Chapter 1.47
Moderating Learner-Centered E-Learning:
Problems and Solutions, Benefits and Implications

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ABSTRACT

In response to the changes taking place in collaborative online learning environments, this chapter discusses how the simultaneous emergence of collaborative technologies and the learner-centered movement impacts the role of the online instructor. As part of this review, research related to online moderation and facilitation of learning is summarized. It is suggested that online instructors need to facilitate student generation and sharing of information, while assuming the role of learning coach or mentor to provide needed leadership and guidance. Finally, ten key benefits and implications of e-learning, as well as ten potential problems and solutions, are summarized to assist e-learning decision makers and instructors. Among the benefits include the permanence of the online text, the availability of online mentors, and the fostering of student idea generation. Some consistent online learning problems include learner confusion, lack of justification of student reasoning, and difficulties in grading online content. Instructors are provided with guidelines on how to take advantage of the benefits while limiting or overcoming the problems.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching in an online world is a relatively new and often uncertain event. With popular technologies and instructional trends coming and going, distance learning practice and policies are constantly changing. No matter how careful one may be in selecting an online course management system, he or she may be forced to drop it in favor of an inferior and untested courseware shell that was developed internally and adopted by university administrators or training managers solely because it was free. Adding to the confusion, technology trade shows as well as teaching and learning conferences continue to change their annual themes so that they all start sounding alike: "e-Learning," "Online Learning," "Asynchronous Learning Conference," "Collaborate East," "Collaborate West," "WebNet" or "Training and Learning," to name a few. Of course, the associated terminology also swiftly changes and evolves. One year "online learning" spews off the tongues of supposed distance learning experts. The following year everyone is clamoring to know more about "Web-based learning." At the time of this writing, the latest buzz word from the gurus is "e-learning[1]." What's next? It is no small wonder that many professors, administrators and corporate trainers are habitually nervous about each new wave of distance learning technology.

Despite the anxiety caused by the many uncertainties and the accelerating pace of change, teaching online is fast becoming an expected part of one's daily scholarly endeavors or, at the very least, a legitimate practice of one's colleagues and home institution. A June 2000 report from the National Education Association (NEA) (2000) indicated that while only 10% of NEA members taught a distance learning course, 90% were in institutions that offered distance learning courses, 44% of which were Web based. The report also revealed that such courses were widely distributed across fields and types of institutions. More importantly, those teaching online displayed fairly positive attitudes about these experiences and the training with which they were provided. Not surprisingly, most widespread is the use of online technologies to supplement instruction in a *blended learning* format (Ganzel, 2001; Laster, 2003; Mantyla, 2001), combining online and face-to-face instruction. While such formats may appear costly, many argue that there is significant return on investment for blended e-learning (Barbian, 2002).

Among many benefits are opportunities to create online learning communities rich in collaborative learning and to assist the learning process of adults who can now share work-related experiences around the globe (Bonk & Kim, 1998). Clearly adult learners enrolling in online courses are expecting more inquiry activities and learner-centered approaches than in the past (Rogers, 2000). As Web-based instruction continues to expand, understanding how to facilitate or moderate student learning in virtual spaces has become an important issue. Online instructors must create situations where students are building knowledge and sharing it with experts and peers who, in turn, offer authentic evaluation and timely feedback.

In response to these issues and trends, this chapter begins with a discussion of the learner-centered movement followed by brief descriptions of team centered and collaborative environments. Next, possible roles for online instructors are suggested; in particular, the role of instructor as moderator of learning (Salmon, 2000). Recent research on the various roles of the online instructor will be also discussed. Finally, ten key benefits and implications of e-learning as well as 10 associated problems and potential solutions are highlighted based on our own research. This final section is meant to provide insights for administrators making decisions about e-learning tools and systems, as well as practical guidelines for college instructors, military trainers and corporate human resource personnel embedded in the e-learning trenches.

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