The Role of the Online Instructor/Facilitator

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Introduction

A prerequisite to the use of computer mediated communication (CMC) when facilitating online instruction is access to a high level of computing power and a reliable telecommunication infrastructure. After saying that, I want to emphasize in the strongest way that when developing and delivering instruction, whether online or not, the use of technology is secondary to well-designed learning goals and objectives. What distinguishes online instruction from entertainment or recreation is the purposefulness of the designers and developers in provoking certain intelligent responses to the learning materials, context, and environment.

This article will list the roles and functions of the online instructor in computer conferencing (CC). Simply stated, computer conferencing is "direct human-human communication, with the computer acting simply as a transaction router, or providing simple storage and retrieval functions" (Santoro, 1995, p. 14). Regardless of the level of technology used for CC--such as email, mailing lists, MOOs, MUDs, BBSs, computer conferencing systems, or the Web--certain instructional tasks must be performed for successful learning. It may not create the best learning environment to rely solely on CC. But used alone or in conjunction with other media, such as audioconferencing, classroom delivery or printed materials, CC can be used to provide an effective instructional system.

Types of Interaction in Learning
The Role of the Instructor When Teaching in the CC Environment

Clearly the most important role of the online instructor is to model effective teaching and accept "the responsibility of keeping discussions track, contributing special knowledge and insights, weaving together various discussion threads and course components, and maintaining group harmony" (Rohfeld & Hiemstra, 1995, p. 91).

There are many necessary conditions for successful online tutoring, which I have categorized into the following four areas (Berge, 1995): pedagogical, social, managerial, and technical. Not all of these roles need to be carried out in their entirety by the same person. In fact, it may be rare that they are. A brief description of those roles follows (Feenberg, 1986; Gulley, 1968; Kerr, 1986; McCreary, 1990; McMann, 1994; Paulsen, 1995).

**Pedagogical** (intellectual; task)
Certainly, some of the most important roles of online discussion moderator/tutor revolves around their duties as an educational facilitator. The moderator uses questions and probes for student responses that focus discussions on critical concepts, principles and skills.

**Social**
Creating a friendly, social environment in which learning is promoted is also essential for successful moderating. This suggests "promoting human relationships, developing group cohesiveness, maintaining the group as a unit, and in other ways helping members to work together in a mutual cause," are all critical to success of any conferencing activities.

**Managerial** (organizational; procedural; administrative)
This role involves setting the agenda for the conference: the objectives of the discussion, the timetable, procedural rules and decision-making norms. Managing the interactions with strong leadership and direction is considered a sine qua non of successful conferencing.

**Technical**
The facilitator must make participants comfortable with the system and the software that the conference is using. The ultimate technical goal for the instructor is to make the technology transparent. When this is done, the learner may concentrate on the academic task at hand.

The following recommendations come from many sources and experiences. Besides the references, these sources are listed in the "For Further Reading" section below. Let me emphasis that I have categorized these arbitrarily. There is considerable overlap with some tasks. This is especially true of the issues more difficult to address effectively. It may well be because these issue cut across two or more areas that make them particularly challenging! For example, if I say that the mechanics of giving feedback online student papers (as oppose to hardcopy) need to be devised, should this be under pedagogical, technical, administrative or interpersonal issues? I think a case could be made for each as being an appropriate category.
ASSESSING TEACHING PRESENCE IN A COMPUTER CONFERENCING CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT
This paper presents a tool developed for the purpose of assessing teaching presence in online courses that make use of computer conferencing, and preliminary results from the use of this tool.

The method of analysis is based on Garrison, Anderson, and Archer’s [1] model of critical thinking and practical inquiry in a computer conferencing context. The concept of teaching presence is constitutively defined as having three categories – design and organization, facilitating discourse, and direct instruction. Indicators that we search for in the computer conference transcripts identify each category. Pilot testing of the instrument reveals interesting differences in the extent and type of teaching presence found in different graduate level online courses.

KEYWORDS
Teaching, CMC, instruction, formal education
IV. CLASSIFICATION OF TEACHER ROLES IN COMPUTER CONFERENCING

The initial classification of teaching presence proposed by the present authors consisted of three characteristics – design and administration, facilitating discourse, and direct instruction [1]. A review of the literature related to online teaching provides support for this classification.

Our three categories of teaching presence can be mapped directly to previous work by other researchers (see Table 1). First, it is important to note that Berge [7] categorizes four major functions of the online moderator. He adds a “technical” support role to the three we have itemized. However, while we acknowledge that providing technical assistance to students is currently an onerous function of the online teacher, like tending the prairie school stove, we believe that its importance will decrease as users become more experienced and as the tools of online learning become more intuitive and ubiquitous. Moreover, technical support can be provided by a variety of means (i.e. technical discussions, Frequently Asked Questions, student call centers, etc.) that do not necessarily involve the teacher [7].

Paulsen [9] and Mason [10] also divide the educational moderator’s role into three major responsibilities – organizational, social, and intellectual. The one area where we depart somewhat from these authors is in terms of how we construct and define the social aspects of an educational experience. We have separated out the purely social elements as a separate element of a community of inquiry and refer to (this distinct element) it as "social presence" [5]. The creation of the social environment is the responsibility of students as well as teachers. In our model, only the social aspects of the teacher’s messages that directly relate to the content contributions from the student are included in the teaching presence category. The corresponding characteristic from a teaching presence perspective is the role of facilitating discourse. Finally, we refer to the third function as “direct instruction” rather than Berge’s “pedagogical” which, in its broadest sense, can refer to all three functions or to Paulsen and Mason’s “intellectual” which does not necessarily denote teaching at all.

Table 1

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Rossman’s [11] extensive research provides empirical support for these classification systems. Through the analysis of over 3000 student end-of-course evaluations from 154 university courses, Rossman found student comments and complaints clustered into three major groupings – teacher responsibility, facilitating discussions, and course requirements. These map to our categories of direct instruction, facilitating discourse, and design and administration, respectively. Finally Coppola, Hiltz and Rotter’s [12] qualitative interview research with 20 ‘virtual professors’ identified affective, cognitive and managerial roles (changes) as major categories undergoing change through the teaching of online courses. Obviously these three match directly with our indicators of teaching presence.

Lists of hints and suggestions for conference moderators and online teachers have also been provided by many authors (see especially Salmon [8] and the many lists of hints at Berge and Collins’ Moderators’ Home Page). However, these provide few, if any guidelines by which teaching presence characteristics can be measured or assessed. To achieve this goal we have developed a template and tool for assessing teaching presence. We have done this through the provision of indicators and examples that clearly describe and measure the concept of teaching presence.