Best Practices for Online Facilitation

magine you are helping a 20-something year-old student logging on to his/her first online course. Then, imagine you are helping a 40- or 50-something year-old student logging on to his/her first online course. What are the differences? The first obvious difference may be the degree of computer skills and experience. Most young adults have had experience with computers, electronic games, and other digital devices in their K-12 classrooms, friends' homes, the mall, and even workplaces. Computers are a way of life for them. But for older learners, computers often cause anxiety; technological proficiency may be a newly acquired skill, limited perhaps only to their television remotes. Those of us older than 35 did not grow up with computer technology, so may have had to adapt to it in our workplaces. Technological proficiency and comfort are also accompanied by very different expectations learners bring to online learning. Younger adults also bring expertise with a variety of different types of communication: IM (instant messaging), interactive video games, online chats, electronic bulletin boards, blogs (Webbased journaling sites) and cell phones that take and send photos and text messages.

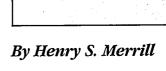
It is important to take these audience factors into consideration when facilitating online learning. In addition to matching the learner preparation and abilities to the course level and content, other factors that contribute to facilitating of online learning best practices include understanding the technologies, effective course design, the multiple roles of the facilitator, developing your own online style, and effective group interaction.

Understanding the Technologies

There are many different technologies that add to the complexity of distance learning. The first online courses provided content and communication in one direction, such as documents from a static Web site, video to view, or information pushed from the instructor to the learner by e-mail. Today, the designer of an online course has many more ways to deliver information and create interactive communication.

The technologies that make these different course delivery methods possible often are called information communication technologies (ICT). Today these technologies enable delivering course materials and oneway and two-way communication over the Internet, via satellite as well as traditional landline telephone and cable networks. Any of these ICT enable both synchronous (same-time or real-time) communication and asynchronous (at different times) delivery and communication. Examples of synchronous delivery include two-way audio (via computer, telephone or radio) or two-way video, IM, text messages and online chat. Examples of asynchronous delivery include e-mail, listservs, online bulletin boards, blogs, videotapes, CD-ROMS or archived audio and video streams.

ICT delivery modes are converging with the development of high-speed, wide-bandwidth Internet capacity (what the techies call "big pipes") to carry content. The early forms of ICT delivery often used static Web sites as information repositories, with e-mail being the primary interactive medium. Then listservs, discussion forums, and chat technologies developed and were attached to Web sites. Soon these technologies were integrated with course management systems (often abbreviated as CMS or LMS - learning management systems). Examples of CMS are Blackboard, WebCT, Angel, and eCollege.



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These course management systems (CMS) integrate features such as pages for announcements, the syllabus, course documents, and calendars along with interactive features such as discussion forums, e-mail, chats, white boards, drop boxes and group workspaces. Instructional management features include grade books, test construction and delivery, and tools to connect digital library resources, other Web resources such as research databases, audio and video streams, etc. Web conferencing systems are a more complex development that integrate synchronous video delivery, interactive white boards and chat interaction into online delivery. Examples of Web conferencing systems include Macromedia's Breeze, Cisco's MeetingPlace, and Live Meeting from Microsoft Office. Web conferencing is more often found in large-scale corporate training settings.

Effective Facilitation Begins With Interactive Course Design

Effective online facilitation starts with the process of designing a new course, or adapting an existing course, for online delivery. It is important to first develop rich, achievable and measurable learning objectives. The next step is to create engaging, authentic learning events with relevant tasks for learners. Effective online course design and facilitation use a learner-centered model, a familiar model for most adult educators. If an online course consists primarily of video of the instructor lecturing, online readings, quizzes and traditional exams, then the course is simply taking a traditional teacher-centered course and delivering it asynchronously via the Internet.

Effective online courses use interactive instructional strategies and learning events that flow from and support course learning objectives. The activities for students are engaging and relevant to course objectives. One strategy is to adapt successful learner-centered strategies and activities from the traditional classroom. Another strategy is to create new strategies and activities made available by the communication capabilities of ICT. An online course incorporates a variety of engaging tasks besides readings, such as simulation or case study, essays, reports of interviews or field experiences, descriptions of hands-on activities, discussions, peer critique, student journals (a popular use of blogs) and chats. These courses use both individual and collaborative group activities to provide variety. Group activities promote social interaction in courses using ICT delivery.

Bernie Dodge and Tom March developed an Internet-based learning event called a Webquest at San Diego State University in 1995. It has become a well-known way to plan a learning event. It is a useful format for developing individual or group activities. There are many examples developed for all levels of education at their Web site (http://webquest.sdsu.edu/). Webquests are an example of planning/learning cycle that takes advantage of the rich resources of the Web. The critical steps defined for a Webquest are:

- Introduction
- Task
- Information resources to complete task
- Process description

- Guidance—questions or directions
- Conclusion—perhaps application and/or reflection

Online Facilitator Roles and Interaction

There are many roles played by an effective learner-centered facilitator, whether in a traditional classroom or online. However, you need to be more conscious of these roles in online learning. Effective course design strategy doesn't place the online facilitator as a "talking head" or at the center of the Web of learning events. Instead, the facilitator provides content and resource expertise while allowing students to investigate the subject area within the content focus and course structure. These roles and areas of expertise include:

- 1. Content and resource expertise:
- Serves as content consultant who poses relevant guiding questions;
- Maintains a learner-centered focus;
- · Provides clear and useful feedback; and
- Structures learning events to engage students with other students.
- 2. Online social process expertise: There is also the element of social process—online course climate, that is—that needs to be developed and maintained by the facilitator. Research on "social presence" has identified the richness and depth of social interaction in online courses. Interactive learning events promote the development of this social process. It is important for the facilitator to:
- Create a safe and engaging climate for collaboration;
- Design interactive group discussions and tasks;
- Empower learners by encouraging self-directedness;
- Post critical, reflective questions; and
- Share course organization and responsibility for learning with students.
- 3. Manager of the structure and process: Online courses require planning ahead. Students are much more comfortable and engaged if they see a roadmap for the entire course rather than a few weeks at a time. The facilitator is responsible for managing this structure and process. It is important to:
- Provide clear structure and course organization with places for students to share in the responsibility;
- Provide directions to appropriate resources;
- Develop clear guidelines and format templates for assignments;
- Maintain appropriate pacing for tasks in course schedule to avoid task or information overload; and
- Be flexible to make adjustments when necessary during the course.
- 4. Demonstrate technical competence with ICT: The final role of the online instructor is the ability to demonstrate that anyone can be technically proficient with using the tools and features of a CMS. The effective facilitator provides FAQs, guidance to "Help" resources, and a supportive

climate where learners are comfortable asking basic questions. This is especially important at the beginning of a course as your online learning community is developing. Particularly crucial elements include:

- Assist learners to become comfortable with tools and features of a CMS;
- · Model using a variety of media (text, graphics, video, audio); and
- Model effective communication techniques and "netiquette."

Develop an Engaging Voice and Tone

Your personal voice and tone have an important impact in online facilitation, even in written materials such as the syllabus, schedule,

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description of assignments, and announcements. Interpersonal communication needs to be personal. Using student names and inclusive language (we, you, our) in e-mails, forum postings, chat exchanges and rubric or other assessment feedback helps build relationships. If you model using names, others in the course will use them too. In the same way, students will pick up on terse responses or un-verbalized frustrations that come through in your writing that may interfere with positive communication and impact the climate within the course. The following are important to consider:

- Create inclusive, supportive and engaging climate, using learners' names often;
- Develop a personal voice and conversational style—as appropriate for the audience;
- Use inclusive language, such as we, you, our;
- Use a neutral, balanced tone in all communications to describe course content and for interpersonal communication; and
- Provide a space for everyone to post an introduction and share appropriate parts of their personal life to develop the online learning community.

Effective Visual Presentation

Online courses are very often text-intensive so designers and facilitators need to make an effort to add visual elements within text documents or via links to other Web resources. Most subjects can be enriched by providing pictures and maps of where events happened and the people involved and using visual presentation of concepts and data such as a table format, charts, graphs or concept mapping. Concept mapping software is available from low-cost and even free sources. Here are some ideas for more effective visual presentation:

 Add visual elements in documents or via links to provide variety in text-intensive courses, such as pictures or video clips, tables, charts, graphs, and concept maps; Include maps of related geography and cultural features.
It is very important to respect ownership and copyright issues. Look for sources such as the Smithsonian and other government sources for visual elements in the public domain or be sure to get permissions to use works covered by copyright.

Effective Online Groups

There are several elements to consider when creating effective online groups. Individuals in online courses do a great deal of work independently. An authentic, relevant group task in an online course focuses the peer student group on communicating to collaboratively complete the task. It brings the strengths of all to bear and is very

effective when it includes a reflective component. And, even though students may complain about group work, it does build social bonds and reduce the sense of isolation in an online course. These factors are important in creating effective online groups:

- Individuals work interdependently to produce quality outcomes;
- Online peer groups work collaboratively to provide support and the opportunity for reflective process; and
- Authentic, engaging tasks require communication to collaborate and achieve a successful outcome.

As the final element in effective online groups, we need to remember the ICT context that provides the tools and supports successful group interaction. Just like good lighting, comfortable chairs and tables, and a comfortable room temperature in a conducive traditional classroom, the ICT, supports the facilitator and the learners as they accomplish the tasks. The ICT provides the tools for transparent group communication, developing group norms, managing conflict effectively, and solving problems as the group accomplishes course tasks.

Summary

A very positive impact of online learning has been the attention to course design as an important process with a set of tools to improve all courses, not only those offered at a distance. Effective course design uses a systematic approach to planning all the elements of a course. This article has provided an overview of the best instructional design and delivery practices for facilitating online courses. Many factors that contribute to effectively facilitating an online course have been discussed, including student expectations and experience with technology, understanding the types of technologies used, effective course design, the multiple roles of the facilitator, and developing effective groups. The facilitator needs to be able to weave an effective learning experience from these interactive elements that is appropriate for the specific online audience.

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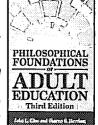


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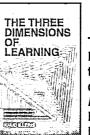
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