Chapter 12
The Evolving Role of the Instructor in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

In this era of student-centered, collaborative, constructivist learning, augmented by social networks and other virtual environments featuring learner autonomy, self-direction and independence, the role of instructors in online education is undergoing continuous evolution since the advent of the Internet, and the proliferation of Learning Management Systems (LSM) to support teaching and learning. This chapter examines the role of the online instructor, and indeed, poses the provocative question: does there remain a useful and meaningful role for what is arguably the increasingly 'invisible' instructor in many online settings. Factors that contribute to this phenomenon, such as the proliferation of new technology, the emphasis on self-directed learning, a changing student clientele, emerging modes of assessment, etc. are noted. Findings from a various studies of student attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions of what is critical for success in online courses are highlighted, including data suggesting that the role of instructors and the features of Learning Management Systems are relatively minor factors for achieving success in online learning. The implications of these trends for the future role of the professoriate are also considered.

INTRODUCTION

In one of his dialogues, Plato discusses the impact of writing on society, and the prospect that the role of the teacher might be diminished if more citizens were to get their information and ideas from the written word rather than from the mouth of a teacher. In a more recent era, educa-

tor Mark Hopkins, as he witnessed education becoming more "industrialized," decried the loss of intimacy between teacher and student, each sitting and discoursing from opposite ends of a see-saw. Currently, there is speculation regarding the impact of Kindle and other electronic devices for reading, and the likely loss of more traditional habits and formats, as the printed word succumbs to the electronic word. Such changes, as they more significantly come into play in this

digital age, suggest the potential loss of a so-called "embodied presence" best represented in face-to-face exchanges that are not compromised by any sort of phenomena functioning as an intermediary between the interacting parties. Further, the alliance between the constructivist agenda and the ongoing effort for greater economies and efficiencies in education, reinforces the driving force that moves the teacher away from the epicenter of the teaching-learning dynamic, sidelining even more the so-called "guide on the side" and increasingly marginalizing him/her to the fringes, wherein "guide on the outside" might be a more appropriate moniker. The implications of this in the context of online teaching and learning are increasingly obvious and potentially significant

Market forces have further exacerbated this trend. As online resources have proliferated, institutions initiating online courses have enjoyed exponential growth in the number of new learners, but also have had to contend with new competitors entering this expanded arena. In the 1990s, a strong market ethos developed, with more attention paid to "customer" service, transforming students into paying consumers, and thus making them more important, as tuition dependency steadily increased in an era of diminishing resources. These changes introduced a subtle but significant element into the equation- educational providers now had to be especially attentive to the delicate balance between increasing access to knowledge and generating profits, all the while, satisfying a changing clientele, and with a product often new to both providers and consumers.

Facilitated by the advent of Web 2.0, the popularity of social networking tools, and the ubiquitous presence of various digital tools and toys, all inexorably creeping into the changing learner landscape, there is mounting evidence that the age of the auto-didactic learner may not only be eminent, but indeed dominant. Note the proliferation of "how to" books and webinars constantly on offer on such topics as "Using Twitter to Enhance Collaborative Learning; Cutting-edge Social Media Approaches to Education" and similar seductive topics as: "How instructors are incorporating Linkedin, Facebook, Twitter, Second Life, Skype, YouTube, Flickr, blogs, Wikipedia, smart-phones, etc. in their courses."

This recent and intense enthusiasm for the merits of social networks as dynamic teaching-learning environments, with almost limitless possibilities for learner-managed activity, generates equally intense cynicism by those who see this phenomenon, when carried to excess, as little more than social forums that promote narcissistic behavior fueled by fragmented and frivolous communication. One European colleague, of this chapter's author, refers to "the web 2.0 temptations" (e.g., the notion that there really is no need for course development because 'it is all on the web'; there is no need for direct instruction, as peer support can achieve this; there is no need for technical infrastructure, since it is all free on the web anyway). If this perspective has some validity, online course development and learning might well be characterized as primarily a process of "peer production" (i.e., most content developed by its student users) with progressively diminishing contributions, at least more obvious ones, from instructional personnel.

In 1990, an article which appeared in The American Journal of Distance education (Beaudoin, 1990), I attempted to identify how the burgeoning phenomenon of distance education (DE) was demanding new roles and responsibilities of teachers that differed quite significantly from the conventional duties they have historically performed within classrooms. And contrary to the misgivings of many academics at the time, it was argued that the role of instructor would remain central, and indeed, be more critical than ever. It should be noted that this piece was published just prior to the advent of the Internet as a major force in instructional design and delivery. Ten years later, I pursued another area of inquiry and wrote about the so-called "invisible learner" (Beaudoin, 2009). In that work, the phenomenon

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