

Facilitating Roles an E-Instructor Undertakes

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INTRODUCTION

A discussion of roles that an instructor plays in the traditional classroom does not seem to be an innovative focus in the educational field. Yet, such discussions continue because of the topic's paramount impact on student learning. Discussions regarding the roles that an online instructor plays in a virtual learning environment are essential because teaching and learning via course management systems are completely different from that in the face-to-face setting and are still in their infancy, thereby requiring a great deal of exploration.

BACKGROUND

Roles of an Online Instructor: The Paradigm Shift

Traditional face-to-face meetings differ distinctively from online teaching (Coppola, Hiltz, & Rotter, 2001; Lim & Cheah, 2003) largely due to the following reasons. The former relies heavily on a specific location and time, whereas the latter is independent of time and location. The former mostly constitutes speaking and listening, while the latter is exercised primarily by reading and writing. The former makes an instructor and learners easily visible to one another, while the latter leaves the instructor and all learners in individual and invisible locations (Pelz, 2004; Sloan Consortium, 2006). The former expects learners to have a moderate level of self-regulation, whereas the latter requires learners to have a higher level of self-regulation (Pelz, 2004; Sloan Consortium, 2006). All the changes from the familiar to the unfamiliar explicitly generate a sizable barrier for online teaching and learning. Removing barriers to student success necessitates the online instructor to undertake a variety of responsibilities (Lim & Cheah, 2003; Morris, Xu, & Finnegan, 2005). Discovering what roles an instructor ought to play in a virtual learning environment is conducive to and vital in the successful facilitation of student learning.

MAIN FOCUS: ROLES UNDERTAKEN BY AN E-INSTRUCTOR

In the following text, the roles of an e-instructor are characterized horizontally by two categories on the basis of a study conducted by the author (Chang, 2007): Pedagogical Efficacy (8 roles) and Affective Promotion (19 roles). These roles are also set apart vertically by three distinct stages: Course Development (7 roles), Course Delivery (18 roles), and Course Completion (2 roles). To address these roles one by one, the author will present them in the form of stages, namely, Course Development, Course Delivery, and Course Completion. The first two stages contain both categories of Pedagogical Efficacy and Affective Promotion with the last stage showing only Pedagogical Efficacy.

COURSE DEVELOPMENT

During the Course Development stage, under the category of Pedagogical Efficacy, the instructor assumes four roles from those of gaining technological skills to those of getting the course ready for teaching. The instructor is responsible for acquiring necessary and useful technological skills and becomes familiar with the learned skills through practice. In the same stage, the instructor engages in research to decide the content of a course plan, which is in line with what Wilson, Varnhagen, Krupa, Kasprzak, Hunting, and Taylor (2003) found from their interviews of eight e-instructors. The researchers noticed that the information covered in virtual learning environments was not equivalent in amount to that in face-to-face meetings. One of the interviewees in the Wilson et al. (2003) study noted, "I went from about 13 individual classes or modules to about six modules." Followed by the decision-making, the instructor lays out a course plan appropriate for the students' learning needs. The reduction in content should not only be measured in quantity, but also be in quality. The environment set for learning should be responsive to students' needs and their learning levels (Berge, 1995). Topics for discussions need to be meaningful and related to students' experiences and interests to attract and maintain students' learning and desire for an in-depth study of concepts and tasks (Lim & Cheah, 2003).

During the stage of Course Development, student affective learning should be seriously attended to. Three roles are involved in this teaching process. An e-course instructor

ought to keep in mind that designing an online course is by no means “curriculum conversion” (Palooff & Pratt, 1999), because this practice is insufficient to guide students in their acquisition of knowledge in a self-controlled manner (Chang, 2007). Learning through a virtual classroom seems intimidating to some and confusing to others. To minimize the degree of apprehension and anxiety, much work is necessary, such as an analysis of the learning environment (Tessmer, 1990) and offering details of requirements and expectations (Lim & Cheah, 2003). The purpose is to avoid the phenomenon that “an instructional design project may produce a theoretically sound but practically unable product” (Tessmer, 1990, p. 56). Additionally, if the same course is repeated in a following semester, redesigning/revising should be something that an online instructor needs to exercise based on the instructor’s self-reflections and voices from students taught in the previous semester.

COURSE DELIVERY

It is through the stage of Course Delivery that interaction between students and the instructor transpires. During the interaction with students, an instructor, undertaking four roles, works as an academic guide instead of attempting, as much as possible, to remove the instructor from actual course delivery (Lim & Cheah, 2003; Morris et al., 2005). Over the course of this process, the instructor not only is a learner acquiring knowledge both in content areas and technological skills, but also needs to lecture students. Lecturing still is one of the appropriate instructional methods employed via the Internet or face-to-face meetings. Lectures would address both technology and content in order to prepare students for online learning and to avoid unnecessary confusion later in the learning process. During the lecture, the instructor should exercise caution as not to drive students further away by making a poor presentation, as some students are already intimidated by the idea of learning with computers. Lectures can also be viewed as the time when the instructor responds to students’ emails and when he or she interacts with students about their assignments via course management systems. The way that the instructor offers assistance to a learner works as a form of scaffolding or individualized instruction.

Individualized instruction transpires as each communication between the instructor and a student is tailored to specific needs or misconceptions that a student expresses through emails or a submitted assignment. Lim and Cheah (2003) supported this notion with the analysis of a questionnaire and two focus-group interviews. The researchers found that feedback provoked students’ thinking and enhanced reflection. In this sense, reviewing the student’s submitted work should not be restricted by a traditional responsibility: granting a grade. Reading student submitted assignments works as an informative process that helps the instructor be aware of the status

of the student’s learning and the quality of the instructor’s facilitation. In this sense, awarding a grade itself is not an end to the cycle of communication between the student and instructor. The circular communication continues if a student is willing to continue working on the assignment based on the instructor’s feedback. This exercise corresponds to Pelz’s (2004) argument that the instructor’s thinking is stimulated by the student’s work, with an emphasis on helping the student to reach a high level of reflective expression. Moreover, this assessment process provides opportunities for the instructor to improve the course design and teaching strategies. To an e-instructor, this practice is part of ongoing assessment. Ongoing assessment is essential in the process of teaching and learning, as it allows an instructor to continue to improve the work by constant reflections on students’ posted work. It is a way to guide students on the side as an effort to keep online learning on the right track (Berge, 1995). Teaching is intellectual work; examining one’s teaching and asking questions about ongoing teaching are part of it (Anthony, 1999). Analyzing the process of teaching in a detailed and organized way is scholarly (Shulman, 1993).

Although pedagogical efficacy is significant in student learning, student emotional involvement in learning is equally essential to the success of learning and should be taken into serious account. There are 14 roles regarding affective promotion during this stage, three times more roles than those in the Course Development stage. To ease the transition from the mode of speaking and listening to that of frequently reading and writing and to help students establish self-responsibility, self-time management, self-motivation, and a sense of autonomy, the instructor’s appropriate and incremental support in these aspects is pivotal (ESRC Economic and Social Research Council, 2002). An e-instructor should be purposefully committed to employing various strategies to encourage learners to become owners of their own learning (Morris et al., 2005; Pelz, 2004) in hopes that students would actively participate in online discussions and activities. In learning with computers, some students jump right in, whereas others resist the situation. These students usually struggled, to a certain degree, due to the dramatic shift of the learning paradigm (Wilson et al., 2003). Monitoring students’ learning can help students ease into the transition and boost their self-confidence in online learning when the instructor provides just-in-time needed support and assistance. Furthermore, to gradually help students transit from the familiar to the unfamiliar learning environment, the instructor frequently sent out email, reminding students of matters requiring their attention at an appropriate time. In the reciprocal interaction with students, it is fundamental for the instructor to understand that one student’s question may be representative of others’ and that emerging problems in the process of teaching and learning may become a potent opportunity for the instructor to reexamine the course design and instructional strategies. These can be the basis for the

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