

Adopting Orphaned Students in Cyberspace: Creating Course-Level Communities

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Introduction

The primary consideration underlying any discussion of Course-level Communities is the difference in the type of community that exists in online courses vis-à-vis the traditional community in a classroom. The environment created by online distance learning courses requires an instructor to adjust his thinking from the tangible communal environment found in the classroom to one that is created by connected persons behind computer screens. It can be argued that while the learning theories behind face-to-face instruction are equally applicable in the online environment and therefore need little, if any, adjustment, the online instructor must adjust his practices based on the new opportunities and disadvantages of the online environment to fit established learning theories. Such adjustment needs to be conscious and deliberate, but it need not be uncomfortable and difficult. It is the authors' hope that this article will contribute to the vast body of literature which seeks to increase the effectiveness of the online instructor, especially one who approaches that instruction with a Catholic understanding.

In 1989 Michael G. Moore suggested three different levels of interaction within distance learning courses: learner-content, learner-instructor, and learner-learner (Moore, 1993). The names of these types of interactions are re-presented in this article as: student-to-instructor, student-to-content, and student-to-student. These three compose the Course-level Community. It must be understood from the beginning that all three interactions exist within traditional face-to-face learning environments which provide the opportunities for relational and interactive learning among participants due to a common proximity. Conversely, the lack of the common geographical and chronological constraints, while giving online learning its major advantage, necessitates the purposeful creation of virtual learning communities in each course by purposefully addressing and fostering this trio of interactions.

Student-to-Instructor Interaction

This segment of Course-level Communities is perhaps the most important and the most difficult for

instructors to address. While the remaining interactions require an instructor to adjust and adopt new pedagogical activities, the student-to-instructor interaction requires the instructor to rethink his or her role in the learning environment in order to create the appropriate online rapport. Online rapport is quite different from the traditional classroom rapport. The instructor in an online classroom is a facilitator of student learning, that is, a facilitator of the various texts (course lectures, textbook materials, Internet sources, student postings) which together comprise the teaching and learning environment. This distinguishes him or her from the course lecturer who sets him- or herself up as the *primary* text within the classroom. This later model derives from the research method within which all research doctorates are trained, for they are taught to assert their own positions and quote from source materials that support those positions. The classroom texts are chosen, then, to complement the lecture, acting as secondary resources to help students map themselves onto the transmission of the lecturer. When the instructor shifts to facilitation – a tutor – the role changes, and this is why *role identity* is the first element in the essential difference between transactive and transmissive courses.

While transactive instruction can be pursued in face-to-face courses, online teaching and learning environments are actually structured to facilitate a transactive, community presence rather than simply a transmissive instructor presence. Cynthia Roberts, Associate Professor and Chair of the Business and Organizational Leadership departments at Purdue University North Central, posited that the transition to "wherever, whenever" education necessitates that the instructor shift "from a focus primarily on teaching to one of learning. The knowledge media itself changes the nature of the fundamental relationship between an individual and knowledge, and lessens the need for a professor or 'interpreter'" (Roberts, 2008). This concept highlights the difference between transmissive and transactive forms of instruction and calls for a rethinking of the way instructors engage classroom space. Rather than approach the class in the classic lecture/discussion mode whereby the instructor transmits information into passive student receptacles, calling on them on occasion to give sound-bite responses within a canned lecture, the transactive instructor facilitates the learners' negotiation of meaning from the course

materials, which include both his or her lecture materials and the texts he or she has assigned as course content. This new faculty role includes the following elements:

- designing meaningful ways for students to interact with the instructor, the material, and each other in an asynchronous manner;
- allowing students to choose from a variety of activities in order to match accountability exercises to individual learning styles;
- allowing students opportunities to work in teams or groups on accountability exercises and serving as moderator over those groups while respecting their subsidiarity;
- providing a greater amount of student control over the presentation of content than what has traditionally been offered in the classroom – and this can be done through the use of interactive PowerPoints that are not themselves tied to canned lecture materials (Olliges, Mahfood, & Tamashiro, 2005) and through the integration of small group activities/projects and individual or group presentations;
- encouraging student higher level critical thinking, both in the discussion fora and in the accountability exercises – and this point merits an article in its own right, for it is often the case that lecture materials and readings aim at the higher levels of Bloom's taxonomy (analysis, synthesis, and evaluation) while the accountability exercises aim only at the lower levels (knowledge, comprehension, and application);
- acting as a moderator over online discussion fora for the purpose of addressing offensive online behavior, encouraging the forward progress of meaningful discussions, and redirecting tangential discussions

While this list is not exhaustive, an instructor's reflection on just these points alone will prove transformative not only to his or her online pedagogy, but also to the pedagogical practices to which he or she has grown accustomed in face-to-face classroom teaching.

This concept of a different type of post-secondary and graduate instructor finds roots in the 1980's and early 90's, before the explosion of online learning. Vicki Williams, an eLearning Assessment Specialist at Pennsylvania State University, and Karen Peters, Professor of Communication Arts and Sciences at Pennsylvania State University, noted in the 1990's that online instruction requires a wide-range of skills encompassing instructional design, graphic artistry, technical skills in video and audio, instructional programming, and webmastering – some of which may need to be acquired by the instructor. Williams and Peters further highlight the advantage of the online environment as offering "a better environment to accommodate flexibility in learning styles" (Williams and Peters, 1997, 109). The pursuit of such flexibility requires a turn from instructor-based instruction to learner-based instruction:

Learning grows out of what interests the learner, not the teacher. The Web offers an excellent environment to support a number of learning style differences. Faculty can create a learning environment that challenges each style of student to pursue a topic further, gather different perspectives on an issue, and really accomplish a learner centered goal (ibid., 110).

The sentiment has been otherwise expressed by St. Thomas Aquinas when he wrote that the receiver receives according to the mode of the receiver, not according to the mode of the sender. If the mode of reception of the receiver, or student, is not being targeted in an intentional way by the sender, or instructor, then the chances of fully realizing the intended communication are diminished.

Faculty understanding of even the basic rudiments of andragogy, a learning theory advanced by Malcolm Knowles in his book *The Adult Learner: a Neglected Species* (1973), is helpful to the *pedagogical* development of viable online learning environments. Michael Moore, editor of *The American Journal of Education* and Professor of Education at Pennsylvania State University, has more recently guided the conversation in this direction, noting that the distance learning instructor needs to "at least maintain the student's interest in what is being taught, to motivate

the student to learn, to enhance and maintain the learner's interest, including self-direction and self-motivation" (Moore, 1993). This is the same dude mentioned on page 1, right? Then shouldn't we mention his bio there? While these are foundational principles of all forms and grade levels of education, we can see in these discussions the conscious de-emphasis of content provision (instructor-centered instruction) with the corresponding emphasis on content facilitation (learner-centered instruction). The point that this paradigm shift requires a different type of student-instructor rapport has by now been made, but point that it is an instructor's responsibility to structure the teaching and learning environment in such a way to actually bring this about is something that needs further articulation.

Among the practical activities a Catholic educator can engage to build such a rapport with his or her students are the following:

- Establish rapport early. A rapport should be established before the semester by the sending out of an introductory email to all students which includes a brief welcome to that semester, highlighting major calendar events, and the expected educational outcomes. This overview will greatly aid the students in grasping what is required when the course is finished. This welcome letter should be redrafted each semester – even if the core content remains essentially unchanged – not only for the purposes of updating tangential content but also for recognizing changes in the social and environmental realities that make each semester unique.
- Give students a heads-up. The syllabus should be available by the registration period, not only to provide students with enough time to purchase their books – including shipping time – but also to provide them with a clear understanding of what it is, exactly, that they are signing up for (alternatively, a required reading list can be provided). This will help mitigate the number of students who drop the class during the first week.
- Overtly state your educational goals. A definite effort ought to be made to share one's exact educational expectations with the class that is efficacious enough to be used as study material

for a final exam (even if none is given). It is, therefore, a reverse-engineered document that takes the end-of-course into consideration first. This trend should be continued by providing grading rubrics which detail both the kind of response expected from every assignment and the manner in which grades will be assigned. Creating such a rubric helps refine one's goals, hones the tone of the class, and puts the students at ease regarding how they will be evaluated – this is especially important in the case of activities where students do not have the benefit of reading the instructor's body language when they present their responses to the content (see Halvorsen, et al. for further details on rubrics, as well as Elbaum, B., McIntyre, C., & Smith, A.). Students should be able to predict a teacher's response patterns based on clearly established guidelines.

- Be predictable in communications. Reliable communication should be provided through one's chosen communication medium. As the instructor is the facilitator of learning within the class, response time to student questions and concerns must be prompt. In the present culture, students often expect an immediate response, so establishing guidelines for responding within, say, twenty-four hours or during certain times of the day will decrease stress on all persons involved. These commitments must then be honored, and if for some reason a response cannot be made within the guidelines established, the students should be informed as soon as possible.
- Utilize in-course communication organization. Within online course templates, the bulk of electronic communication is already organized into threaded discussions, keeping conversations organized and establishing a common space for class interaction. Because disparate emails can become disjointed into separate digital artifacts and students tend to be redundant when seeking clarification, students ought to be encouraged to use an FAQ forum in which the instructor can address frequently asked questions or issues.
- Maintain privacy through email. For situations where privacy is required, however, the use of email is to be encouraged and guidelines for the use of email – such as queries about grades,

concerns about defamatory statements in discussion forums, requests for assignment deferral, etc. – ought to be set. Providing the appropriate contact information for other issues with which one does not deal, such registrar issues, student finances, etc., will save the online instructor from having to manually redirect student inquiries in these areas.

- Organize your email. Whether email is used as the main means of communication or only for more private issues, a few organizational tips ought to be kept in mind: the "spam" folder should be frequently checked to ensure that student emails are not lost; if the school does not provide one, a special email account might be created to which the students will send their emails, thus separating student emails from personal and other professional communications; folders within an email account might be created for each class, and rules or filters might be set to automatically place new emails in the proper class folder.
- Be cognizant of your tone. Students will infer a tone of voice in one's communications, often without realizing that they are doing so. Short answers to student questions may provide the necessary information, but may also be interpreted as being curt or rude. Humor, if not crafted carefully, can also be easily misunderstood. Instructors must therefore make overt efforts to provide the proper tone in their communications. For instance, if a short answer is all that is needed, instructors can begin them with what may be considered redundant prefaces: "Here is the short answer:", "Forgive me for being so succinct, but...", or any other such wording that helps the students know that the instructor is purposefully making a short statement, not scowling at the student from behind the monitor.
- Be available and alive. Optional virtual office hours ought to be offered so that students know that a given time exists each week when they can interact with their instructor. Such can be as simple as synchronous text chat within the course management system, voice conference calling with Skype or WebEX, or even more complicated video conferencing software. Office hours might be offered at different times to accommodate the various time zones in which the students

may live, such in the evening one week and on Saturday morning the following week. Live office hours should also be maintained 'by appointment.'

- Be mindful of your image. In all these ideas, one's "cyberimpression," the image that one portrays of oneself to the cyberworld, needs to be appropriate to one's position. If an instructor is a regular user of social networking sites or blog sites, he or she must remember that students may come across the postings and photographs of such sites, whether posted by him or her or by others on his or her site, and create impressions in their minds of their instructor. As the students are not able to compare such impressions with a face-to-face person, such impressions become all they know. Caution in protecting one's cyberimpression is therefore very important.

Student-to-Content Interaction

Just as the relationship between students and instructors is changing due to the environment and technology of the Internet, the set of pedagogical practices that meets the challenges and advantages of online learning is also changing. While synchronous communications occur in cyberspace, a great many people enroll in asynchronous distance learning courses which offer flexible schedules that meet their own. This extends the time it takes for the individual student to respond to the prompts posted by the instructor concerning the course content and the feedback from the instructor to the such responses. The negotiation of time regarding how content will be modulated for student consumption is key to developing a viable teaching and learning environment in cyberspace. The Internet does not provide an environment where the nuances of physical expression can lend themselves to the continuous assessment process, but it can provide something better – embedded opportunities for creating *objectively measurable transactive teaching and learning environments*, which is the second element in the essential difference between the transactive course and the transmissive course.

The shift from transmission of content to content facilitation (also referred to as instructor-oriented and student-oriented approaches (cf. Frymier, 2007) necessarily requires a shift in content-management strategies. According to a meta-analysis of research studies spanning 1996 through 2008 recently

published by the United States Department of Education, in order for online education to be at least equal to the efficacy of face-to-face learning, it needs to adopt pedagogical activities that differ from those available in the traditional classroom (2009). Presumably, such pedagogical activities will be congruent with the technology uniquely available to the communicative media of cyberspace.

One way to approach this shift involves a decreasing reliance on long, introductory lectures in favor of individually tailored discussion board responses to student postings based on the principles of cooperative learning (Frymeir, 2007). A second approach involves encouraging and guiding the individual students' inquiry and engagement in the content in having students apply it to their personal life situations (ibid.). This paradigm shift also downplays the importance of examinations and prescribed essay topics (both of which are highly transmissive forms of evaluation) for more transactive activities: analytical, evaluative, and creative exercises which can be shared within a class.

Rob Kelly, managing editor of *The Online Cl@ssroom*, suggests several over-arching educational concepts to keep in mind: one must begin "with a clear understanding of specific learning outcomes and ways to engage students," provide activities "that allow students to take some control of their learning," and bring such activities into a course-environment that clearly show students what to do and where to go within the site to do this. We may also add to this list the idea of "when to do so" as students often operate on the principle of triage, preparing work for submission by the deadlines posted but not preparing for peer interaction prior to posted deadlines. Because peer review is an invaluable activity in any transactive teaching and learning environment, it should be structured within the course calendar by the use of incremental due dates or some other means.

Suggestions for course design considerations and online activities which have been shown to be effective for rhetorical goals of knowledge presentation include:

- An instructor's educational goals should be clear and concise. As the instructor is not immediately available whenever course content is presented to the students, he or she must provide a clear road map at the beginning of each section as to what materials are to be

accessed, when they should be accessed, and what the students are expected to take from the material. It should also be made clear whether outside research is necessary. In other words, what would a theoretical final examination include both by way of content knowledge and depth of understanding? Students who know the expectations of the course are better equipped to meet or exceed them.

- The instructor should ponder the differences between two types of online learning applications – hypertext format and hypermedia format – and choose the method that best presents a given content module for the purpose of engaging the students. The difference between these is provided by Leping Liu, Associate Professor of Counseling and Educational Psychology at the University of Nevada, Reno, who offers examples of such hypertext format activities as WebQuests ("an inquiry-oriented lesson format in which most or all the information that learners work with comes from the web," www.WebQuest.org), lecture notes, readings, and text-based materials. Such activities need not be static, but can be dynamic and creative. Hypermedia activities are online games, drills, tests (within the course management system), and videos. Various software packages can be used to create interactive activities that combine text and video, tests, and interactive elements. Choosing activities to match learning objectives is something that instructors do naturally, but when they shift into cyberspace, Liu writes, instructors “usually need to consider whether the format and function fit the learning objectives, content structure, the nature of the activities, and the grade level of the students” (2007).
- An instructor should combine content presentation elements such as video lectures or recorded presentations with reflective learning activities that guide students in reflection upon the content so that they can more meaningfully respond to each others' thoughts. This will help the students become integrated into the instructional process and create relationships with their classmates.
- An instructor should label each activity with a time marker to give students an idea of how long

they ought to be involved on each task, thus helping to facilitate the student's ability to schedule time for the activities. A reasonable formula for reading is 25 pages an hour, for instance, so every reading assignment can be accompanied with an estimated time commitment. A reasonable formula for discussion board posting is one post per half hour or one response to a classmate's posting per quarter hour. Other formulas like these can be derived as needed.

- An instructor should provide content presentation activities that allow the students to fast forward, rewind, pause, skip sections, etc. Some of the material presented may be review material for some students while others are encountering it for the first time. Some may benefit from the ability to pause presentations and mark down notes or review certain sections multiple times. The U.S. Department of Education's meta-analysis suggests the following for individual learners: "*Online learning can be enhanced by giving learners control of their interactions with media and prompting learner reflection.* Studies indicate that manipulations that trigger learner activity or learner reflection and self-monitoring of understanding are effective when students pursue online learning as individuals" (emphasis original). This report states that it is not simply the presence of video media in a course that enhances learning, but it is the ability of the student to manipulate a given video that creates a learning benefit from the video (U.S. Department of Education, 2009, xvi, 49).
- Online quizzes and tests can be incorporated into the course material, but their effectiveness is mainly seen when they are made available as self-assessment or reflection activities and not as graded exercises. Such can be obtained if the quizzes are created to provide a unique reply to each student's answer which, if the student has answered incorrectly, offers a reference to the materials which provide the correct answer (U.S. Department of Education, 2009, 43-45).
- Feedback should be provided to students for all activities. Quizzes and tests can automatically provide this feedback while other types of activities require the instructor to inform the students of their progress vis-a-vis the educational goals.

- The U.S. Department of Education summarizes the goals of content-related activities: "Overall, the available research evidence suggests that promoting self-reflection, self-regulation and self-monitoring leads to more positive online learning outcomes. Features such as prompts for reflection, self-explanation and self-monitoring strategies have shown promise for improving online learning outcomes" (2009, 45).

Many student-to-content interactions include relations with instructors and fellow students, but more important than this is the "connection factor" that students must create while in a course: if they are not able to connect with the academic expectations placed on them or are not able to connect with the content, they can easily feel isolated and abandoned.

Student-to-Student Interaction

Asynchronous activities remain the bulk of interaction within online courses, as they were for the correspondence courses of the previous generation of distance learning coursework, but the Internet has enabled something that the previous generation could not: the reality of a learning community that can meaningfully interact within its own small society. The establishment of a *community of learners* is the third element in the essential difference between the online course and the correspondence course.

If students register for an online course for the purpose of better negotiating their schedules, they may not anticipate the greater investment in time an online course seems to demand until they are confronted with the course schedule. Typically, a face-to-face classroom negotiates time according to a simple formula that every hour in the classroom requires at least an hour and a half of study and preparation outside of class. Thus a two-credit elective should take roughly five hours a week to meet its requirements of study. If students share face-time for two of those hours while listening to lectures, then the time they have to meaningfully interact with one another is truncated into the sound bites of discussion following an instructor's prompt before the canned lecture material is resumed. Confusing.

Such is the usual way in which the face-to-face classroom negotiates linear time. The challenge to negotiating time in an online course is for the instructor, as a content facilitator, to package the two-

credit course within the same time constraints its face-to-face counterpart receives. The same five-hour commitment only seems to be more intensive because of the amount of time students are required to be “on” in the classroom. Instead of being recipients of content for five hours a week, students in an online classroom “receive” content about three hours a week and, therefore, ought to interact with one another on the nature and meaning of that content about two hours a week. Again, this confuses me. Reword??

An online classroom, then, has the capacity to use its human resources more efficiently – at least in the sense of negotiating student interaction within general discussion and group work. The primary way that students demonstrate their learning is through ongoing balanced and instructor-guided interaction with each other that enables them to hone their understanding of the course content in ways that their counterparts in face-to-face classrooms cannot. The result is an increase in quantity of substantive responses, peer-to-peer discussions, and more accountable exposure to the material. **This is a key point**

Because this kind of constant interaction is not normative to students unfamiliar with online courses, the instructor has to schedule the interaction within the dominant unit of measure – the course week – and that requires students who would normally only prepare for a one or two class meetings per week to be vigilant three or more times per week. Kelly writes that “meaningful online discussions that promote learning and build community usually do not happen spontaneously. They require planning, good use of questioning techniques, and incentives for student participation” (n.d., p. 8). The structure established by the online teacher – even something simple like requiring the students to have their initial posts by Wednesday of each week and two responses to the posts of classmates within their assigned groups by Friday – becomes the primary vehicle for student success within the course.

All of this merely points to the mechanics involved in the shift from a transmissive teaching and learning environment to a transactive one – a shift that requires both the instructor and the students to make adaptive changes to the way in which they interact with one another. The fact that it is a better way of teaching and learning is demonstrated not by the technologies used to bring it about but by the long-standing belief that was first articulated in Plato’s “Phaedrus” 2,350 years ago: that dialogic

interaction facilitates understanding through meaningful conflict better than does simple transmission of content without concomitant opportunities to negotiate their meaning with others.

Once the instructor has synthesized the course materials for student consumption under the old model, the new dialogic model enables students to express their understanding of that material in relation to their prior learning and experiences, to the texts provided them, and to their own particular orientation, readiness, and motivations. The classroom provides an intellectual safety net in preparation for their ministries: interacting meaningfully with others on the theoretical principles and practical applications of their learning under the guidance of their instructor. This is what makes transactive teaching and learning an exemplary and normative practice all distance learning courses and programs.

Because of the value inherent within robust communities of learning, learning communities have become a requirement for accreditation. This is as true for accreditation with the Association of Theological Schools as it is for regional accreditation. According to ATS guidelines, distance learning “courses shall provide sufficient interaction [*not only*] between teachers and learners [*but also*] among learners to ensure a community of learning and to promote global awareness and sensitivity to local settings” (ATS 10.3.3.3, brackets ours). That this requirement actually has to be spelled out in Standard 10, which deals at the present time with distance learning programs and extension sites, is evidence that what is valued in face-to-face programs may not come naturally to online programs, yet is vital to a properly crafted distance learning program. Some simple methods to bring this about are as follows:

- Faculty should structure asynchronous discussions each week – either in the form of threaded discussions or blog posts – through the use of question prompts appropriate to the central aim of the weekly readings. The format for these question prompts can vary from week to week – they can require a reflective response, an analytical response, a problem-solving response, and the like, but the key to any kind of prompt is that it allows for the kind of response that invites discussion. For the kinds of questions that are by nature objectively oriented, the instructor might provide the objective answer within the discussion prompt and ask for student responses

on application to or implementation within their own ministerial settings. The quality of these postings, as previously mentioned, should be measurable on a rubric designed for the purpose.

- Faculty should, in addition to integrating asynchronous discussion prompts should also map out time during the week for students to respond to one another in some kind of meaningful way, and the quality of these responses should be as measurable on a rubric designed for the purpose as the quality of the original postings to which they are being directed.
- Faculty should meaningfully enter the asynchronous discussion postings by addressing areas where students demonstrate an imperfect understanding of Church teaching and by drawing connections among areas across student postings that remain unconnected with the readings. The instructor's presence in every discussion forum is similar to the presence any moderator has at a professional conference.
- Faculty should provide a coffee house or water cooler discussion forum for phatic communion, or off-task, relationship building banter, to decrease the frequency with which this might occur within the discussion fora designed for course content.
- Faculty should require students to post a personal photograph in a discussion forum designed for introductions to the class. In this way, students will be able to put a face with a name whenever they interact with their classmates online, and that helps develop the kind of personal connections that facilitate online discussion.

Conclusion

Bringing the three elements together that comprise the essential difference between transactive and transmissive teaching and learning environments, we find our definition of a transactive teaching and learning environment to be one in which objectively measurable goals are negotiated by a community of learners who understand their identity as collaborative partners within a facilitated discourse. In short, the teacher is the magisterial guide who is responsible for maintaining the structure within which

the learners are encountering the human and material resources of the course. As such, the teacher has a responsibility to ensure that the students are meeting the course goals and for helping them transcend those goals where possible through their interpersonal interactions with one another.

The online course, then, can have more to offer in its focus on both rhetorical and relational goals if the course-level community is meaningfully initiated by the course instructor and actively developed by the students. According to Ann Frymier (2007), Professor of Communication at Miami University of Ohio, these goals are already apparent as a two-way street in online teaching and learning. In rhetorical goals, students seek to extract information from their instructors, as well as good grades while instructors seek to impart knowledge and motivate their students. Student relational goals concern receiving confirmation as a student, and often as a person, through seeking relationships with their instructors while instructor relational goals concern efficacious communication, affinity with students, and working with students in learning together. The active development of a course-level community that meets these dual goals is thus beneficial to all participants.

The technology provided by the Internet and the World Wide Web has created an environment which is best utilized by more relationally-oriented activities. This is not to say that rhetorically-oriented goals are relegated only to face-to-face environments, but that rhetorical goals are best addressed in online courses by augmenting them with relationally-oriented activities, like discussion forums and blogs that discuss the presented content. This translates into the instructor becoming the guide who learns alongside his students through constant interactive means.

Today's distant learning instructors, therefore, need to consciously re-evaluate their roles vis-a-vis students, decide upon strategies and activities which best exploit the resources available to them in this new environment, and work with their students in absorbing, understanding, applying, and evaluating the course material.

Resources:

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