Five Roles I Play in Online Courses

by Scot Headley

In my view, the key to successful teaching and learning is relationships. As Bernard et al. (2004) suggest, "Instructionally relevant contact with instructors and peers is not only desirable, it is probably necessary for creating learning environments that lead to desirable achievement gains and general satisfaction with DE [distance education]" (412). In online courses, developing meaningful relationships requires different strategies. Although this philosophy is familiar, especially to experienced online instructors, the five roles I describe below provide a useful rubric for thinking about how an instructor can promote community.

I deliver courses to graduate students enrolled in programs offered by the School of Education at George Fox University (GFU). Our students are teachers and administrators in elementary, secondary, and postsecondary schools. GFU, a Friends institution based in Newberg, Oregon, has an enrollment of about 3,000 students. I have delivered Internet-based distance education courses here for over seven years. Currently, we use WebCT as the primary vehicle for the delivery of our online courses.

Scholars concerned with relationships in the online environment have presented several views in describing good online pedagogical practice. Salmon (2000) proposed a specific developmental process for describing and managing the online learning environment; each step in this process presents unique challenges and opportunities for instructors who want to build strong relationships with their students (Exhibit 1). Others (e.g., Palloff, Pratt, and Pratt 1999; Preece 2000) propose specific elements and procedures for building community in online courses, such as clarity of purpose and expectations, consideration of leadership, functionality and transparency of the technical system, and well-defined roles and policies (Exhibit 2). The particular strategy I employ is to adopt a number of roles that allow me to provide for student success and for community building. These roles include space planner, pacesetter, host, connector, and mirror. Several of these roles emphasize my organizational responsibilities while others reflect my commitment to the social aspects of my courses. The roles I describe do not designate linear stages of development but instead refer more to the ongoing responsibilities and commitments online instructors need to accept in order to ensure success for their students.

Space Planner

The first responsibility of online instructors is to plan their course space by using the functionality and activities of the online course to create abundant opportunities for interaction within an easily navigable interface. This responsibility is at the heart of my first role: the space planner. In Salmon's (2000) model, the first two steps, "access and motivation" and "online socialization," require that the instructor provide clear instructions on system use and course expectations; in addition, through these stages, instructors need to provide opportunities for students to associate with one another and to establish their respective identitities as participants in a particular online community of learners (Exhibit 1). I address these needs by creating opportunities for students to get to know me, the course content and expectations, and one another.

Within the online course environment, I create interactive spaces, such as a virtual student lounge, wherein I encourage students and participate in casual, off-subject conversation. I will "seed" the lounge with talk of my family, travels, personal concerns, and favorite sports teams. Further, I also require as the first activity in all courses the posting of a biographical statement by each student, which is always followed by a great deal of personal interaction in a threaded discussion. All the course participants have the opportunity to share as much professional and personal information about themselves as they wish. I summarize the biographies in a one page information sheet that can be used by students as ready reference. In addition, I create a course

photo bank or scrapbook. I accept digital pictures or photographs and manipulate them as necessary to make them usable; I especially encourage pictures of the participants with their students, colleagues, or families to help all of us get a sense of the others' personal lives. In cases where students decline to submit personal photos, I suggest that they select a picture of a favorite animal or flower to serve as their iconic representation.

I create physical spaces for interaction and relationship building as well. Although some of my students are not within commuting distance, many are, so I offer optional face-to-face meetings that center on fellowship, problem solving, and addressing technical and process concerns. We schedule two or three of these sessions on Saturday mornings throughout the semester. I often organize these mornings so that students from any of my courses can gather for an opening session that deals with broader concerns about online learning and that provides for social interaction amongst classmates. We also include photos of these face-to-face sessions in the course scrapbooks. Course-specific sessions follow, focusing on the particular expectations of each course.

Pacesetter

Online instructors must carefully design not only their virtual classroom spaces but also the timing and pacing of the course. As pacesetters, online instructors provide time for interaction and reflection and thus allow for depth as well as breadth of learning. Satisfactory experiences for the instructor and student in an Internet-based course require the recognition that the preparation, activities, and commitments are a bit different than those of face-to-face courses. I value discussion as an important instructional device, and as research done by Swan (2001) indicates, active discussion is viewed by online students as a positive contributor to their learning. In my role as a pacesetter, I recognize that rich online discussions require more time and that I must allow for more reflection time than face-to-face discussions require. Therefore, it is important to avoid content overload, both in scope and sequence. In my online courses, I reduce the scope of the content and streamline course objectives.

I also attempt to elongate the timing of the instructional cycle so that there is sufficient "time-space" available for participants to read, reflect upon, and converse about the content. Specifically, I have adopted two and three week sessions as opposed to the weekly sessions I use in my face-to-face courses. In this modified schedule, students' discussion postings often become the text for additional analysis. For example, in a three week session, students read a selection from our assigned text in the first week and post a summary and reaction by the end of the first week. During the second week, I ask the students to reflect on what their colleagues have written, responding to several posts specifically; by the end of the second week, they present statements that react to or summarize key points from the discussion. The third week's assignment then requires students to apply several of the key concepts from the text and discussion to a situation within their own professional role and context (Exhibit 3).

I use a pattern of measured responses in the student lounge and other discussion areas. I work hard at not dominating the conversation, but at the same time I make myself a regular participant. I try to be present several times a week in each conversation. However, I measure my participation by how vibrant the conversation is: the more active the conversation, the less active I become. My hope is that students will not expect me to be the mediator or gatekeeper, but that students will seek out other students as sources of knowledge and will accept the responsibility to share information, affirmation, and empathy.

Host

Rather than viewing their role in class discussions as that of moderators, online instructors should act in more subtly supportive ways—as hosts. In the host role, online instructors draw students into the experience of online learning and respond to student needs and concerns with a patient, welcoming, attentive attitude. This role is especially important in Salmon's (2000) preliminary "access and motivation" and "online socialization" stages (Exhibit 1). I perform a number of functions in this role. I send individual messages of greetings,

concern, and help, both through e-mail and course mail. Occasionally, I will phone students, particularly those who seem to be absent or in great need. I also send group messages for instructions, welcome, and encouragement.

In conjunction with students and colleagues, I have created several "Help" documents for my online course. These include "General Words to the Wise" (Exhibit 4), comments from former online students (Exhibit 5), and frequently asked questions about distance learning at GFU (Exhibit 6), as well as other documents relating to WebCT use and academic success in online courses. The published biographical statements, information sheet, and student photos also serve to foster encouragement and familiarity.

I take very seriously my responsibility to be available to my students. I publish my personal commitments with my "turn around" times. My personal commitments include: a.) a reply to phone messages, course mail messages, and e-mail messages within 24 hours; b.) reading and replying where appropriate on discussion messages within 5 days; and c.) an acknowledgement of my receipt of every e-mail and course mail message immediately upon reading it. If I am unable to respond to the request or concern at the time of initial reply, I state that and also give an estimated time for my next reply. If I am going to be away from the course space for more than a day or two, I send a message out to the participants stating the length of my absence.

Connector

Establishing and abiding by these personal commitments go a long way toward the foundation of the instructor's next role as connector. As connectors, online instructors ensure that lines of access to information and communication among participants are open and clearly established. My connector role requires me to help participants make connections with each other, with the course content, and between their work in the course and their work outside the course space. This role is especially important in Salmon's "information exchange" stage (Exhibit 1). At this particular stage, the participants may be overwhelmed by the vast amount of information available to them. As a connector, I have to be careful to help guide directions and make connections in response to these feelings, while also staying out of the way once the connections are made. I do not want to be a mediator for all conversation that occurs in the course; rather, I build bridges and highways and then enjoy the journeys that occur as a result of that infrastructure.

A number of specific activities and functions make up the connector role. I attend to connections between the course's content and the participants' professional roles and aspirations by "listening" to the concerns, problems, opportunities, and hopes that the participants express and looking for ways of connecting the content and course activities to their personal needs and desires (Exhibit 7). As previously mentioned, I utilize a published participant list that includes each student's name, professional role, geographic location, and e-mail address. This easy-to-use resource allows each participant to be acquainted with and have access to the others. At times, this leads to collaboration on course projects as participants discover common roles, concerns, or geography.

Personal reflections on course concepts are generally required assignments in my courses (Exhibit 8). This type of exercise provides the opportunity for participants to make connections between their personal experience and knowledge and the introduced content. In similar manner, I allow for flexibility in major application assignments. Individualized projects bring diverse responses to a given assignment and help participants see the potential for broad applications of course ideas, thereby expanding the assignment's learning potential and providing not only connections between the content and the students' professional lives but also connections among the professional lives of classmates.

Mirror

As the work of the course progresses, instructors must participate in assessment activities. In this role of the mirror, the online instructor provides clear and appropriate feedback to facilitate student learning. My personal goals within this role are to help individuals have an external guide to their mastery of the course

content, to inform individuals of their level of success in fulfilling community commitments, and to encourage and challenge the group as a whole. In order to provide guides for student mastery of the material, I supply assessment rubrics for written assignments, self-tests on key concepts, and student examples of previously completed assignments. I also encourage students to provide feedback to me regarding the clarity and pace of the course so that appropriate changes can be made when needed.

I use several specific forms of feedback: informal and formal personal feedback, formal group feedback, and final feedback for both individuals and for the class as a whole. Informal personal feedback is used depending on the need of the participant. For instance, I often send an encouraging e-mail or course mail (e.g., "Where have you been?" or "I hope things are going better now" or "That was a great response to…") to students in need. For formal personal feedback, I send out a session-ending course mail message that gives specific feedback regarding the participant's fulfillment of assignments and participation in the session, as well as point totals for the session, for assignments, and, at key points in the course, running point totals. I occasionally send out formal group feedback in a discussion area or through a course mail message that highlights key learning, provides encouragement or a challenge in specific areas, and provides updates regarding changes, problems, or new areas of exploration (Exhibit 9).

At the conclusion of the course, I provide an end-of-course summary that gives feedback on final assignments, a final point total, and course grade. I use course mail and e-mail for this report. I strongly encourage students to provide formal and informal feedback to me and to the university as well. We use an Internet-based course evaluation system for anonymous formal feedback; I usually receive numerous informal feedback messages as well.

Conclusion

I believe that the social aspect of the course makes it a meaningful experience for those involved. This belief is shared by others. Bernard et al. (2004), in a meta-analysis comparing distance education and classroom instruction, stated: "We speculate that the keys to pedagogical effectiveness in DE center on the appropriate and strategic use of interactivity among learners, with the material leading to learner engagement, deep processing, and understanding" (413). My roles as an online instructor lead me to guiding principles and practices for course design—the elements I select and the flow of the course are shaped by my understanding of these roles.

My brief descriptions and examples regarding the five roles of an online instructor serve to illustrate an approach to appropriate and strategic use of interactivity. These particular examples may not be appropriate with other groups of students and different content; however, instructors examining their practice or assisting a colleague new to online teaching will find that reflection on their responsibilities as space planner, pacesetter, host, connector, and mirror will only enhance their efforts.

Assuming these types of roles helps the instructor to assume primary responsibility for community building and demonstrates a commitment to strong relationships as a key expectation of the course. These roles may not be congruent with typical expectations of an instructor. For instance, consider the following implications for online instructors when they commit to adopting these roles:

Instructors would invest more time working with smaller sections of students.
Instructors would take an active role in pursuing lurkers or non-participants.
Course planning and syllabi would allow time for relationship building and reflection as primary activities of the course.
Depth of learning would be a desired outcome, as much as or more than breadth.
Interaction amongst the participants would be rewarded in the formal assessment of the course.
Instructors would model commitment to relationships through prompt and respectful replies to inquiries and discussion.
Personal and technical needs and concerns of students would be attended to and addressed appropriately.

The instructor would invite interactions outside of the formal course space.
Feedback would be prompt and readily available.

Assuming the roles of space planner, pacesetter, host, connector, and mirror requires instructors to recognize their unique position in enabling student learning in an online course.Morevoer, reflecting on the implications of those roles helps in designing the curriculum and implementing instruction in ways that place strong relationships at the center of that plan.

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