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Building Success in Online Educational Programs for Adult Learners

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Abstract: The purpose of this symposium is to explore multiple perspectives on building and maintaining high quality online educational programs in university settings for adult learners.

As a course designer, course instructor, and former graduate student, I (M. Eichler) have had the opportunity to experience an array of online courses designed for adult learners. There seems to be a wide variety of approaches to online courses roughly matching the educational values of instructors and designers, from those who design courses much like independent study correspondence education with little interaction besides assignments to those who use who levels of administrative control through course tools and being highly involved in directive classroom conversation. As a profession, we have seen the rise of online, Internet-based courses through the rise of entire online degree programs both at traditional and online-only universities. Some have had high rates of success, while others have folded. Institutions have followed different paths in establishing, continuing, promoting, and utilizing online educational programs whether they are at the course level, the program level, or the university level.

This symposium will review several perspectives in building success in online educational programs adult learners. Some of the perspectives propose building success through course level interventions, including building effective discussions, utilizing audio tools in interaction, building social presence, or building a teaching presence, while others relate to programmatic issues, such as dealing with programs in transition or building successful student affairs programs for online learners. These perspectives come from experienced online educators in adult education programs.

Focusing on Discussion – Matthew A. Eichler

As one of the main forms for interaction between students and one another and student and instructor, discussion forums in online classes deserve high levels of attention in online teaching. In constructivist-styled online classes, course discussion, whether synchronous (chat) or asynchronous (discussion forum), serves as primary site for relating learning material to previous knowledge, for gaining understanding and building bridges between personal understanding and that of others, namely learning peers and the instructor, and for exploring inferential relationships. Providing elements of structure, such as grading rubrics, descriptive discussion protocols, and active student facilitation promotion provide for more meaningful and effective discussion forums (Gilbert & Dabbagh, 2005).

There are several noted benefits of online discussion forums compared to in-class face-to-face discussions, including the increased reflection time available for students, the ability to edit and formulate posts extensively, as well as the ability to read and post on the students' own time, especially useful for students who are more fluent in written language than spoken language. Having the ability to follow a line of discussion through a thread is beneficial to both instructors and students (Tiene, 2000). Brookfield and Preskill explain that while online courses can be

isolating, learners have the golden opportunity to experience “genuinely individualistic critical thinking” (2005, p. 232) because the power of groupthink is reduced in the online environment.

Students in online courses express concern over repetition and an urge to write about something unique. This can be mitigated by providing several options for discussion prompts, which is something I present in my own online classes. For those students who find the discussion prompts provided to limiting, there is also an opportunity to write their own prompts and respond to them. In my own experience, I have found that students need to be taught how to respond to one another, so that discussion responses go beyond simple expressions of agreement or disagreement. A number of technical tips, plus careful questioning that encourages students to foster connections between the theoretical aspects presented in a class and the areas in which they can practice these aspects provide for optimal discussion. One aspect the instructor can foster in online courses is that of respect (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005). The instructor shows respect for learners in recognizing his or her own limitations in knowledge and acknowledging students’ contributions to the truth-seeking nature of an online discussion. Further, the instructor is the chief role model in online discussions, demonstrating ways of appraising others’ work and developing sound relationship through online discussion.

Computer-mediated Communication (CMC) Voice Discussion Tools – Tani K. Bialek

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is an electronic exchange of information using computers and includes many forms of communication such as electronic mail (e-mail), bulletin boards and computer conferencing (Paulsen, 1995). CMC technology used as a teaching tool and has been widely studied for its pedagogical implications and research illustrates that CMC-enabled discussion threads reveal a deeper thought process by removing time constraints (Davie & Wells, 1992); provide more opportunities for self-reflection (Everett & Ahren, 1994; Aiken, 1993); facilitate collaborative learning (Bonk & King, 1998; Schrum & Lamb, 1996) and promote a learning community (Burge, 1994). Wimba Voice Board software is an Internet-based CMC tool that provides asynchronous verbal interaction resembling conventional text-based online discussion. Despite efforts to incorporate voice discussion boards, such as Wimba, research shows that most students prefer to make text rather than voice postings. Some headway has been made in the area of communication competency when using voice discussions where McIntosh, Braul, and Chao (2003) reported that 41 per cent of the students agreed or strongly agreed that Wimba discussion boards were effective in facilitating debates and discussions. Within the remainder of this section research results from an online course and ways to increase student adoption of voice discussion tools are reported.

The purpose of this research study was to examine Wimba voice discussion usage and preferences within a graduate-level online training and development course at a large Midwestern U.S. university. The course consisted of required discussion participation per module where students had the choice of using either voice, text, or a combination of voice and text discussion posting formats. The course also included an optional opportunity to participate in a training delivery practice session using the voice discussion tool. During the final week of the course students were surveyed electronically regarding their voice discussion usage and preferences. The survey contained both 7-point Likert-scale questions in addition to open-ended questions. Data showed that when given an option students preferred making text-based discussion postings. Within the five course modules containing require discussion participation, all twenty students chose to make text-only discussion postings and five students participated in the optional training

delivery practice. While students generally agreed that both voice and text discussions facilitated collaborative learning they still preferred making text discussion postings.

TABLE 1: Survey Results

Survey Question	Mean
Online voice discussion technology is effective in facilitating discussions.	4.8
The incorporation of voice discussion technology enhanced my overall online learning experience in this course.	4.4
Online voice discussion facilitates collaborative learning.	5.2
I prefer making voice discussion postings.	3.2
Online text discussion technology is effective in facilitating discussions.	5.2
The incorporation of text discussion technology enhanced my overall online learning experience in this course.	5.8
Online text discussion facilitates collaborative learning.	5.6
I prefer making text discussion postings.	5.2

In order to better understand students' online discussion usage and preferences open-ended questions were included in the survey to uncover students' likes and dislikes of the voice discussion tool and why they chose to, or did not choose to, participate in voice discussions.

TABLE 2: Student Remarks Regarding Usage of Voice Discussion Technology

Pros

I liked hearing other student's voices. I felt more "connected" with them.

I liked that it made me realize how difficult it would be to actually synthesize the information in my training program and facilitator guide. It was great practice and helped me see the quality of my training program.

Cons

Sometimes the background noise made it hard to hear. There was a little static here and there, but it could have been where the person was recording.

I did not use it because I was afraid of the technology. I am extremely busy, and taking the time to learn it when there was another viable method of classroom participation did not seem like an important way to spend my time.

It was easier to write the text responses in the Discussion portion of the course. I also did the majority of my Discussion postings from work where a voice discussion wasn't very easy to disguise!

Through the survey it was revealed that none of the students had previously taken an online course incorporating voice discussion technology. When asked to describe their views regarding the use of voice discussion tools in an online learning environment students were open to using voice technology yet they were still hesitant due to ease of use issues.

TABLE 3: Student Views of Using Voice Discussion Technology in an Online Course

After using the voice discussion tools for this final bonus point opportunity, I would consider using it again. I was surprised by how easy and painless it was. I think that online voice discussion should be more of a requirement, especially with the course content of training and development.

I think that it is a great option for students to have. I think that a combination of text and voice discussion postings would be ideal. It also fosters new ways of learning and applying your knowledge to the class. I would be in favor of having voice discussions available for students more often.

Now that I have used it once, I would definitely utilize this tool if offered in a future course. I did have to respond neutrally to the majority of the questions because I was the first to post so I did not have the opportunity to listen to other people's postings and respond. I would like to see if it heightens the level of interaction and engagement in online discussions.

If it is optional, I think participants will always choose the easier discussion tool. In this case, the text postings were easier for me. As an online course, I do think that voice discussions can be a good way to learn and discuss with classmates, but an online course also doesn't quite have the same accountability that an actual classroom session has in terms of fostering discussion.

I think it is a great option for those who prefer to talk rather than type. It is also nice to "connect" with other learners in an online environment. It causes me to realize how my tone and word use effects people's impression of me. It takes more work than a normal post though, so I would probably stick with text.

The results of this survey pose several challenges for adult educators, students, and voice discussion board software manufacturers. Results of this research point toward ease of use as a key obstacle to increasing voice discussion usage. As educators we may have limited influence over the development of voice technology itself, however, there are ways we can increase adoption of voice discussion tools within our online courses. Three suggested practices are (1) promoting the educational benefits of voice discussion technology, (2) incorporating voice-based activities in addition to text-based, and (3) providing students with voice discussion training and support. In summary, the use of voice discussion board technology, such as Wimba, within online educational settings provides students with additional communication channels and has great potential to make a broader impact on self-reflection and collaborative learning in an online environment.

Creating Community Through Social Presence – Rod P. Githens

Online learning is unique from other types of distance education because of the communication tools that allow for high levels of interpersonal interaction between students. These media create spaces for participants to experience social presence, which allows for “project[ing] themselves socially and emotionally, as ‘real’ people” (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 1999, p. 94). Social presence facilitates learners’ safe engagement in meaningful dialogue and discourse. With more widespread availability of online synchronous communication technologies, instructors have even more opportunities to facilitate dialogue. Ultimately, dialogue, collaboration, and social presence can lead to the building of online learning communities. The benefits of community building have been demonstrated repeatedly in the research literature (e.g., Githens, 2007; Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins, & Shoemaker,

2000). In many academic fields, online learning communities have the possibility of generating the knowledge and perspectives that lead to meaningful learning.

Online learning communities can be fostered at the *institutional level* by providing synchronous communications tools like Wimba or Elluminate to programs throughout the institution. These synchronous tools greatly accelerate community building in individual courses (Aragon, 2003). At the *program level*, cohort models and orientation programs help to facilitate early community building through intense and consistent interaction (Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins, & Shoemaker, 2000). Early foundational courses can be strategically designed to require team assignments that allow for maximum interaction between participants. At the *course level*, instructors can provide heavily interactive courses, require assignments that call for genuine interaction, and model casual conversations through their communications. For example, when using conferencing tools, instructors can engage in informal conversations before class. These conversations can foster a comfort level that helps a learning community to emerge.

There is also a need for caution in fostering online learning communities. Although dialogue and interaction can lead to meaningful learning experiences, research is mixed on whether positive academic outcomes are linked to individuals' active participation (e.g., Picciano, 2002). Some individuals do not desire to participate in the learning communities that adult educators strive to foster (Githens, 2007). Additionally, the emphasis on community has led to requirements or expectations of sharing photos and other personal information. This trend toward less anonymity could lead to marginalization that reflects the marginalization in larger society (e.g, based on race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status). In past years, online education was thought to minimize some inequities due to the relative anonymity associated with it.

An additional concern deals with the heavy reliance on text-based communication in online learning. Text-based media can provide safe places for learners to express controversial ideas (Conceição, 2002). However, Bregman and Haythornthwaite (2003) found that intellectual and technical anxiety contributed to some online students not only being reluctant to participate, but also taking long amounts of time to perfect their text-based postings. That concern is partially alleviated with the rise in audio-based synchronous tools.

Building Success Through Teaching Presence - Lynn A. Trinko

Teaching and learning in 21st century higher education no longer lies in the hands of the educator, but also with the learner. Understanding this is crucial to design and implementation of best practices in the online classroom. Utilizing the Community of Inquiry (COI) model (Garrison, Anderson, and Archer 2000) in online course design is just one way to accomplish the goals of the learners. According to the COI model (2000), teaching presence is but one of three presence types in the classroom, also including social and cognitive presence. Teaching presence involves course design, discourse facilitation, and direct instruction in text-based computer conferencing environments. Teaching presence commences with the onset of the course, with the course design and curriculum preparation, and it continues throughout the course, as the instructor facilitates the discourse and provides direct instruction as needed. The teaching presence continues as students within the course also help guide and facilitate conversations and discussions within the course to enhance the course.

Regardless of the formal role of the teacher, online learning provides an opportunity for flexibility and revision of content *in situ* that is not provided by older forms of mediated teaching and learning (Anderson, 2008, p. 346) Imagine students are struggling with a particular concept,

in a static online course there is no room for adjustments, whereas a course that used the COI model would be able to change the content for success of the learners. It could be a matter of re-design of content wording, adding additional resources, or adding a teacher interaction. All of these items increase teacher presence in the online environment.

Discourse facilitation, a necessary component in an online environment, is not the just the act of agreeing and disagreeing, but the act of keeping learners engaged in the content. Facilitating the class for a teacher has the similar components as the face-to-face environment: attendance, keeping students on task, communicating expectations, and keeping the discussions flowing. Discourse is disciplined inquiry that requires a knowledgeable teacher with the expectation that discourse progresses in a collaborative constructive (Garrison, 2007). Discourse has two indicators that assist teachers in identifying it is occurring: Act of agreeing and disagreeing and the ability to reach consensus and understanding. These activities can easily be facilitated in an online environment through threaded discussion, chats and group reflection papers.

The teacher supports and encourages participation by modeling, commenting on and encouraging student responses, drawing in the less active participants, and curtailing the effusive comments of those who tend to dominate the virtual space (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison & Archer, 2001). All of these teaching strategies allow discourse to occur and to promote learning within the environment.

Direct instruction allows for providing intellectually and scholarly leadership in an online classroom. The provision of teaching presence is challenged to shape cognitive and metacognitive processes and learning. Student awareness of this process is crucial to complete the inquiry cycle (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). Direct instruction also takes the form of statements that confirm understanding through assessment and explanatory feedback. (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, Archer, 2001) The teacher's role in the direct instruction process is a critical determinant of overall effectiveness.

Managing Expectation in Programs in Transition - Cynthia L. Digby

The Work and Human Resource Education program at the University of Minnesota has had several faculty members who were early technology adopters who used their technology interests to adapt courses blending technology and face-to-face options. There was some interest in possibly moving one program into a blended or fully online format but many questions and concerns needed to be addressed first. Since adult education, instructional technology, curriculum and instruction and human resource development literature indicate that blended learning may require a new learning paradigm, those of us involved in the process of moving courses to blended and online formats were encouraged to seek out best practices. As department teaching assistants, Anne Conroy and I sought research funding* to try and capture some of the history and best practices at the University of Minnesota when moving programs into blended formats. There are many ways to study blended learning environments and we chose to focus on the blending of learning environments at the program level (Bonk & Graham, 2006).

Two programs in the health sciences that underwent major programmatic transitions when they moved from mostly face-to-face to mostly online classroom formats were selected. The reasons these health programs needed to move to blended formats align with several of Garrison and Vaughan's (2008) comments regarding scenarios facing typical nursing programs, and other professional programs. Data were collected by interviews (n=14) with administrators, faculty, technology support (university and program), and program support staff to ascertain their

perceptions and experiences regarding what is good about blending learning environments. One program's move was bottom-up led and gradual (more than a decade and still occurring), and the other program's move was top-down and required most faculty to move their face-to-face courses into online formats in under two years. Quality was a word mentioned by most of the participants and was both a direction and source of frustration. While it was clear that expectations of all involved with this project were high, hopeful, and there were some clear goals for both programs, there were issues that should be illuminated since these can impact program efforts in adult teaching and learning.

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Student Affairs in Online Education – Cathy Twohig

Student affairs encompasses many university service areas including admissions, registration, financial aid, career development/advising, legal services, disability services, and recreation services. The list of services may vary depending on individual institutions but is extensive in the array of opportunities for participation available to students.

The question of the role for student affairs in distance education is one that continues to evolve just as the overall field of distance education evolves. The Distance Learning Task Force report (2000) submitted to the NASPA (Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education) board of directors warned of the danger of not designing and providing support services for students in distance education programs. The report went on to say that student services in an online environment may look different than those found in on-campus settings. "It may be that the distance learning student population needs different support services provided in imaginative ways, but they may need more support because the lack of structures and patterns of on campus education" (p. 2).

Kretovics (2003) discusses the importance for student affairs to offer opportunities for distance education students to connect to the institution. Student affairs programs offer students a way to be part of a community, whether that is an advising situation, a student union gathering, or other types of services provided in a community setting. The NAFSA (2000) report spoke of student affairs administrators needing to understand the importance of virtual communities and opportunities for students to connect in these communities. While student affairs has done a good job of integrating technology into the services they provide (Hirt, Cain, Bryant, & Willims, 2003), the creation of communities go beyond this integration of technology to create interaction among students.

The need to create opportunities for differing student's needs is just as important in a virtual setting as in an in-person setting. Hirt, et al. (2003) found that the level and degree to what online students want through student affairs varies throughout the online community. The need for continued research in this area continues to grow as the distance education field expands around us.

Kretovics (2003) described the importance of connecting to distance students and creating a sense of community through student affairs. It would seem that the opportunities for student affairs to enhance the distance education experience are abundant at this time.

Reflections

Perhaps one of the strongest methods of improving online education programs is through improving and increasing interaction, whether that interaction is between students, between

student and instructor, or between student and learning material. Improving the quality of online course offerings and maintaining their quality will continue to require a reflective faculty and staff, who are ready to engage with new technologies and issues as they arrive. Critical to this improvement will be instructional faculty willing to be present in online courses, as a co-discussant, a moderator, a guide, and a mentor. The perspectives provided by Cathy Twohig and Cynthia Digby remind us of the behind-the-scenes work involved in continuing programmatic improvement, the evolution of course design and the ability to provision student affairs and student services for online students, which remains a challenge.

Online education will not eliminate the need for instructors and faculty members. In fact, there continues to be a need for faculty skilled in design and delivery of online education. It turns out that human interaction is still needed in high-quality educational experiences, whether provided in a small classroom, the workplace, or across the globe.

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