Establishing Social and Emotional Connections in an Online Environment

Submitted as partial requirements for the completion of EDDL 5111

For Mary Wilson of Thompson Rivers University

by

Brad Harsell

November 25, 2017

ESTABLISHING SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL CONNECTIONS IN AN ONLINE
ENVIRONMENT

Overview

As a newcomer to the field of Distributed Learning I struggle with the idea that while the principle of good teaching practices are valid both face to face and online, much of what I feel makes me a good teacher is the passion and emotion I bring to the subject and the classroom. Best practices in traditional classrooms involve making non-verbal connections between the instructor and the learners and between the learners themselves. My concern is that short of a virtual classroom, which has its own drawbacks and concerns, can I be successful as an instructor and can I ensure learner connection and success in an online environment. My intent here is to view this issue through the lens of my own experiences over the past thirty plus years, from my time in industry to my own experiences as both a learner and instructor in a post-secondary environment.

Distributed learning has existed in different formats for decades, long before the advent of the internet, and the struggle to make connections is not a new problem. . Correspondence courses, relying on the postal system to deliver lesson plans and textbooks and receive completed work existed for decades before the advent of computers. While it may seem like an impersonal method to learn in its original format there was at least a modicum of personal contact. Introductions, instructions, and responses to submitted work were hand written. As a person who grew up in the era when handwritten letters were still the norm I can attest to the fact that emotion and personality do manifest themselves in the act of writing. Technological advancements eliminated some of this contact with the advent of copying systems and word

processors. While efficient from a system point of view the "warmth" of handwritten letters was lost.

The next technological advancement brought us Computer Aided Instruction (CAI). Before the advent of the internet and the World Wide Web CAI was being delivered to remote learners through dedicated servers located at a central location. This was my first experience with distributed learning, long before I even knew the term existed, let alone what it was. Part of my responsibilities in the engineering department was Information Technology (IT). This included departmental administrative responsibilities far a CAI called PLATO (Programmed Logic for Automatic Teaching Operations). Depending on your perspective PLATO was either a resounding success (Bates, 2015) or an abysmal failure (Waters, n.d.). PLATO delivered standardized content to its students through a "dumb" (non PC) terminal. While my responsibilities were supposed to be limited to technical and administrative issues I found myself spending significant amounts of time with the learners interpreting content. Viewed through the lens of time I believe I was providing the connection and support, the sense of community, which was missing.

The advent of the internet led to an exponential increase in distributed learning. The internet was viewed as a way to deliver content efficiently and at a low cost to users who could complete lessons at their leisure. Keller's Personalized System of Instruction (PSI) advocate mastery learning and offered no time limit courses, theoretically taking all the stress of deadlines away from the student (Keller, 1968). Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) brought high quality courses from premium universities around the world to the masses either at a fraction of their bricks and mortar tuition costs or free. The success of online institutions like Udemy, Khan Academy, and Coursera has changed the face of post secondary education. There is significant

research that shows that current and future generations of learners prefer this format to face to face instructions. (Khan, 2011) To a significant portion of these potential students the use of videos that can be paused, rewound, and consumed at leisure is preferred over attending a live lecture.

At the other end of the spectrum are learners like myself. This is my third attempt at taking a program in an online format. My previous attempts ranged from crash and burn to pitiful. As a learner I am capable of learning on my own. In my industry career I spent almost thirty years learning new technologies without assistance. Part of my function was to be the "point man", to learn new equipment and technologies through manuals, research, and hands on experience then disseminate that knowledge. Since my industry days I have completed a certificate, two diploma programs, and a graduate degree all focusing on education. Through them all I craved that sense of community and connection that came with face to face classes. I committed to two years of bi-weekly three hour one way commutes to do my masters in a cohort program instead of online. In my opinion one of the most important issues we face in distributed learning is how to accommodate the entire spectrum of learners, and to bring them together to create a functioning online community.

In my second year cohort class typically 50% of the students have taken their first year at my college together. The remainder are a mix of students who have taken their first year at other institutions or who have been admitted directly into second year of the program with Prior Learning Assessment. As most of the practical activities in the first two courses are group activities it is imperative for me to create connections immediately. I do this with a combination of an icebreaker, where students will pair and interview each other then describe their partner to the class, and with the establishment of base groups.

The choice of which techniques to use to achieve similar results in an online community is a difficult one. Research is ongoing, but I believe that the results of this research is not definitive. As previously noted online learners form a spectrum, from those who prefer it to those who do it because it's the only way. The Grant and Thorton study on online best practices is typical of this research. (Grant & Thorton, 20017) First is the limited nature of the results, twelve instructor responses and 150 student responses is a small sample size. In addition the study was conducted on online learners in undergraduate programs. Since many of these programs offer a choice of online or in person delivery the study was surveying a large number of students taking the courses online by preference. The population studied was already predisposed to online learning and the techniques preferred, this may not hold true for those on the other end of the spectrum. The principles advocated are important, and will be employed in my program, but I am anticipating the process to be iterative as I find out what works for my student population.

The exercises in this course are submitted individually, but support from fellow learners is critical for success. So my immediate goal and focus of this discussion will be to first develop a sense of community, "when the participants in a learning space are able to develop a sense of community, many significant learning advantages and opportunities can result (Oliver, Herrington, Herrington, & Reeves, 2007). This sense of community should be the foundation for future strategies and activities. " Strategies should be selected to motivate learners, facilitate deep processing, build the whole person, cater to individual differences, promote meaningful learning, encourage interaction, provide relevant feedback, facilitate contextual learning, and provide support during the learning process." (Ally, 2011) Building a sense of community will support all of these strategies, particularly encouraging interaction and providing support.

Given the diversity of my student population, from just exiting high school to mid 40's and upgrading, it is important to recognize the diversity and the value that life experience can bring to the course.

> ..adult learners have a life-centered orientation to learning that is relevant and application-based. It can be concluded that as more adult students bring life experiences into the online environment, faculty should incorporate authentic experiences that are applicable to real world situations (Grant & Thorton, 20017)

The methods used should also facilitate the creation of a social group, requiruing "The ability of participants in a community of inquiry to project their personal characteristics into the community thereby presenting themselves to others as real people" (Rourke & Kanuka)

My vehicle of choice for this exercise will be similar to what was used in the Beginning and Establishing Successful Teachers (BEST) program. Social support was established through a user forum. "This interaction is manifest in a forum titled *Keep in touch*" (Oliver, Herrington, Herrington, & Reeves, 2007) I have created a threaded discussion forum on our distributed learning platform Blackboard Learn. The forum will be used for faculty and students to provide technical support, but two exercises will focus on building community.

The first exercise for the incoming course will be to read the last exercise of previous participants. The technique is called the "legacy letter" (Macpherson, Alice) and involves the outgoing learners documenting what they wished they knew at the beginning, and what they feel is important, and pass that information on to new learners. Having some foreknowledge of what to expect and focus on, and to know others have faced these issues and were successful should lower stress and created a sense of belonging to the past, present and future community.

The second exercise, while light hearted, is the first opportunity for learners to begin to get to know each other in a way that normally occurs in idle conversation. Called the "wanted poster", (Macpherson, Alice) it involves learners filling out an old west style wanted poster with information they are willing to share. This allows learners, and the instructor, to share how they view themselves, how they perceive others view them, and their interests outside of the course. This technique has been very successful for me in face to face courses, and the format should transfer well to an online forum.

Throughout this paper I've looked at distributed learning from my past, my present, and where I hope to go in the future. I am confident that the technical activities I have designed for use in class will translate well to an online environment. It is my hope that the techniques I have discussed will allow me to project my passion with the topic, and help my learners to connect and build a functioning learning community.

References

Ally, M. (2011). foundationS of EducaTional Theory for Online Learning. In T. Anderson, *The Theory and PracTice of Online Learning* (pp. 15-44).

Bates, A. (2015). A Short History of Educational Technology. *Teaching in a Digital Age*.

Grant, M. R., & Thorton, H. R. (20017). Best Practices in Undergraduate Adult-Centered Online Learning: Mechanisms for Course Design and Delivery . *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*.

Keller, F. (1968). Good-bye, teacher.... *Journal of Applied Bahavior Analysis*, 78-89.

Khan, S. (2011, March). *Salman Khan - Lets use video to reinvent education*. Retrieved from Ted: http://www.ted.com/speakers/salman_khan

Macpherson, Alice. (n.d.). COOPERATIVE LEARNING GROUP ACTIVITIES FOR COLLEGE COURSES: A GUIDE FOR INSTRUCTORS. Kwantlen Polytechnic University.

Oliver, R., Herrington, J., Herrington, A., & Reeves, T. (2007). representing Authentic Learning designs Supporting the development of Online Communities of Learners. *Journal of learning Design*.

Rourke, L., & Kanuka, H. (n.d.). Learning in Communities of Inquiry:: A Review of the Literature.

Waters, A. (n.d.). *The hidden History of Ed-Tech*. Retrieved from Hack Education:
http://hackeducation.com