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TITLE: Exemplary Online Educators: Creating a Community of Inquiry

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PAGES: 46-54

ORIGINAL PDF URL: <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/156473>

Exemplary Online Educators: Creating a Community of Inquiry

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www.athabascau.ca

November 18, 2004

INTRODUCTION

Within most disciplines there are those who are recognized as being exceptionally competent practitioners. These people are sometimes called exceptional or exemplary. In the educational realm, students remember these individuals as the teachers who most positively influenced their learning. The commonality of these exemplary practitioners is that they do their work in a remarkable way and their teaching strategies and interpersonal interactions are regarded by their students as highly successful.

Although there has been a "virtual explosion of online education" (Thiele, 2003) the literature remains lacking in terms of studies focused on what makes some online educators more effective than others. This paper outlines the initial findings of a qualitative study that asked students who study online their perspectives on why they recall certain online

educators as outstanding. The "Community of Inquiry" model developed by Garrison, Anderson and Archer provides a framework for analysis of the findings of this study (n.d.). Specifically, the data reveals that exemplary online teachers create a community of inquiry that is comprised of a strong social, cognitive and teaching presence.

The outcomes of this study have implications for all those who teach online and for administrators who are proposing to move their curriculum from class-room based to the online method of delivery. In order to develop high quality online teachers, we need to understand what makes online educators not only effective, but exemplary.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although technology, especially the Internet, is revolutionizing the way people learn, there is very little literature on the topic of effective teaching online. Recent studies such as the one by Thiele (2003) focused on the learning patterns of online students. The particular focus of Thiele's study was on the effect of online courses on learning styles. Kenner, Androwich, and Edwards (2003) concurred that distance education has grown over recent years. These authors in writing about a particular program offered by Excelsior College to prepare nurse executives again focus on elements of online education such as program cost and factors that attract students to this mode of learning. Christner (2003) cautions that online education should not be seen as the cure for higher education's ills or as the ultimate in educational technology. He observes that problems exist in this new format: balancing the needs of students and faculty can be challenging and not all subjects work as online courses.

White, Roberts and Brannan (2003) focused particularly on course design in online education. Their major premise is that "unless the course is reconceptualized using an interactive learning pedagogy, the results are nothing more than a correspondence course via e-mail and that simply transferring a traditional classroom-based course to an online format is doomed to failure " (White, Roberts & Brannan, 2003, p. 172). However, the unanswered question beyond course design is how does the instructor influence the learning experienced by the student. White, Roberts and Brannan go on to describe an online nurse refresher course provided by University of Wisconsin that promotes the following four components - humanizing or creating a good learning environment; getting the learners to participate; using the right message so that it is received, understood, and remembered; and eliciting feedback from the learner (White, Roberts & Brannan, 2003, p. 173). These elements may provide some clues as to what makes online educators exemplary yet a major gap remains in our understanding of effective online teaching.

Congruent with the White et al. (2003) model, Archer, Garrison, Anderson and Rourke (2001) have conducted research that shows that "creation of adequate levels of cognitive, social, and teaching presence are associated with high levels of deep and meaningful learning." Garrison, Anderson and Archer (n.d.) situate their findings in a model they call the "Community of Inquiry" (see figure 1). The Community of Inquiry features three major elements: social presence, cognitive presence and teaching presence which overlap to form the educational experience of the learner (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, n.d.). The Garrison et al. and White et al. models provide the framework for analysis for this study and provides direction for further research possibilities.

Methodology

Narrative inquiry was the method used in this study. For centuries people have told stories to convey values and explore life (Taylor, 1996). Carter (1993) argues that stories as a mode of knowing are "particularly suited to explicating the issues" that are relevant to educators (p. 6). As Carter explained stories capture and richness and nuances of meaning in human affairs. We believe that the effective teacher-learner relationship is probably rooted, at least in part, in the human interaction between the participants in this relationship. In designing

this study we were influenced by Elbaz (1991) who wrote, "story is the very stuff of teaching, the landscape within which we live as teachers and researchers and within which the work of teachers can be seen as making sense" (p. 3). This we began to understand exemplary online education using narrative inquiry.

This initial study involved questioning graduates of the Masters in Health Study (MHS), Masters in Nursing (MN) and the Advanced Nurse Practitioner (ANP) programs from Athabasca University. These learners had all completed their degree requirements entirely online. Specifically the goal was to ask their perspectives about what makes an online educator exemplary.

Participants were asked the following question on a survey that was sent to all MHS, MN and ANP graduates one month after convocation for the years 2002 and 2003. They were asked to provide a narrative, that is to focus on specific interactions and experiences with their exemplary teachers rather than on a list of characteristics or adjectives in the following question:

We seek to recruit and hire faculty who are exemplary online educators. In order to achieve this, we need to have your perspective on what makes online educators exceptional. Please tell us about an incident or interaction you had with a faculty member during your Master's program that you would categorize as an exceptional moment of learning. We are interested in going beyond a list of characteristics of exceptional educators to look at the context and process of these learning moments. Therefore please provide as much detail as possible regarding the interaction. Perhaps you would be able to tell us the "story" of your learning moment.

The surveys were completed online and returned anonymously. The total number of responses to the research questions was nine out of 17 graduates from 2002 and 14 out of 47 graduates from 2003 with a total of 23 participants in this initial study. This is a participation rate of 36%.

Data Analysis

One of the most challenging aspects of qualitative method is the analysis and interpretation of data (Priest, Roberts & Woods, 2003). In this study we used what Priest, Robert and Woods (2003) call narrative analysis. Narrative analysis is a method by which interpretation of meaning may be made from data which is in story form. Narrative analysis allows researchers to attempt to communicate what was experienced by the study participants. In narrative analysis elements of the narratives (or stories) are organized into common themes.

The major themes that emerged from the study were exemplary online educators as challengers, affirmers and influences. These themes were determined from narratives that were rich in description of how the exemplary online educators affected the learners in these ways. In the sections that follow each theme is reviewed and a verbatim excerpt from the narrative that illustrates these themes is provided. Additional analysis is achieved by applying the Community of Inquiry (Garrison, et.al. n.d.) and White et.al. models to the findings.

EXEMPLARY ONLINE EDUCATORS AS CHALLENGERS

Many of the narratives characterize the online educators as very demanding individuals with high standards. The students illustrate how they came to value the teachers who had high expectations for them, those who challenged them to perform at levels that were beyond their own prospects for themselves. Consider three excerpts that illustrate the theme of educators as challengers.

I once wrote a brief posting regarding common treatments patients sometimes use at home that are harmless, but that may reflect outdated information and learning needs. The instructor wrote to challenge what evidence I used to deem the treatments harmless. I retrieved it, and never forgot her valuing of evidence, and of basing even seemingly harmless statements on evidence to withstand relevant challenges.

Online learning is limited by personal interaction; my best experiences with instructors were those where the instructors challenged my thinking or perspective. A couple of the instructors were particularly good at questioning my assumptions and pointing out other views to broaden the perspective of the students.

I had one instance where the instructor explained that a paper that I had submitted did not meet my "usual" standards. I had indeed had trouble with it and she suggested a rewrite and a chance to submit it again. Initially, I was not looking forward to the extra work but she challenged me to do a more professional job....I was grateful eventually and expressed that to her. Her feedback was so encouraging and you never wanted to let her down.

As Garrison et.al. (n.d.) point out, cognitive presence of the teacher is a core concept in creating a community of inquiry. The responses of the participants in this study give examples of how the online instructors challenged the student to think critically, provide additional examples from practice, and improve the quality of their assignments. These strategies might all be considered to enhance the cognitive presence in the online environment.

In another study by Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2004) of cognitive presence in online learning, they concluded that teacher learner interaction is not sufficient on its own to create effective learning. Rather they conclude that "structure and leadership are crucial for online learners to take a deep and meaningful approach to learning." In the White et.al. study the theme of "using the right message" could be seen as a strategy for achieving cognitive presence. These findings provide additional insight into how cognitive presence in the online teaching environment might be manifested.

EXEMPLARY ONLINE EDUCATORS AS AFFIRMERS

The second major theme relates to exemplary online educators as affirmers. The students identified instructors who found opportunities to let their students know that they were succeeding in their studies and to encourage them in their learning. Specifically exemplary educators affirmed students by recognizing their potential, treating learners with respect and recognizing potential problems and taking actions to assist with this. In all of these ways the teachers identified by the study participants demonstrated to the learners that they valued them as individuals. This affirmation seemed to have a positive influence on the learning experience. Here are two specific examples from the data to illustrate instructors affirming learners by recognizing and acknowledging their potential.

The best part came when my instructor, whose expertise and wisdom I greatly admire, noted that she had learned something new from the means by which I had presented my understanding of the concepts of nursing theory. I also enjoy being asked to share my work with future students or having input for improving courses.

The data also revealed that treating learners with respect provides positive affirmation and enhanced the educational experience. For example,

Sometimes I thought my peers were rejecting or ignoring my ideas or focusing on non-course content (e.g. seemingly unrelated work life issues). At these times, encouragement and validation by the instructor was validating and uplifting. Validation of student needs and respect helped me to stay committed to the long hours of study.

The first was in a particularly difficult semester for me and I had to be away for ten days and the instructor was very accepting of this fact and assured me that catching up could be done later. At the time that I was to leave (several weeks after I had notified her) she sent me an email to wish be well and to enjoy my time away and not to worry about catching up. I was able to take the much needed break and came back with renewed interest and enthusiasm. I felt that this demonstrated a true interest in me in this otherwise seemingly cold impersonal learning. It gave me much more of a feeling that she wasn't just doing her job but that she cared about the students as people and that our learning was also important to her.

Finally, here is an example of how the exemplary online educator recognized a potential problem common in adult learners who are balancing competing priorities in their lives and thus made the learner feel valued thus enhancing the learning experience.

I appreciated being able to ask for flexibility in scheduling of assignments and deadlines on several occasions with different instructors to meet my personal needs. This reduced stress and stress reduction certainly helps to improve readiness for learning.

Applying the Community of Inquiry model to the educator as affirmer theme draws attention to the concepts purposed by Garrison et al. (n.d.) of teaching presence and social presence. The overlap of teaching presence and social presence as depicted in the model forms what Garrison and his colleagues have labeled "setting climate" (see figure 1). We suggest that the affirmation of the learner by the online educator assists in creating a positive, supportive learning climate. When interactions between learner and instructor are one-on-one in a private online venue, the climate may be student specific. Likewise affirming student-teacher interactions in public fora would have the possibility of enhancing the virtual classroom climate. In either case the educator by acknowledging student success, interacting in a respectful manner and being astute to arising problems and taking appropriate action all served to enhance the virtual classroom climate setting a positive tone that facilitated learning. Likewise, White et al. conclude that one essential component of effective online teaching is creating a humanizing learning environment which is was achieved in this study by affirming the learners.

EXEMPLARY ONLINE EDUCATORS AS INFLUENCERS

The final theme is exemplary online educators as influencers. The stories told by the study participants illustrated that the exceptional teachers had influenced them significantly. The students recalled examples of how the expertise of the teacher in a particular subject area and the strong online presence of the instructor were specific ways that they were influenced. Consider these examples of the power of the content and process expertise of the instructor.

My best "learning moments" often occurred as I was struggling to grasp a complex concept and the instructors provided clarity through the use of practical examples.

Professor X's feedback on my assignment--publication of article, stands out as a "special learning occasion." Her method of putting together feedback in a positive format would stay with me for the rest of my life. Although I received an exceptional

mark, the feedback was so well documented that I think Dr. X can instruct other instructors on how to give feedback.

The following are examples of strategies online instructors used to convey their presence. The study participants concluded that the sensed presence of their instructors contributed to their success in the online course.

She would send you a little email just out of the blue to let you know you were on track.

Another instructor similarly demonstrated how she thought of us as real people was in the way that she would send thoughts of the day/week or season. These were closely timed with times of high stress obvious by the type of conversation in the forums, when the subject matter was more difficult to grasp or the times when assignments were due. It lessened the stress, which for me, led to a better performance.

Linking these findings to the Community of Inquiry (Garrison, et.al., n.d.) model is obvious. The narratives provide examples of how teachers can achieve what is documented in the model as teaching presence. Further, the findings are congruent with results from study of the influence of social presence of the instructor in online courses by Swan (2003). She found that social presence evidenced by teacher immediacy behaviors affected student, and possibly instructor, satisfaction with a course. Specifically, Swan found that students with high overall perceptions of social presence also scored high in terms of perceived learning and perceived satisfaction with the instructor (2003).

Perceived online presence of the instructor as recommended by Swan, combined with a presence that is considered by the learners to be positive and influential as suggested by the participants in this study, seems to be a necessary goal for online teachers who strive to be effective. Further study to determine additional strategies that online instructors use to successfully achieve online presence is desirable.

EMERGING THEMES

The analysis of the data in this study continues. There are still many themes beginning to emerge that require additional data for support. For example, there is an emerging theme related to the idea of "learning with." Some narratives convey that students are motivated when the teacher-learner relationship involves a mutual learning experience. This reciprocal arrangement in the teacher-learner relationship will be explored more fully in the follow-up to this initial study. One example of this emerging concept taken from the current study follows.

In one of the courses the instructor was openly honest about how much she was learning from each of us during our conference dialogues and assignments. What struck me about this was how important it is for the instructors to guide, share and participate and not to assume or present themselves as being the authority on a subject.

In some ways the Community of Inquiry model speaks to this experience of mutuality (Archer, et.al, 2003). The educational experience that forms the center-piece of the model is a convergence of the experiences of both the learner and the teacher. We propose that this educational experience can be more or less positive situated along a continuum, but that it is likely a similar experience for both the teacher and the learner. This proposition requires further study in follow-up research where the perspectives of both teachers and learners are gathered and compared.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Technology is revolutionizing the way people learn. The heart of the challenge facing online educators is “the need to create a critical community of inquiry- the hallmark of higher education – within a virtual text-based environment” (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, n.d., p. 1). This study focused on exemplary online educators with the goal of discovering what teaching approaches and strategies used by the group students identify as being exceptionally effective. In other words, how do outstanding online educators create a critical community of inquiry? The research data provides rich examples of how students experience the elements of social, cognitive and teaching presences within the virtual classroom. This knowledge may assist those who teach courses online to improve their teaching effectiveness thus creating exceptional learning environments that will enhance student learning.

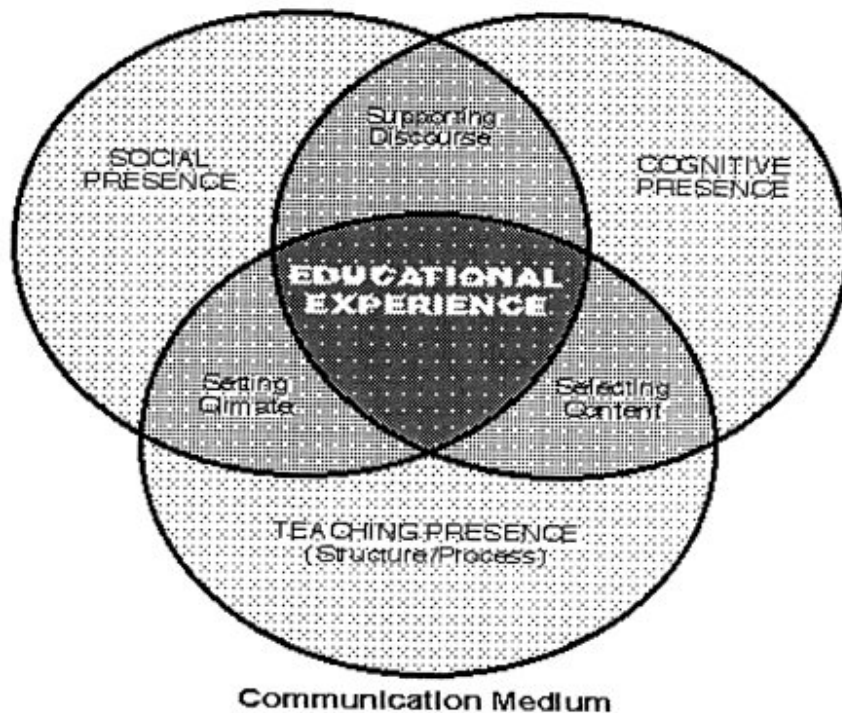
As the use of online as a method of delivery grows, the interest in effective delivery using this method is also developing. The narratives and analysis of these that are the major component of this study provide specific examples that can be situated into the Community of Inquiry model of online learning proposed by Garrison et.al. (n.d.). This model also stimulates additional areas for further research. For example, how can the educator further enhance the online educational experience through interventions that promote a positive climate? How does the online educator effectively support discourse and what content is most appropriate for online learning? Further, there is much to learn about the student-teacher relationship in the virtual classroom. The findings of this study give rise to an emerging theme of “learning with” with implications for the reciprocity of the teacher-learner relationship. Through further study we may discover that the effective teacher-learner relationship is probably rooted, at least in part, in the positive human interaction between the participants in this relationship which was alluded to by White et al., 2003. Further research to unveil the components of such a relationship and the contribution it could make to learning is needed.

Online learning is not just a learning enhancement, it is an entirely new way of learning and teaching that is likely here to stay, and thus additional research aimed at the largely unanswered question of how the instructor can positively influence the learning experienced by the student should be a priority. The next phase of this study is underway and it involves a much larger sample of online students. A richer and fuller description of the phenomena will be sought by augmenting the questionnaire with interviews of selected participants.

Perhaps some of what has been learned about excellence in online education is encapsulated in this participant’s comments, “Having a good educator can be likened to the experience of having a fine wine. Your senses are stirred but not assaulted leaving you wanting more and recalling the experience with pleasure.” This study provided a beginning description of the approaches and strategies used by effective online educators. This knowledge can be used in the recruitment and selection of new faculty members and in the ongoing coaching and development of current faculty with the overall goal of enhanced quality of online education. But most importantly, online teaching, if done in an effective way, has the potential to significantly enhance the intellectual quality of learning environments and learning outcomes. Exemplary online teaching can create a true community of inquiry.

Figure 1

Community of Inquiry



Source: Garrison, D., Anderson, T. & Archer, W. (n.d.). p.16.

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