Online Course Creation and Facilitation: 
The New Classroom Management

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Abstract
Generally one of the primary concerns of both novice and experienced teachers is classroom management. Issues of how to keep students engaged, on task, cooperative, and appropriately responsive are always in need of effective solutions. With the constant growth of online learning in higher education, university faculty face the challenge of creating engaging learning environments and enriching synchronous and asynchronous discussion forums. Frequently, concerns about online learning and discussions include how to keep students engaged, on task, cooperative, and appropriately responsive. Is online course facilitation the new classroom management?

In this article, we attempt to address the creation and educational value of virtual learning environments and discussion. Although the research may exist, the challenge of bridging the gap between interface literacy and online pedagogy still exists. Through a review and interpretation of the literature, various strategies and tips are offered that translate into actual practice for higher education faculty.

Introduction

Generally one of the primary concerns of both novice and experienced teachers is classroom management. Although questions regarding classroom management as we envision it in the preK–12 setting are not usually a worry at the collegiate level, other concerns are present. In this case, classroom management refers to the combining of teacher traits, which include reflection, problem-solving, behavior management, and the delivery of engaging instruction (Hansen & Childs, 1998). With the constant growth of online learning in higher education, university faculty face the challenge of creating engaging learning environments and enriching synchronous and asynchronous discussion forums. Frequently, concerns about online learning and discussions include how to keep students engaged, on task, cooperative, and appropriately responsive. Is online course facilitation the new classroom management?
When contemplating this question, it is important to consider the issues surrounding online courses in the context of the overall construction of online learning environments. Higher education faculty today face challenges regarding many aspects of virtual learning environments. Often, these challenges are rooted in the early stages of creating an online class. Therefore, foresight and strategic planning need to be a part of the online course creation process (Preece, 2000).

Take for example the following scenario: Jan is an active, committed, enthusiastic higher education faculty member. Although she is not extremely tech-savvy, she does use her computer for both her own personal work and as a learning tool with her students. Always interested in cutting edge developments in education, Jan enrolls in a series of professional development workshops to learn how to function within the college’s new online course management system. Faithfully, Jan attends each workshop and completes all the required and suggested activities. Although these sessions are challenging for her, she is energized about learning something new. At the end of the workshop series, Jan knows that she has learned many skills and although not all of them are embedded in her memory, she knows that she has the excellent notes and a user manual created by the workshop facilitators. Jan feels excited to start creating her courses in the new course management system. However, this euphoria lasts only as long as Jan remains in the technology center on campus. Once she has left the building, she realizes that although she has learned many new functions in the technological interface, she really does not know where to begin in creating an effective virtual learning environment. She feels stuck and is looking for somewhere to go from here.

That is Jan’s story, but it is a story told other places. If that scenario or any aspect of it provided a feeling of familiarity, then perhaps there is need to review the literature and some established strategies for online teaching and learning. There also exists a need to investigate why circumstances like Jan’s are presently taking place in most college and university settings.

Current literature in the field of online teaching and learning has already established many resources, strategies and methods regarding this environment, but the research has not always produced results that can be interpreted in meaningful ways in the actual assessment of student learning. According to Cothrel (2000), the most common measures of online learning environments include: unique users, page views, session time, percentage of visitors who click through the community, registered members, postings, read-to-post ratio, page additions, page revisions, peak number of concurrent users, audience penetration, repeat visitors, and frequent visitors. The data are relatively easy to collect, analyze, and report; however, they may not sufficiently evaluate an online learning environment. Minimum attention has been given to the quality of discourse and the acquisition of higher order learning.

In an online environment where the goal is to transform ways of knowing, this trivializes the exchange and does not promote higher order learning. Typically, member opinions are not substantiated with data, through intellectual justifications, and stimulating questions fail to promote critical or reflective practices. To ensure that participation in online learning communities promotes the high quality member exchanges and the acquisition of higher order learning, it is important to examine how members interact and apply information to construct new knowledge.
Given that the topic of creating meaningful online learning experiences is not new, why do faculty in higher education faculty with this skill? As at Jan’s institution, many universities provide faculty professional development for various levels of media literacy (everything from options in basic word programs to facility in multimedia software). In addition to the media workshops, separate sessions for many differing instructional and assessment strategies in the classroom are offered as lifelong learning experiences. However, rarely is professional development offered to faculty in higher education specifically on how to tie the areas of media proficiency and teaching strategies together (Palloff & Pratt, 2001). This phenomenon is especially apparent in professional development for teaching in online environments.

Even when faculty are motivated to offer online classes and seek to increase their technology skills, they often walk away from technology workshops feeling like they still do not know how to construct their online class environment. Faculty acquire isolated technology and pedagogical skills, but do not know how to put the pieces together to offer quality, effective online learning experiences. Often, this connecting piece — online teaching and learning strategies — is omitted in the higher education environment due to budgetary, expertise, and/or personnel reasons. Being that this is the case, the more frequently, clearly, and concisely experts in the field can investigate and publish these effective online pedagogic strategies, the more likely faculty will be exposed to them.

In this article, we attempt to address the creation and educational value of virtual learning environments and discussion. Although the research may exist, the challenge of bridging the gap between interface literacy and online pedagogy still exists. Perhaps some of the established guidelines for virtual learning environments need to be revised to address the challenges that are occurring in the field of online education today.

**Literature Review**

Dewey (1916) asserted education should promote “habits of mind.” Dewey viewed education not as a single event, but rather as a lifelong process of reorganization, reconstruction, and transformation. Institutes of higher education must meet the challenge to restructure didactic programs. Researchers recommend several features to improve teaching and to shift from the traditional didactic models of teaching and learning to a learner-centered model. These features include: (a) experiential concrete tasks, (b) inquiry and research-based experimentation, (c) collaborative exchange, connected to subject matter and pedagogy, (d) coaching, mentoring, and problem-solving, and (e) relating to other school reform initiatives (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). The infusion of online learning teaching and learning strategies can facilitate ongoing, authentic, collaborative, and learner-centered programs to improve student achievement.

When web-based learning environments were first implemented, there was rampant skepticism regarding the effectiveness of the process. Since that time, research has indicated that “The No Significant Difference Phenomenon” exists between technology-based instruction and traditional instruction (Russell, 1999). While there is no significant difference in learning, it is hypothesized
that the teaching and learning processes within a virtual environment are influenced by the
technology circumstances of every individual who participates in the experience. Each
individual’s knowledge, skills, and experiences with technology have the potential to impact
motivation, engagement, discourse, content, and affect. Characteristic or perceived
characteristics of online learners or facilitators are that they are computer literate, and that the
lack of reliable technologies or technology skills creates a barrier to active engagement (Simard,
2003).

Simard (2003) notes it is important to provide a process for supporting members to become
technology proficient and to procure or access the technologies required to engage in an online
learning community. In addition, it is critical that the facilitators of online learning be supported
in not only becoming proficient technology users, but also in how to maximize the inherit
interactive features of technology to promote student achievement. Lieberman (1995) points out
that what people seem to want for students is frequently denied to educators when they are the
learners. What is essential to remember is “Learning is not caused by the technology, but by the
instructional method ‘embedded in the media’” (Clark, 1994, p. 22).

Learning can be broadly defined as an expansion of the mind to meet new challenges: “Learning
is not concerned with decoding and recalling information but rather with the process of social
and practical understanding. It is an active and meaningful construction of facts, ideas, concepts,
theories and experiences in order to work and manage successfully in a changing world of
multiple and synchronous contexts” (Light & Cox, 2001, p. 63). Such learning requires higher-
order thinking skills. According to Hopson, Simms, and Knezek (2001) higher-order thinking
skills are the cognitive skills that permit learners to perform at the analysis, synthesis, and
evaluation levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy. Lewis and Smith (1993) purport, “Higher order
thinking occurs when a person takes new information and information stored in memory and
interrelates and/or rearranges and extends this information to achieve a purpose or find possible
answers in perplexing situations” (p. 136).

Bloom’s Taxonomy under girds educational research and is currently the most widely accepted
model of cognitive ability. According to Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, and Krathwohl (1956),
the intent of Bloom’s Taxonomy is to provide a classification system for educational learning
goals. Bloom’s Taxonomy outlines six hierarchical and cumulative levels of cognitive skills. The
levels of the taxonomy, listed from least to most complex skills, include knowledge,
comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Barlow (1987) indicates that the
levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy are not absolutes; some overlap and may exist as learners transition
from one level to the next. Although Bloom’s is not the only framework available, research has
indicated that Bloom’s Taxonomy transcends age, method of instruction, and content (Hill &

According to Wells (1996), traditional “teacher talk” is concentrated at the knowledge,
comprehension, and application levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy. Research indicates that when
educators participate in collaborative discourse their conversations range from the exchange of
practical strategies or anecdotes, testing of new ideas, and systematic inquiry, which result in
“enhanced normal practice” (Feldman, 1997). In an online learning environment, discourse
supports social interactions and the creation of joint understandings related to student learning
and pedagogical practice (Louis & Kruse, 1995). Koschman, Kelson, Felteovich, and Barrows (1997) indicate that within collaborative conversation processes, members exchange ideas, beliefs, and uncertainties; enhance learner construction and retention of knowledge; explain a member’s stance on an issue; empower members to take a position on an issue; and permit learners to analyze information in new ways and construct new knowledge.

Conversation is essential to exchanging information and constructing knowledge. Brookfield (1998) indicates that a conversation is typically member-to-member, and not controlled by a single party. Simard (2003) indicates that the facilitator actions necessary to develop and sustain an online learning environment include: establishing clear expectations and communication strategies; promoting member engagement or interaction; fostering a sense of community or cohesiveness; setting and maintaining a positive tone; providing technical support; offering directions and protocols for participation; encouraging members; presenting content that is informative and relevant; varying content presentations and activities (individual and teaming); summarizing conversations and pulling out the common information as a discussion point; responding to individual and community needs; giving timely feedback; and utilizing questioning strategies that focus the discussion.

For faculty who are implementing online learning environments, there are frameworks available for building community, setting goals, and promoting member discourse. For example, Laurillard’s Conversation Framework (2002) outlines stages of conversation (discursive, adaptive, interactive, reflective) along with the responsibilities of the facilitator and members of the learning environment. Simard (2003) recommends the following facilitation strategies (Table 1), which are based upon Laurillard’s Conversation Framework and implemented within the context of an online learning community.

**Table 1. Facilitation Strategies Adapted from Laurillard’s Conversation Framework**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dialogue and Activity</th>
<th>Facilitator Responsibility</th>
<th>Member Responsibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discursive</td>
<td>1. Provide a discussion environment for the topic goal within which members will generate and receive feedback.</td>
<td>1. Engage in discussion course overview (as needed), Getting to Know You (required), and Learning Goals Forum (required).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 1 (Days 1–3)</td>
<td>2. Provide objectives and proposed outcomes.</td>
<td>Note: Learner goals can be generated in a private discussion forum depending on member preference, but all final goals are posted in a public forum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>•Program overview</td>
<td>3. Build connections between participants (“Getting to know you”).</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Summarize discourse and member goals.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptive</td>
<td>1. Facilitate final goals and objective.</td>
<td>1. Use existing conceptual knowledge to respond to scenario in the discussion forum (required).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 1 (Days 4–7)</td>
<td>2. Present a scenario and frame the topic based</td>
<td></td>
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## Dialogue and Activity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facility Responsibility</th>
<th>Member Responsibility</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Goals established</td>
<td>2. Modify learning goal as needed. Present goal(s) as a hypothesis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Lectures and reading assigned (after goals established)</td>
<td>3. Pair or team learners.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Scenarios presented</td>
<td>4. Respond to learner goal modifications.</td>
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### Interactive Weeks 2 & 3

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<tr>
<th>Facility Responsibility</th>
<th>Member Responsibility</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Provide a task, based upon the challenge question, which requires learners to act and to generate and receive feedback (from peers and facilitator) regarding actions.</td>
<td>1. Explain hypothesis to learning partner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Provide meaningful feedback on learner actions that relate to the nature of the task goal.</td>
<td>2. Act to achieve the hypothesis. (Remember, action must cause a meaningful change)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Guide learners to additional sources.</td>
<td>3. Report basis for action (beyond personal experience) and progress to learners and facilitator.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Provide a synopsis.</td>
<td>4. Provide peers with feedback regarding hypothesis, basis for action, and progress.</td>
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</table>

### Reflective Week 4

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<tr>
<th>Facility Responsibility</th>
<th>Member Responsibility</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Support the process by which learners link the feedback on their actions to the topic goal.</td>
<td>1. Reflect on the task goal, his or her action on it, and the feedback she/he received, and link this to hypothesis.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

According to Laurillard’s Conversation Framework, during the discursive stage the facilitator provides an overview of the initiative. Within the discursive stage, members and facilitators begin to build connections and get to know one another. Characteristics of the phase include: facilitator and member conceptions; agreement upon learning goals; discussion of the topic goal within which members can generate and receive feedback on descriptions appropriate to a specified topic.
In the adaptive stage of the Conversation Framework, facilitators present content or scenarios and solicit member feedback. Throughout the adaptive stage, the facilitator has the responsibility to use the relationship between her own and member ideas to establish the focus of the continuing dialogue. Members have the responsibility to use the facilitator feedback and relate it to existing experiences or concepts.

As discourse progresses to the interactive phase, facilitators provide an environment within which the member can engage in, generate, and receive feedback on actions that pertain specifically to the task goal (Laurillard, 2002). The member is accountable for taking action to achieve the task goal. In addition, the facilitator must offer meaningful intrinsic feedback upon member actions that relate to the nature of the task goal.

Within the reflective portion of discourse, the facilitator must support the process in which members link feedback about their actions to the topic goal for every level of description within the topic structure. Members then reflect upon the task goal, action taken, feedback received, and link this to his or her original concept of the topic goal. Laurillard (2002) emphasizes that it is imperative to remain focused upon learner conceptions and epistemologies within the iterative process of member and facilitator dialogue.

Discussion

Many higher education faculty members, such as Jan, who have an understanding of the Course Management System and its potential, translate their on-ground courses into the online environment via traditional means (i.e., by posting their course syllabus and lectures and leaving it at that). However, “access to information” does not equate “access to learning.” The act of providing students with information and resources does not ensure learning. Crook (2000) states, “The use of technology in an educational setting needs to advance from a ‘one-sided repository for handouts, lecture notes and assignment details,’ to a more ‘community-based’ model of facilitating collaborative discussions and sharing products of the learning group” (p. 175). According to McDermott (2000), knowledge acquisition occurs by using the tools, ideas, techniques, and participating in a learning community. Conceptualization or meaning making of the information or resource creates knowledge. If Jan had this article sitting beside her on her desk, we hope that the following pragmatic advice would help her to take the first steps.

One important thing to remember at this point is to develop the vision and activities and then think about the processes needed to make them happen. Do not get mired in a vicious cycle of letting the technology tool drive your course development. That is akin to letting a tool (e.g., a hammer) determine the blueprint for your home. The tool has to be considered, but not to the point whereby it prevents the facilitator from developing a pedagogically sound plan.

More important than the tool is Jan’s awareness that her role is evolving from that of content expert to that of knowledge facilitator. An online facilitator plays a large role in fostering a sense of belonging or connectedness. A facilitator’s roles include being an active member of the learning environment, role model, disciplinarian, observer, participant, mentor, host, technical support, and learner (Preece, 2000). In addition, a facilitator plans and promotes effective
pedagogy and social interactions, which can be constructed using Laurillard’s Conversation Framework (2002).

Once the plan has been developed, Jan may want to spend some time locating an online mentor. This individual could easily be a colleague whom Jan works with on a daily basis. The colleague should have some experience in developing online courses and be someone who is willing to support or guide Jan through the process of translating her plan into an online environment.

The online course environment will need to address pedagogical and learner needs. Zemke and Zemke (1995) and Boucouvalas and Krupp (1989) concluded that it is important to consider the needs of adult learners: flexibility in time, relevance of material, and control over their educational process. In order for online learning environments to meet the needs of its members, they must contribute empirically and empathetically to community needs (Ulrich, 1998). In essence, it is important to

- create an environment that reflects your personality (i.e., casual, welcoming, and supportive),
- be prepared for the technology glitches (yours and your learners),
- look for signs that a learner is struggling (i.e., lack of engagement),
- establish a social presence so learners know you are ‘there’,
- communicate regularly (especially during the first couple of weeks (use e-mail, discussion, and even the phone),
- provide relevant and timely feedback,
- provide contact information (e-mail and phone) and appropriate times to call,
- foster relationships (learner-to-learner and facilitator-to-learner),
- model appropriate online etiquette in all communication,
- and set and post clear protocols and timelines.

Prior to the end of the course, Jan may want to conduct a learner survey to evaluate the success of the course. In addition, she will want to personally reflect upon the experience to determine what was worthwhile and what needs to be revised for future iterations of the course. Based upon learner and personal reflections, Jan can then revise her strategic plan and learning environment.

**Summary**

So now that the literature has been reviewed and interpreted into some practical tips for creating online learning environments, we need to revisit our initial question:

*Is online course facilitation the new classroom management?*

Based on what we know about online teaching and learning, the literature that has been written about it, and the research that has begun to investigate pertinent aspects of the field, in many ways the answer is yes, online course facilitation is becoming the new classroom management. For faculty like Jan, who has taught traditional on-ground classes, ‘managing’ the learning
environment has never been an issue. Instructors throughout the ages have been creating, facilitating, and teaching face-to-face classes. So much so that now our history as educators has provided us with an almost transparent view and embedded understanding of how to conduct on-site classes. As instructors, we simply don’t have to consider every detail of face-to-face instruction because our predecessors have put strategies and processes in place which time has proven work to elicit effective teaching and learning. Now with the advent of distance-education, course creation, delivery, and facilitation are all new areas to be considered. Since our physical classrooms have changed, the ways in which we manage teaching and learning also need to change. As the literature base in distance learning develops, many of these challenges will acquire creative solutions. For now though, online course facilitation is indeed the new classroom management and a novel area for investigation and courageous exploration.

References


