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Teaching online: Now we're talking

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Just when it looked like the "shrink-wrapped" approach to technology implementation (with its implied notion that "if you post it on the World Wide Web, they will learn") was about to suffocate further discussions about online learning (see the most recent Critical Reading column), conversations about what it means to "facilitate" interaction have begun permeating even the popular discussions of online learning. Like a spring breeze, the voices of teachers and researchers who value student input and faculty sanity bring new inspiration to the direction of online educational environments. These discussions, perhaps more energetic now that the post-it-then-test-it model of education faces overt challenges in online pedagogy, begin to address the implementation of instructional strategies into the cyber-medium.

The plague of academic research historically has been its failure to inform practice (Robinson, 1998). Whether research in teaching and learning has been misunderstood, refuted, or simply ignored, the result at the dawn of the new millennium is a mismatch between what we know and what we do.

A good example of this inconsistency is expressed in the conclusion of Beaudin's (2000) study, "Keeping Online Asynchronous Discussions on Topic." In addition to the gains and potential available with online pedagogies, Beaudin finds that the teachers he surveyed did not take their own advice. Beaudin speculates that instructors tend to recommend techniques that they think will work rather than those they actually employ. But Beaudin, who contends that "increased learning occurs" when learners retain ownership of their learning "without being manipulated and controlled," may have isolated the real paradox: the cost of encouraging learners to make learning their own runs the risk of losing "focus on the original intent of the instructor or the course objectives."

It is not clear in Beaudin's study how one fosters "ownership" of learning without being "manipulative or controlling." The author suggests, however, that the key to this balancing act of human interactions is a responsive moderator. And the moderator, Beaudin also notes, does not need to be the instructor. He asserts that

the role of the moderator and the guidelines within which this figure will operate must be part of the pre-course design and clearly understood by student participants.

Ultimately Beaudin determines that "this exploratory study reinforced many of the principles and practices used in face-to-face classrooms to keep discussion on topic and should serve as a reminder that good instructional design is essential whether it is online or face-to-face." Yet the evidence he presents suggests that structural design in an online environment requires even greater sensitivity and attention than in the traditional classroom. Mindfully designed questions and guidelines must create the parameters of communities previously circumscribed by walls, teacher posture, and the physical proximity of peers. However, if it also is possible that the absence of traditional educational structures might allow a liberation of "ownership" to occur in online learning, then we must be wary that the new boundaries we erect do not stifle the interactive potentials of the medium.

Citing a study done by Romiszowski (1985) on asynchronous communication, Beaudin reports that it is more difficult to bring participants back on track in computer-mediated communication seminars than it is in a conventional classroom. But if we heed the caution that we should be neither manipulative nor controlling, then such a challenge may have a positive effect. Perhaps such dalliance might reflect a healthy decentering of authority. Students who wander off topic together and cannot be snapped back to attention by the stern glare of the teacher or the disinterested shrugs of certain classmates may wander right into a connection with the subject matter and with each other that they otherwise may not have had time or space to discover.

A group of articles recently published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* demonstrate the range of opinions on issues of student agency and authority in online pedagogy, starting with Carr's (1999) report, "On-Line Instructors Can Corral 'Long Mouth' Students." Carr reports on the work of Lieberman, who educates faculty about teaching online. Lieberman, framing her advice on managing student contributions, remarks, "Domineering students who monopolize class conversation can be as difficult in online courses as they are in traditional classrooms." Lieberman proposes a few strategies for equalizing student contributions, such as thanking quieter students in class-wide e-mail and imposing guidelines on length and numbers of required messages. Such structure, Lieberman argues, provides an overt framework within which students can function equitably. Lieberman's focus, according to Carr, is on the importance of establishing "ground rules" that provide an opportunity for balancing the contributions of members of the learning community, consequently mitigating the influence of prolific posters or what she calls "long mouths." In her framework, Lieberman says, "Everyone gets their whole response out without being interrupted, and having those responses written down makes the louder, more vocal student see and acknowledge the response of the quieter student."

Lieberman's advocacy for student voices, however, is confused by some of the

language that she uses to discuss student learning. Her explanations of ground rules and balancing acts indicate a respect for student voice and agency, but whether or not the reality of uninterrupted opportunities for expression actually "makes the louder, more vocal student see and acknowledge the response of the quieter student" remains questionable. There is also something unsettling in her intentions to "make" students "see and acknowledge," to "corral" those who would "monopolize" and those who are "domineering." The irony reminds us of the conundrum of using our authority as instructors to promote egalitarian learning environments, particularly given that more and more students in higher education are adults.

In an article on the challenges of teaching online, Carr ([2000]) again reports on the work of another experienced online instructor, Winiecki, who speaks to the challenge of achieving equilibrium in an online classroom. Winiecki, however, places more concern on striking a balance between course content and facilitated student interaction than on student contributions. Students "gradually learn about the subject," he notes, but they "also learn how to apply effective conversational practices to discussions carried out by e-mail and computer conferencing." After about three months, Winiecki observes that his students are working "smarter [if] not necessarily working harder." Learning "to work in the medium," says one of Winiecki's students, takes the same effort as "dealing with the content." "Working smarter," it appears, means letting the impromptu relationships that develop among student-learners take up as much, if not more, space than the machinery and even the scripted content of the course.

White (in Young, [2000]), seems to agree on the importance of fostering interpersonal relationships in online classrooms. Managing a healthy interpersonal environment, according to White, is paramount to the success of a good online course. White argues that online education can and "should be an interpersonal environment." He advocates educational transformation that requires dialogue and interactions that "allow . . . personalities to come across [through] the medium." To foster open communication, White provides detailed advice and cautions teachers that students need more than just ground rules up front. They need personal responses to their questions quickly (within 24 hours). Those responses should acknowledge that students' questions and comments are important. Immediate feedback from either the teacher or the other students prevents students from filling in the communication void with negative assumptions about why no one has yet responded. The explicit advice White provides, however, rests upon a critical caveat: the optimal interpersonal learning environment requires limited class size and "hard work."

Again, although this information is not really new, it is not always—or even frequently—heeded. White's advice echoes an earlier report written by Ragan ([1998]), director of a three-year study on distance education. The study, the Innovations in Distance Education (IDE) project, united Penn State and Lincoln and Cheyney universities in establishing a set of foundational principles and learning goals supportive of distance education and distance educators. Central to

the mission of the study was the examination of "what constitutes quality instructional interaction." In the IDE project the principles are grouped into five broad categories: Learning Goals and Content Presentation, Interactions, Assessment and Measurement, Instructional Media and Tools, and Learner Support Systems. In the development of these categories, the IDE group generated an abundance of advice: learning goals should "be publicly available and communicated clearly and explicitly," assessment "should be congruent with the learning goals and should be consistent," students "should be provided ample opportunities and accessible methods for providing feedback," and media "should reflect the diversity of potential learners."

Ragan and his colleagues caution that without "a firm understanding" of the principles of quality instructional interaction, decisions are based on the merits of the technology or methodologies without consideration of the long-term and potential benefit to the student. Certainly this last point has an all-too-familiar ring.

But in the midst of all of the energy we invest to create tidy structures for student learning, that "firm," even nagging, and persistently untidy principle keeps resurfacing: productive interaction needs to focus on more than just the interaction between students and the instructor, or even between students and the content of the course; it needs to include the intractable long-term and potential benefits of interaction between the students. As Ragan argues, "If students feel they are part of a community of learners, they are more apt to be motivated to seek solutions to their problems and to succeed."

At the heart of this literature on online learning, we find the message that well-moderated student interactions structured by frameworks that ask good questions and allow for the establishment of certain ground rules create perhaps the most productive of online communities. Yet the advances put forward in these articles do not and should not pertain exclusively to online learning. The shift they reflect has more to do with moving from presentational to well-facilitated interactive pedagogies than with technologies. Specifically, it has more to do with the growing realization that learning and managing learning environments must acknowledge and address a new paradigm that identifies a course as a body of content subordinate to an authentic sequence of activities and, most importantly, a group of learners who will engage in those activities and that content. It is not a trivial change of focus.

Despite the simplicity of such a condensation of the published advice, however, the complexity of fashioning such an environment defies clear articulation. There are no fool-proof formulae, recipes, or shrink-wrapped packages for teaching, online or otherwise. Human interactions are fickle and capricious. It may be that, despite the very clean and orderly machines that we use to engage each other, the machinations of the human psyche will always manufacture a cluttered mess that can only be sorted out and understood by humans in the midst of that mess. In spite of our need to formulate principles and organize rigorous steps to shape our learning environments, in our classrooms or in cyberspace, no amount of sanitation

can desensitize people from reacting to new environments, expectations, and each other in very human ways; and no amount of authoritative intervention can completely silence the desire for community to establish its own ground rules and live by its own terms.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the mantra "good teaching is good teaching" is the one that experienced online teachers always seem to retrieve from their excursions into the Net. The cyber-medium may offer us ways to include individuals in conversations that once would have been inaccessible to them, but the fundamental challenges of teaching, like life, are never easy.

So we keep talking.

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