Chapter 9
It Takes a Village:
The Value of Multiple Instructor Voices in the Online Classroom

Nicole A. Cooke
University of Illinois – Urbana-Champaign, USA

ABSTRACT

Online asynchronous learning is increasingly popular in academia, providing learners with new modes of content delivery and affording new levels of convenience regarding when and how people complete degree program coursework. The same technology that benefits learning can also challenge it, and online courses should strive to be as inclusive, rigorous, interactive, and content-rich as their on-campus counterparts. One method of achieving this parity is to have guest lecturers in the online classroom. Multiple instructor voices add diversity of thought and practical expertise and enrich the standard curricular content. They also contribute to creating the online learning environment and provide a basis for discussion, elaboration, reflection, and long lasting learning.

INTRODUCTION

Online learning is steadily increasing in popularity and sophistication across disciplines; it does not discount, nor replace, learning and interaction that occur in traditional face-to-face classrooms, and can no longer be considered the 'other' or alternative to 'real' learning. "The modern student is techno savvy and demands flexibility and, in a climate where universities are driven by student enrollments, we have little choice but to deliver this flexibility" (Mullamphy, et al., 2010, pp. 456-457). As such, significant and purposeful inquiries need to continue in the area of online pedagogy and learning (Rovai, 2004). In the spirit of constructivism ("a philosophy of learning based on the premise that knowledge is constructed by the individual through his or her interactions with

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the environment" (Rovai, 2004, p. 80)), the best online classroom environments are centered on learners, and encourage dialogue, collaboration, and high levels of interaction (p. 81).

Because online learners do not have physical access to their instructors and fellow students, they must be purposeful in their interactions and efforts to make contact with one another; socializing becomes a function facilitated by technology (Kazmer, 2000). Kazmer posits that forming community is an important coping skill for distance students. They are in a new and unfamiliar learning environment, without physical classroom and with limited face-to-face contact. They face a variety of problems, social and technological, that students in more traditional programs do not. As students enter this new learning environment, they need support to help them gain entry to the community and to begin their interaction with others (Kazmer, 2000).

Haythornthwaite (Haythornthwaite et al., 2000) concurs, and suggests that not only is building community important for distance learners, but maintaining it is vital as well. Technology can certainly facilitate community building, but will take concerted effort by students to maintain and nurture the initial bonds formed; disengaging from and not cultivating social bonds and connections is referred to as "fading back" (p. 12): "Those who fail to make such connections feel isolated and more stressed than those who are more active in the community" (p. 2). This is especially true when considering Internet-based asynchronous learner communities, or asynchronous learning networks (ALNs) (Rovai, 2000, 2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2003, 2007; Rovai & Jordan, 2004; Rovai & Wighting, 2005; Wegerif, 1998).

One of several models used in distance education and virtual communities, ALNs revolve around learners and instructors who are separated by space *and* time. Students in such courses, or communities, "interact with each other mostly through the use of discussion boards, without the requirements to be on-line at the same time" (Rovai, 2001, p. 33). This population of learners is at the most risk for experiencing alienation (Rovai & Wighting, 2005), boredom and lack of engagement with others and the content, and run a higher risk of dropping out or removing themselves from the online environment. Asynchronous learners have the greatest challenge when attempting to build a sense of community due to the lack of same-time interactions and no physical and verbal cues, but may perhaps benefit the most from community formation.

Haythornthwaite and Hagar (2005) do mention that there can be barriers to forming communities via mediated means; technology is so pervasive and plentiful that care must be taken to choose methods capable of accommodating various hardware and software requirements, and take into account learners' varying levels of technological skills. These these tools must be utilized in meaningful ways; learners should feel as though they are really connecting with others and engaging in personal relationships and networks (Haythornthwaite et al., 2000), as opposed to just completing academic requirements.

The instructor is vital to creating community in the online classroom (Rovai, 2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2003; Rovai & Wighting, 2005). Related to the instructor's role of providing 'transactional distance' (the structure of an online class and its dialogue) and 'social presence and immediacy' (how often they participate and provide timely feedback), in the online classroom, her design of collaborative work and learning, as well as her group facilitation skills (Rovai, 2001, pp. 288-294) are all called upon for successful learning. Students' motivation and willingness to learn are certainly important factors for building community, and contribute to the ultimate benefit from the virtual classroom, but if the instructor does bring this array of abilities 'to the table', community will not form.

With the themes of community and instructor immediacy firmly in mind, I taught two sections of an online class (*Reference Sources & Services*)