be available to guide the student through foreseeable technical difficulties. One other critical feature to look for in the help function is attitude of the helper. They must be specifically trained to show interest and empathy, even if it is the 500th time that they have been asked about this ele-

mentary procedure. Not all individual problems are technology related, however, and instructors can't forget that online students face the same kinds of frustration and misunderstandings that students in face-to-face courses experience with assignments and course requirements. In a traditional class we can sense this frustration or anxiety when we see students' faces or hear the tone of their voices, but these clues are missing in the online world. Some students won't hesitate to let their emotions show, and may even go beyond acceptable behavior (yes, students have been known to flame instructors), but other students will worry in silence, fall behind, and even fail to complete the class. Amy Sitze (2000) stresses the importance of discussing online body language, using examples of how e-mail can be interpreted differently, at the beginning of a course. While you have to be careful to ensure student privacy, try to use examples from previous classes.

The real challenge, though, as we see it, is community building for the course. Of course, some students may have selected an online learning experience because of its perceived isolation and independence. They may resent efforts to become acquainted, virtually or otherwise, with the instructor or other students. However, we do not believe that this represents the attitude of the majority of students, who find that social interaction enriches the learning experience. Assuming that most students value the social nature of learning, how can an instructor foster a sense of community and break down the barriers of asynchronous learning? The instructor must purposefully design her course to be personal. The way you organize and present your learning community shouldn't be overlooked as an important strategy. The Virtual High School (<http://vhs.concord.org/home.htm>) has a set of links devoted to campus life, with a yearbook and a newspaper. Faculty and students enrolled in the Virtual High School can visit the student lounge or the faculty lounge to inter-

act with their peers. Developing these types of resources, on top of creating course content, interacting with students and evaluating assignments, may seem overwhelming. But as John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid note, "Attending too closely to information overlooks the social context that helps people understand what that information might mean and why it matters." (2000, p. 5) Nancy White maintains an excellent list of community building resources for new (and experienced) web instructors at <http://www.fullcirc.com/>.

Here are some of our favorite strategies to build a sense of community. Not every technique can be used or is appropriate for every course and instructors will have to modify techniques to match their own teaching style and comfort level.

- Meet with your class face-to-face the first class meeting. The class will be able to see that you and the other class members are real (as opposed to cyber) people. They will be able to picture each person as class interactions develop. They should also be able to get a sense of the instructor's humor and the class' normal response.
- Post your bio or vita in an accessible place on the Web. Most course management software provides a place for this both for the instructor and the students. Include more than the typical business/education oriented entries. Knowing a person's interests/hobbies will make students more comfortable with one another and with you. If you don't use course management software, include this on a class web site.
- Post your picture in an accessible place on the Web. We all like to be able to "see" the person that we are "talking" to. In the cyberworld, many times we have to be able to visualize the communicator.
- If the class is conducted for cohorts at separate sites, visit each

cohort, if possible. That way you will be able to see them where they work. This will allow you to be better connected to their problems and frustrations. Couple this visit with a meal (Dutch treat, of course) to give students a chance to interact with you and with each other in a more casual setting.

- Be accessible to your students. We find that e-mail works really well for this purpose. Once the students become proficient at e-mail, they will use this communication tool efficiently if you model and encourage this behavior. But there is a potential downside. If students don't see themselves as part of a class learning community they will depend exclusively on you and may expect an almost immediate response from you. Be reasonable, while allowing yourself to maintain your sanity.
- Provide a student forum, so they will depend on each other more and you less. Course management software typically provides threaded discussions and chats. These could be set up independently using free web sites or may be provided by your IT department.
- For the more technically and bandwidth affluent classes, you may use internet videoconferencing. Here students and instructors may be able to see each other as they "talk" real-time using voice or text.
- MUDs or MOOs provide another way to bring ideas together in a group. Both of these types of online communities include play or game-like elements that make them very appealing to students. Anytime you add a synchronous element to an asynchronous course expect to meet with resistance from some students. Part of this resistance may be due to logistics (differences in time zones, job responsibilities, and so on). However, students may fail to see the impor-

tance of these collaborative, community-building exercises unless you demonstrate their usefulness in terms of course success and application to the real world.

- Don't overlook the importance to storytelling. Many teachers are natural storytellers, especially in the sense that we share experiences from our own professional lives with our students. In *The Social Life of Information*, Brown and Duguid (2000) assert that teachers use stories to bring information together. They also suggest that communities are formed when individuals work together to arrive at a shared interpretation of a story.

Teaching and learning in new ways brings new challenges and opportunities. Asynchronous learning doesn't have to be isolated and disconnected. Many students and teachers find that online learning is just the opposite. In some online learning groups students and teachers report the development of a deep sense of community, with a high level of participation and engagement from all of the members of the community. The "art of teaching" is alive and well in the world of online learning communities – please don't hesitate to e-mail us with your success stories that we can share in future columns.

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