Communicating with e-Learners: Creating Inclusive Learning Environments.

Education and training has moved rapidly into the cyber environment, making the upmarket change from a CBT that originally relied on text and sides retyped from class notes, to e-learning which now incorporates web casts, simulations and chat forums.   Many courses can even be taken and completed without the class members or course convenor ever meeting in person. It is that aspect that some trainers find problematic as they believe that a loss of the face to face environment can make it more difficult to engage learners, ascertain when learners are having problems learning or to include learners who may be feeling excluded. It is these aspects that I wish to discuss. As part of my PhD folio of research, I conducted an online forum to discuss how women felt about using the internet for work, study and socialising and I use some of my findings and a review of literature to discuss online learning and how it affects the communications patterns in an online environment.

No two e-learning courses are exactly alike, but they generally share similarities in that the communication would be between all class participants, between the convenor (for simplicity's sake I will use convenor to mean tutor, lecturer, trainer or facilitator) and the group and between the convenor and the learners on an individual basis.   An e-learning course may encompass to various degrees: individual tasks, small group tasks, whole group discussions, and individual or group projects or assignments. In my experience of e-learning units, the learners are expected to carry out certain weekly tasks and then contribute to a shared online site for the other learners and convenor to read and comment on their work. In a successful online course this can create a learning community which facilitates communication and collaboration between the learners, while in an unsuccessful e-learning course the same environment can simply provide a showcase for the confident communicator while excluding others.

I believe that communicating in an online environment with learners requires more of the instructor than a face to face to environment, precisely because we are missing all the auditory and visual cues that learners would ordinarily share with us. Participants are expected to place their tasks, comments or other types of input into a 'public space' on e-learning courses, so that they work may be read and shared with others. However this may be uncomfortable for some people as they are opening themselves up to the possibility of perceived criticism and for others it may cause them concerns from a cultural perspective if English is not their first language.   From a gender perspective, some women may not feel confident enough to be first with their opinions or to offer alternate viewpoints to the mainstream group.   Research into online environments (Ross, 2000; Sussman & Tyson 2000) has found that overall men post more often than women, men engaging on power discourse communicate longer irrespective of the topic being discussed and deliver more opinionated speech.

Aspin (1997) found that women preferred the pedagogy of online learning when they experienced it as shared and interactive and believes it has a collaborative potential that many women find attractive. While Anderson (1997) suggested that female learners prefer face-to-face communication, Kramarae (2001) established that despite valuing interactive experiences in education, women also felt that it could be established in a virtual environment and were largely positive about their learning experiences in a distance model. Stanley-Spaeth (2000) also observed e-learning actually facilitated the feminist techniques of collaborative and active learning, as it was able to "de-centre the classroom" (Stanley-Spaeth 2000, p.1).

In the online forum I set up for my research in 2003, online study became a topic for discussion. Melinda[1], a participant in the forum (who was doing an online study unit at the time) wrote about the problems she was having with a lecturer in the online environment. She said that she found this lecturer or convenor of the online unit (who was also incidentally a woman); to be 'domineering' in a way that she felt was not appropriate to the medium. She was disappointed to find that the lecturer found it necessary to always have the last word and to frequently denigrate the postings of some students. Melinda found this to be far more devastating when done online as opposed to face to where, where the group can ignore it or the lecturer can soften it with a smile or friendly tone of voice. Melinda further observed that having done a couple of online units they varied greatly in the type of learning she experienced:

> *Depending on the facilitator - e.g., one who values a non-hierarchical structure emphasises relationships between teacher/students and amongst students themselves, then I find a web-based environment a democratic one that can empower both the facilitator and the learners - the ideal environment being one that sees us become a community of learners or co-enquirers. There is still plenty of opportunity for inequality, but the idea of collaborative learning can be reached or strived for more easily with the use of forums, message boards and mailing lists - and the fact that they are shared and in the open probably tends to neutralise them a bit more and facilitate the idea of collaboration rather than a hierarchy of the loudest voice, strongest personality etc. However when the lecturer is the one who does not support a democratic online classroom, then I can hardly see the point of having an online classroom!* (Melinda).

Like many adults doing tertiary study, she had expected online learning to be facilitated by lecturers who engaged in adult learning pedagogy and as such would value flexible teacher-student-teacher roles and support egalitarian power relationships (Knowles 1980, 1094; Weiler 2001).

As social cues such as age, culture or physical appearance are not present and

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[1] Not a real name.

time and space become in theory available to all learners, the Internet environment has the potential to be a democratic teaching and learning medium which can mediate power hierarchies between students and teachers. Campbell (1999, p.28) believes that 'the learning and playing fields' can be levelled by "eliminating or blurring gender identity characteristics and communication patterns". However as some users of e-learning and CBT have found, this is not so easily done, and nor may it be such a simple solution. I argue that in a virtual environment the educator has to be even more vigilant than in the real life environment, because In terms of a shared verbal discourse there is always the auditory - what is heard, as well as the sensory – what is felt. The silences, the intonations, the inflection of an utterance – a facial expression, surprise, disgust, irony, admiration – these intonations can serve as a bridge built between the two speakers when no words can be used.

Given the singular dimension of the e-learning environment and the lack of ways of communicating with learners, Sheinberg (2001) recommends that the course convenor does 'some homework' of their own prior to the course beginning and gathers as much information as possible about the learners, including,

- age, gender, disabilities
- education: fields of study, degrees earned, computer literacy
- cultural background: language, place of origin, traditions, sensitive subjects
- employment background: experience, time in current job, relationships with other participants
- Expectations: reasons for attending the course, expected results.

He recommends that the convenor then asks questions of him or herself such as:

- Am I using technical words? Will my audience understand them?
- Am I using slang?
- Am I using inclusive gender (he and she)?
- Can somebody be offended by the words I'm using?

With some prior knowledge of the class participants, the convenor is in a position of interacting with participants in ways that are appropriate to the group. For example some older learners make not be comfortable with computer jargon, but a group of IT professionals will prefer to use 'tech speak'. If there are a minority of women in the group the convenor may need to be alert to the women making equal contributions or if a number of learners are new to working an online environment it might be appropriate to suggest a group face to face meeting if that is possible, or try to set up online conferencing, so people can hear each other's voices. Simply ensuring that you the convenor are available to talk on the telephone rather than only being available in the e-learning environment will also open up the opportunity of communicating, particularly if someone is shy or unsure about sharing with a group of co-learners.

Much is made of the fact that an e-learning course is a decentered environment. In this model the tutor, lecturer or instructor is not the pivotal focus of the class, his or her contributions are greatly outnumbered by those of the learners, and the class convenor does not control 'turn taking,' because if someone wants to 'say' something they simply post online. The potential problem with setting is the danger of allowing the class to be monopolised or hijacked by those who write well, have the time and computer access to post frequently or who are very comfortable in an online environment. Group collaboration shouldn't be confused with allowing an anarchy that doesn't include all the learners. A discussion, class or conference, whether it is in person or in an online environment, requires someone to facilitate it and to act as 'social host'. Feenberg (1989) considers this a highly important aspect to e-learning environments; given that e-learning is not just an educational but a social milieu. He describes the role of the e-learning host as :

> *..a social host as she/he has to issue warm invitations to people; send encouraging private messages to people complimenting them or at least commenting on their entries, or suggesting what they might be uniquely qualified to contribute. As meeting chairperson, she/he must prepare an enticing-sounding initial agenda; frequently summarise or clarify what has been going on; try to express the emerging consensus or call for a formal vote; sense and announce when it is time to move on to a new topic* (Hiltz and Turoff 1981, pp 23-24 in Feenberg 1989).

Given the considerations outlined above, facilitating clear lines of communication needs to be proritised. The convenor needs to not only be visible and accessible, but proactive in setting the tone of the online discourse and establishing the e-learning etiquette from the beginning of the course, as well as ensuring the learning is inclusive by seeking out those who are noticeably absent from online discussions or postings. Awareness of these issues by the educator more than anything, will ensure that the learners all feel included.

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