Assessment Measures: Pre-Tests for Successful Distance Teaching and Learning?

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Introduction: Who Are Distance Teachers and Learners?

With the growing popularity and acceptance of Web-based or Internet-delivered education, maintaining pedagogical efficacy and integrity must remain primary goals and objectives. Developing online coursework is becoming a skill required by many in higher education and its predecessors in K-12 education. The technologies are continually streamlined and simplified, thereby opening the doors for any and all to teach and study in virtual environments. Yet, questions remain which speak directly to pedagogical efficacy and integrity. Can anyone study—and thrive—in an online classroom? What skills and qualities should or must one possess as a distance student? And, likewise, is teaching online a natural outgrowth of classroom teaching? Or, are there qualities inherent to instructors in the online arena contributing to "successful" teaching?

Many, including Moore (1990), Campbell Gibson (1998), Keegan (1990), and Thompson (1998) and have looked at attrition rates as well as success rates of distance students, and have found that certain characteristics lend to a "better" distance education student. Holmberg (1995) has asserted that the population or demographics of distance students is far from homogenous. Nevertheless, Thompson identifies some

> broad demographic and situational similarities that have often provided the basis for profiles of the 'typical' distance learner in higher education. Characteristics included in such a profile have varied, but generally have reflected some combination of demographic and situational variables, such as age, gender, ethnic background, disability, location, and life roles. (p. 10)

Moreover, Jegede concurs that the "distance learner, who is usually an adult in some form of employment, is characterized, amongst other qualities, by autonomy, persistence, independence, self-direction and flexibility" (1989, p. 26), while Schrum and Luetkehans (1997) specify that "the great majority of adults learning at a distance were reported to be in the 20-40 age range and studying on a part-time basis from their homes while maintaining full-time jobs" (p. 13).

Furthermore, Wedemeyer and Childs (1961) assign self-motivation, organizational skills, and the ability to concentrate well as ideal qualities a distance student should possess, while the educational program itself should maintain clear goals and objectives, manageably sized lessons, and rapid feedback from the instructor in order to coincide with the qualities of the students.

Such qualities as maturity, independence, self-discipline, and assertiveness have been recognized as qualities inherent to a successful distance education student. Desirable qualities surrounding instructors are less solidified, though recent works recognize the need for a new model of teaching (Raths, 1999; Sherry & Wilson, 1997: Pea, 1994). What constitutes an ideal teacher, instructor, moderator, or guide in Web education remains debatable. Of the new roles, Raths (1999) asserts that

> instructors who thrive in the new environment combine the skills of a traditional classroom teacher with those of a technical support representative--they engage students and spark their curiosity, and are also responsive, well-organized, courteous, patient, and flexible. (p. 32)

Overall, the role of the instructor in distance education combines a mentor with a facilitator of knowledge. This dualistic role of the instructor proves critical: Students, while indeed more self-directed, need to know that a "human," who knows the subject and is capable of replying in an articulate, professional manner, is on the receiving end of their materials. The ability to *facilitate* a virtual classroom is becoming a desirable skill.

Too, the US Congress (1989) has described the emerging role of the instructor:

> Although it is the technology that removes barriers and expands opportunity for learning, it is the teacher who teaches. In distance learning, teachers find that they are required to change their method of teaching and give more attention to advanced preparation, student interaction, visual materials, activities for independent study, and follow-up activities. (p. 11)
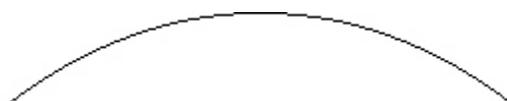
Furthermore, Eastmond (1998, p. 39) affirms that

> Supporting on-line teaching demands that faculty actively guide the on-line discourse in a caring, stimulating manner….On-line instructors can use a variety of techniques to enliven courses, such as small group discussions, role-playing, student presentations, brainstorming, and simulations. Effective teachers give individual attention in private messages and provide summarizing comments in the general discussion to keep the conversation on course.
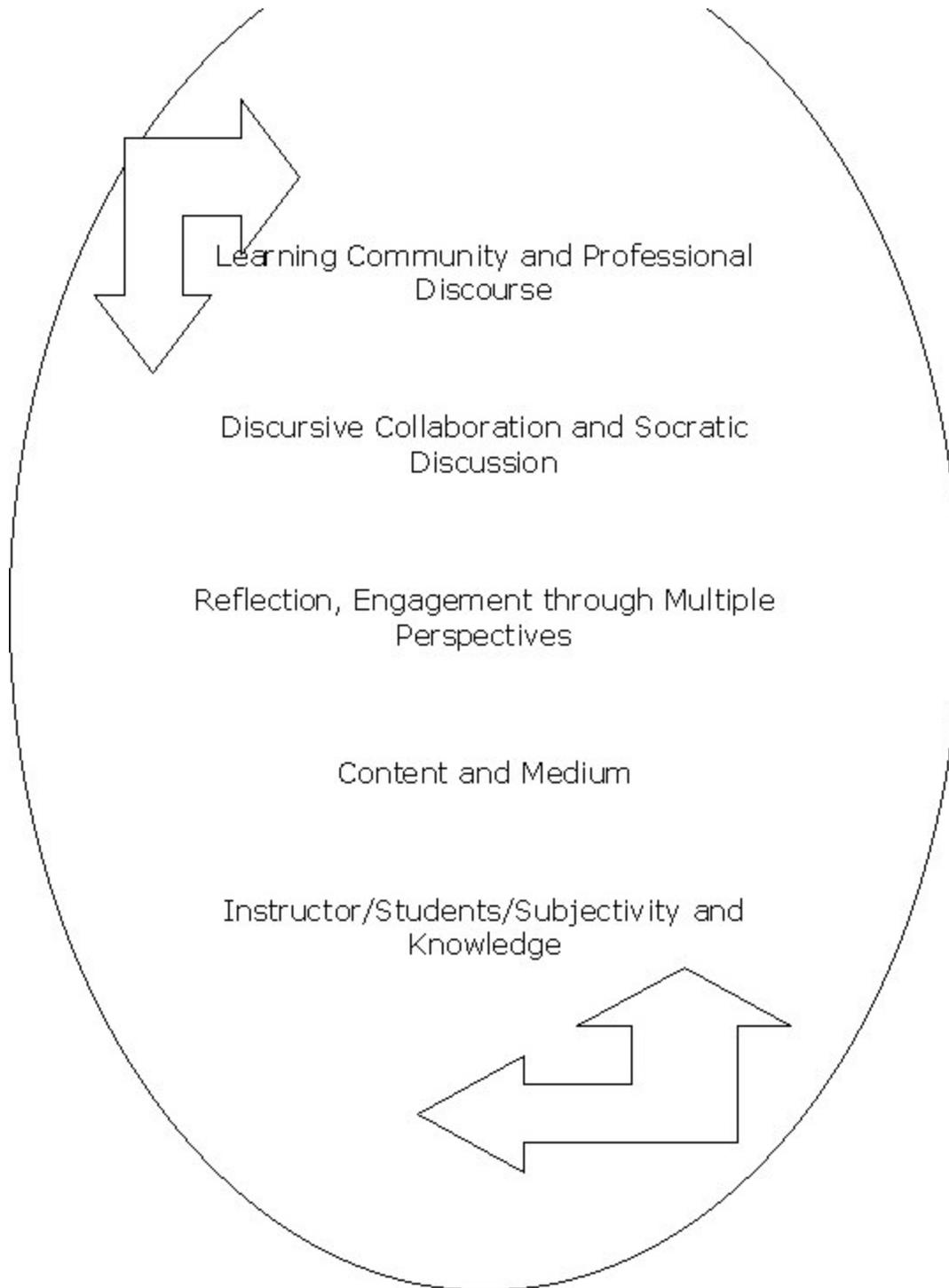
Additional requisite qualities include a comfort level with the delay in engagement and with the loss of control (Raths, 1999). Sherry and Wilson (1998) see a relationship between the loss of instructor's control with a corresponding awakening within students; students come to the "realization that the instructor is not the sole authority or repository of answers, and that the answers to real problems aren't as simple as they might seem!" (p. 68)

Cahoon (1998, p. 74) is absolutely yet unfortunately correct when he notes that "educators are learning how to teach on the Internet as they go along." Such haphazard approaches to pedagogy serve no one well. To avoid inefficacious learning environments on the Web, a set of criteria is requisite. Such factors as student and instructor characteristics, communicative flows, and educational philosophies must be pre-examined and understood by the parties involved.

A Model of Communicative Flow

In order to discuss assessment criteria, the following model of Web-based pedagogy is proposed.

Learning Community and Professional
Discourse

Discursive Collaboration and Socratic
Discussion

Reflection, Engagement through Multiple
Perspectives

Content and Medium

Instructor/Students/Subjectivity and
Knowledge

Developing Assessment Measures

Web-based educative environments are distinct from traditional educational models, and yet, the proposed model could be replicable in other educational environments. The specificity of the model depends on the presence of each variable named in a multiplicitous flow. An hierarchical disposition would not sustain the model.

Beginning with the students and the instructor, the acceptance of newfound pedagogical responsibilities must occur immediately. To flourish in a Web-based environment requires a redefinition of roles and a reconstruction of the teaching and learning process. Both parties are active in the construction and facilitation of knowledge, based on unique worldviews and

dispositions. The ability to take risks, to assert oneself through the written word and be able to present, justify, and defend one's perspective becomes more difficult when body language and other visual cues are removed. The extent to which both instructors and students are willing to assert themselves in a careful and reflective, yet direct and understandable mode dictates success in a Web classroom.

Both students and instructors in a Web-based environment must possess certain characteristics. Student qualities include maturity, self-discipline, organizational and management skills, commitment, and assertiveness. Underlying these, qualities such as the ability to articulate oneself through a textual means, and the ability to thrive in a group learning environment by participating fully assume importance. It is crucial for educators and administrators, as well as students, to recognize that Web-based learning is not necessarily a valid option for all. As the participants in this study revealed, adapting to the learning environment requires certain qualities and learning styles.

Further, the uniqueness of these roles, as seen through this cohort's rejection of the learned-learner dyad, is fluid and processual, thereby enabling an ongoing learning process. Students needn't wait for the word of the instructor to proceed or to speak out. The ability to connect with the content through an ever-present medium offers newfound potential for expanding the learning experience outside the temporal and spatial constraints of a classroom. The idea of learning as omnipresent and incessant forces the meeting of experiences of the real world with the theoretical of the classroom. The recognition and acceptance of this newfound role calls for a mature, self-directed, and self-disciplined individual. Individuals participating in distance education in Web-based formats must demonstrate a unique level of maturity and self-control. The ability of both stakeholders in a Web environment override the content to a great extent, but, the presentation of pedagogically solid materials through a virtual medium fosters a greater learning experience for all.

Through the content, in the various forms of text, images, video, or other multimedial platforms, reflection and engagement take place on a scale much different than traditional environments. This cohort recognized the duality of immediacy and delayed response through their activities. The asynchronous nature of the course enabled class members the time to examine an issue before responding, but the omnipresent availability of the course permitted and fostered a sense of immediacy and presence. This duality is unsustainable elsewhere, and lends to a pedagogical model that offers "the best of both worlds:" Time and engagement with the learning process and with the content, as well as the ability and availability to participate in this process at any time. Because the learning environment is unlimited in time and space, perspectives are not disregarded. The constraints of the classroom often forbid us from hearing from everyone. We often hear the same voices each week, and overlook many others; we are often unable to bring together groups as disparate as the cohort examined in this research. With the openness of the Web forum, multiplicitous voices emerge. The "lattice" of the Web classroom is comforting and encouraging.

With an array of voices from disparate perspectives, coupled with the encouragement to be heard, dialogue and collaboration can occur with great intensity and more often. The adoption of Socratic dialogue has heretofore been impossible in distance education. The spatial and temporal dislocation of the participants disallowed "back and forth" dialogue. As the learning environment of the Web is characterized by duality of temporality, Socratic dialogue is possible and probable. The ability to read a message or assignment from a peer and ask questions and respond to each and every one is not impossible in traditional educative environments, but one can doubt the implementation of this. Time restraints keep students from talking to each other, as in depth and

detailed as this cohort were able to do.

With peers and their expertise at each other's omnipresent disposal, the formation of a learning community grounded in professional discourse appears to grow naturally. Students, "attending" class each day, come to know each other more thoroughly than their weekly counterparts.

Thus, the learning environment, based on the aforementioned model, reveals unique potential for efficacious Web-based learning.

Recommendations

To avoid failure and inefficacious pedagogy in Web-based environments, potential students should respond formally to a set of criteria. Chapter One offered a review on characteristics of distance education students. This criterion may include a survey instrument developed by each institution and distributed before admission to a Web-based program or course; this survey may include such questions as:

1. Are you able to work independently?
2. Will you sacrifice personal time to complete assignments and readings?
3. Can you write clearly and articulate your thoughts coherently?
4. Are you a self-starter?
5. Are you able to manage time?
6. Do you have strong study skills?
7. Do you need direct lecture to understand materials?
8. Are you comfortable asserting yourself in a group?
9. Will you divulge personal information and be comfortable hearing others' information?
10. Are you computer literate?

Furthermore, instructors should complete a self-assessment survey before teaching in the Web environment. They absolutely must not learn how to teach online as they proceed, but they should be trained and confident before they enter the online classroom. The instructor's role in a Web-based environment demands newfound skills and pedagogical philosophies. This research maintains that monological and instructivist strategies fail in the Web environment, and educators must be confident enough to relinquish their authoritarian role. The role of the educator in the guided conversation must be understood as a fluid role, and one in which conversation is multi-directional and cacophonous.

Questions for assessing instructors may include:

1. What is your teaching philosophy?
2. As an instructor, do you view yourself as: Faciliatory, Constructivist, Didactic?
3. Are you comfortable listening to your students' perspectives and opinions?
4. How do you feel when a student disagrees with or posits a position different from your own?
5. What is the most important part of your pedagogy?
6. How do you foster a sense of community in your classrooms?
7. Are you comfortable working online?
8. Are you able to condense multiple perspectives into a coherent discussion?
9. Are you willing to devote more time to an online class than an onsite class?
10. How well do you feel you know the subject matter of the course in question?
11. Will your materials be prepared before the beginning of the first class meeting?

Conclusions

This discussion has offered insight on Web-based pedagogy, and in particular, it recognizes that Web-based learning is not appropriate for everyone, despite increasing efforts to offer every type of course or program to any grade level. Since its inception, distance education has been battling criticism of validity and integrity. The matchbook advertisements for distance education may be over, but their legacy remain. To ensure validity in distance education, such pre-assessment measures as those described above must be considered by institutions, their faculties, and potential students. To ignore such pre-assessment measures is to lessen the quality, pedagogical integrity, and learning experience for all involved.

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