

Chapter 21

Identity: Introspection and Integrity

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ABSTRACT

The issue of identity awareness is rarely discussed in the context of its relevance to professional growth or autonomy, and as an essential requirement for independent functioning in a web-based learning environment. The need for integrity is at the core of every interaction, the stress on doing one's best for the special satisfaction one derives from it, rather than for recognition and awards – these topics are related to awareness of the individual identity and development of a strong professional and ethical self which will help students to remain focused and skilled at self-monitoring strategies, essential in the online learning environment. There are various other issues related to web identity. This chapter will not deal with issues such as telepresence which is related to technological innovation creating a virtual presence, or social presence, which deals with interpersonal interaction; rather the discussion here is more intrapersonal in nature.

INTRODUCTION

E-learning is one of the most exciting and revolutionary developments in education. When we, as educators, want to become better instructors for adult learners, we have to learn to teach for change, to adapt to the new group of adult student population entering the non-traditional faceless classrooms in cyberspace. These are students who often enter the e-learning world with some prior knowledge and

experience and choose to study for numerous reasons ranging from improved career prospects to a real interest in the subject matter, unlike many of the Asian youth who are in the traditional classroom due to tremendous parental pressure to perform (Wike & Horowitz, 2006). This emerging revolution in education with non-traditional students choosing web-based courses and programs, is compelling educators to have a serious re-look at both the curriculum, and the ways of presenting the curriculum (in modules) or chunks of information, that students

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61520-985-9.ch021

can access at their own time, pace and space. For an instructor, to teach for change first and foremost means that there has to be personal transformation which can impact the students and transform them, and we also need a transformative environment and transformative texts (Taylor, 2006). Instructors need to introspect and reflect on teaching methods, and update themselves on the new and innovative theories that are learner-centric, moving away from teacher-centric methods (Blumberg, 2009). On his part, the online student also has more ethical responsibilities (Ettling, 2006). The passive classroom learner has to become an active online learner while taking web courses.

Competitive learning has been replaced by cooperative and constructive learning with experiential learning playing an important role. Moreover, the increasingly rich cultural diversity in the student population everywhere provides further satisfying challenges to transformative instructors who have to learn to present information in relevant and useful ways to make it easy for students to understand and remember the information. The large amount of information available to students on the dynamic Web pages that have constantly moving information facilitates the instructor's job to some extent. Yet the information in web-based courses has to be presented with great clarity as the student is not part of a classroom where there are others to provide missing cues with questions asked and responded to by the instructor immediately. Assessment too has to be ongoing with frequent corrective feedback that is explanatory. By incorporating some elements of self-assessment where students can mark their scores on objective type questions, the instructor can empower adult learners to be more responsive in online courses even if such self-assessment scores do not have a large weightage on the final grade (Taylor, 2006).

Introspection and identity awareness also impact student achievement, more so while taking distance education and online classes. Apart from technology skills, it requires a lot of maturity on the part of students – improved self-monitoring

strategies and independent functioning skills – to perform well in online courses. As unlike the traditional classroom environment, in the web world, there is an instructor in the background who is more of a facilitator than a regular face to face entity that the student can run to with minor problems. This is so even in virtual classrooms where students can see the instructor's face on the computer screen with the additional feature of being able to chat and interact with the instructor. Survey results indicate that a majority of undergraduate students admit to having cheated while at college (Bok, 2006). Independent functioning requires an awareness of self that directly influences one's interactions with others in a positive manner and assists in personal growth. In the environment of computer-assisted distance learning, where students have to work on their own, as well as cooperatively, this quality is particularly important to make them more sincere, diligent and ethical learners who can take responsibility for their work and achieve a level of self-confidence and professional etiquette. The habits learnt here will not only help them in their learning mode, but also continue to assist them in their future professional growth (Bok, 2006). There are quite a few ethical issues on the web – relating not just to usage but also to respect for each other's space and privacy. Apart from the regular topics, the overall e-curriculum needs to be comprehensive enough to cover topics related to ethics and personality development to ensure a disciplined approach in surfing the web and using the vast amount of information contained therein. Such discussions on ethical dilemmas will also address some of the long term career skill requirements for students (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

BACKGROUND

What is an identity? The Oxford dictionary meaning of the word identity is "the fact of being who or what a person or thing is" or "the

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