Virtual Classroom: I wonder if my teacher got my file!

By Carol Brown and Denise Roods

Above the doorway hangs a sign with the words, “Quiet: Classroom in Session.” Peeking through the door, we see a lone, silent professor whose fingers dance over his keyboard while he gapes at a computer screen. Our question might be: what kind of class is this, which quietly takes place in a subdued hallway of academic offices?

The class is one of a growing number of online courses that use e-mail and “chat” technologies to conduct college coursework. For the past several years, we have seen sundry communication and display devices invade our classrooms from kindergarten through graduate school. Now that this form of classroom is with us we may wonder, is this a good thing? Most would say the jury is still out.

We know that students learn best when they are learning by doing. Since computers allow students to learn while they explore, the overall experience may be constructive. Research shows that when we involve ourselves in active projects, we are more likely to retain the skills involved. Besides, when we involve students in discussion activities that involve questioning and clarification, we help develop students’ critical thinking abilities. Given all this, by increasing active learning strategies, we increase the number of students who take away from their courses something beyond just a full notebook.

Lost in Cyberspace

On the down side, anxiety about relying on Internet communication abounds. If we were to glance into the professor’s office on another day, we might hear his voice mail trumpeting something like, “Hello—Dr. Jones—this is Adrienne from your A430 class? Uh, did you get my e-mail—the one with my assignment attached?” Or else, “Dr. Jones, please help, I am trying to submit my assignment by the deadline but my e-mail keeps bouncing back!”

The above examples reflect a real problem with teaching via Internet. It is a phenomenon that Virginia Monetizing and Mary Lou Crouch from George Mason University have dubbed “asynchronous anxiety.” This stress extends to faculty as well as we are transitional from managing the room with the chalkboard to managing computer connections and configurations, audio visual equipment, and software concerns.

In addition, when professors are communicating with students or requiring assignment submissions via Internet, they find themselves worrying when they do not hear from students on a regular basis. The conversion from a physical classroom to a virtual classroom means that we are unable to enjoy the physical reassurance that people are present. Professor Carol Ridges of Indiana University succinctly states, “Despite our preferences, it is illogical to require physical presence where it’s

Vary your course activities to maintain interest.

There are many approaches to an online course. How to handle it depends on the learner and the topic.

Asynchronous forms are those where the students participate at different times. These could include on-line and interactive journals, Web-based forums, newsgroups, Web logs (blogs) or emailing lists. Using this technique, teachers can assign students specific writing projects that may or may not be interactive. In addition, asynchronous communication activities can be used by teachers to make announcements to classes, to distribute assignments, to update schedules and other course materials.

It is noteworthy that asynchronous communication has a lot of potential applications for peer review, especially in Web-based forums or newsgroups, where smaller groups of students can post essays and peer responses as threads of discussion. E-mailing lists, in the form of newsgroups and electronic mailing listsevs, represent excellent sites of discourse to be examined by students. In general, it is best to use asynchronous activities where deeper reflection is involved.

Synchronous forms are those in which students “meet” and communicate in a virtual environment. These include Internet Relay Chats (called IRC or simply “chat” sessions), video and audio meetings, and even telephone conferences. These types of meetups are appropriate where the topic calls for rapid-fire exchange of ideas, quick collaboration, and spontaneity.
not required; nonetheless, we are accustomed to assessing participation based on attendance. In the traditional classroom, we use body language to gain information about the students’ level of participation. Body language is important in determining if we’re adequately conveying our message; this type of communication is also critical when we provide special assistance.

**Computer skills may not count**

Generally speaking, the student who does best in a virtual class is accustomed to working independently, being individually motivated to learn, and who has a vision of achievement goals. Obviously, many college students do not meet these criteria.

It is widely held that younger students are proficient at computer usage, especially internet relay chat technology and video games. However, we may be overestimating their overall skill level. Their real aptitude at using software and effectively searching the Internet may be significantly lower than we would guess. There are some who fall in the “natural” category, who are able to pick up any computing skill with ease. But there are more out there who are intimidated when outside of their own computing comfort zone. These students may find the virtual environment frightening— a condition which creates a lackluster environment for collaboration and peer feedback.

**What can we do?**

Literature abounds on effectively teaching with technology. Probably, with technology’s “coming of age,” along with ever-increasing changes, recommendations for teaching approaches will also continue to be amended. At this point, there are a number of guidelines that are universally regarded. Having this information up front helps you to better support your students, and to concentrate your efforts on teaching rather than running yourself ragged trying to support your students by yourself. The following four tips for student engagement may improve the overall student course satisfaction and implement a smoother coursework experience.

**Make the experience relevant**

An important part of using technology in the classroom is making it relevant. The adage, “presentation is everything” is indisputably applicable to the classroom. However, presentation technology for its own sake may impair the learning process and alienate students. Commonly, presentation technology appears in the classroom for the “glitz” factor; in other words, the professor doesn’t have a compelling reason to use it except for showmanship. This generally leaves computer-savvy students unimpressed.

**Relevancy checklist**

When planning to use technology, the best question is, “Does your use of technology add something to the class that would be impossible without it?” That is a certain indication for the use of technology in the classroom. Just from the perspective of keeping materials current, it is good to electronically distribute such things as lecture outlines, exam-review questions, class announcements and syllabus changes, supporting files, and study tips. Certainly projected presentations are effective in class for images that illustrate points, and scans of slides or other images that can be accessed for study outside of class. Our own unique perspective is essential to many teaching situations, and visuals can effectively convey that. Everyone teaches differently, and instructor use of multimedia tools will differ. In summary, it is important to think about how to embed the technology into the class, instead of layering it on top.

The next concern in multimedia presentations is the level of difficulty: is it appropriate to the students’ experience? Of course the “presentation” aspect is vital. Is the technology appealing, or would the voice and chalkboard provide a better venue for the learning experience?

**Establish fundamentals**

When physical communication is reduced, constructing effective assignments requires some forethought. First, it is critical to decide exactly what the goals are. It is helpful to provide examples of good work. Second, a “plan B” approach is critical. It is good practice to provide a “help” page that lets students know what to do when their computer expectations don’t meet reality. This page should delineate backup procedures for every conceivable situation.

**Provide variation**

Teachers who depend solely on any one instructional method often lose the interest of their students. A simple answer to the technology-dissociation problem involves offering at least several hours of actual meetings with students. Convening on a semi-regular basis gives those with computer expectations don’t meet reality. This page should delineate backup procedures for every conceivable situation.

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