

Chapter III

Preparing Participants for Computer Mediated Communication

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ABSTRACT

Computer mediated communication (CMC) provides a way of incorporating participant interaction into online environments. Use of such features as discussion forums and chats enhance collaborative work and learning. For many, however, CMC may be an unfamiliar medium. To ensure a successful CMC event, it is essential to adequately prepare participants for CMC. A proposed four step model prepares participants for CMC. The four steps include conducting a needs and population analysis, providing an orientation before the event and shortly after the event begins, and providing continuing support.

INTRODUCTION

Computer mediated communication (CMC) provides interaction during online events, whether synchronous or asynchronous. The moderator-to-participant and participant-to-participant interaction present in CMC offers participants an environment that closely replicates face-to-face interaction with which they may be more comfortable. The advantages of CMC are diminished if participants are not adequately prepared for its deployment and use. In addition to examining why participants may be uncomfortable with CMC-based interaction, this paper proposes

several strategies for effectively preparing participants for CMC. These strategies are based on experiences delivering online training across the country to an audience that was unfamiliar with CMC-based interaction.

BACKGROUND

Moore and Kearsley (2005) cite one common misconception that participants new to online learning hold is that learning online is less demanding than face-to-face learning. In fact, the opposite is generally true. Effective participation

in CMC environments requires participants to be highly motivated and less passive than what may be possible in a face-to-face environment. They must be prepared for what they will experience in CMC. If not addressed at the outset, this misconception may result in participants falling behind and never becoming comfortable and engaged in CMC.

Sherry (2000) cites Fishman in highlighting several potential constraints on CMC-based learning. These constraints include the participant's lack of experience with using computers, cultural influences, and apprehension about electronic communication (Sherry, 2000). Hiltz and Wellman (1997) describe a sense of pressure on new CMC participants and an uncomfortable feeling of being lost that many of them experience after they first venture into a CMC environment. In addition, new participants are often apprehensive about using technology to communicate and may be more guarded in what they post in discussion forums or chat rooms when compared to what they might otherwise communicate in a face-to-face environment (Puetz, 2000; Sherry, 2000). They may need time to find their online voice (Sherry, 2000). Finding one's own voice, knowing what to say and when to interject it in an online environment is critical in CMC and the earlier that participants are comfortable with this, the more successful the CMC event will likely be. As features such as instant text messaging and chat are more widely incorporated in everyday life, participants should be more comfortable with CMC.

Many universities incorporate instant messaging in their online education. One such example was the use of MSN Messenger in a mathematics course at the University of Southern Queensland (Loch & McDonald, 2007). Students in the mathematics course were comfortable using many of the features of the instant messaging application, including the electronic ink feature (Loch & McDonald, 2007). Increased organizational use of instant messaging and its improving func-

tionality will likely result in its increased use in CMC events.

While a lack of comfort in communicating online is the primary challenge for CMC, surveys have indicated several other factors that may result in discomfort with CMC (Lewis & Romiszowski, 1996). Some participants are uncomfortable with the nature of asynchronous communication and may be frustrated with the time lags between postings and responses in online discussion forums (Lewis & Romiszowski, 1996; Sherry, 2000). For some participants, the delay in back-and-forth communication lacks the spontaneity and directness of face-to-face communication. Some participants are reluctant to express candid personal views in discussion forums or chats, since they fear that their postings can easily be printed out or saved (Lewis & Romiszowski, 1996). Apprehension about leaving a "paper trail" is understandable. What might be said and forgotten in a face-to-face environment may be misinterpreted and taken out of context in a written form. Participants may become frustrated when others post comments in discussion forums and in chat sessions that reflect their own ideas before they get a chance to comment (Lewis & Romiszowski, 1996). In a face-to-face environment, participants may be able to better gauge when they should interject comments. Those who post late in discussion environments are at a disadvantage in expressing what might appear to others to be original ideas. This situation occurs in face-to-face environments as well, as anyone who is familiar with the overeager "hand raiser" can attest. It might seem to be more clearly evident in CMC due to the text-based method of communicating. The give-and-take of face-to-face verbal interplay is replaced with a written record of who stated what and when.

Technology continues to evolve and may mitigate some of these challenges. For instance, some discussion board applications now allow users to easily post audio or even video postings and responses, thus reducing the emphasis on text-based

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