Creating Effective Online Collaborative Educators

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The early pioneers in online education tried to recreate the world that they were familiar with, the face-to-face classroom or lecture theatre, in cyberspace. There is now a recognition that this approach, to some extent, is limiting. We are starting to recognise that we need to change the way we think and operate, if we are to reap the benefits of Computer Mediated Communication as an educational tool.

When the movie camera was first invented, the early filmmakers filmed plays. It took a few years for them to learn how to exploit the power of the movie camera. If you look at how a film is made today and compare it with the production of a play, you will find that there are some significant differences. Some of the core features in the production of plays and films remain the same. The movie camera permits a great many additional techniques to be exploited. This has resulted, over time, in a whole new way of operating, in order to exploit the medium fully. With the medium of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) we are still developing educational techniques that will reap the learning benefits that the medium may offer.

The most important element in producing effective 'Online' learning, in my view, is that of the tutor. As Helen Milner and Professor Ian Draffan of the University of Industry point out "University postgraduate departments have realised the benefits of having tutor roles that check up on the progress of all work-based learners. Of course all of this helps retention but we all know that this human encouragement is essential for effective learning." [1] For most learners, the encouragement given by effective tutoring processes determine whether they complete their learning experience successfully. Robin Mason and Martin Weller of the UK Open University maintain, when talking about online tutoring. "However, both for those involved in the staff development process and tutors themselves, there are new sets of skills to learn and working practices to adopt" [2]. Yet very little effort and resources have been committed to produce and enhance the skills of this vital element in this process. There has been too little recognition that educators need any additional skills, in order to maximise their effectiveness when working with CMC.

The Educators

Educators are facing accelerating rates of change. This is making many of them feel very uncomfortable. Much of the change is seen as being externally driven, for non-pedagogical reasons. Often, the educational deliverers are left out of formulating the changes that are then imposed upon them. They are often reluctant to accept anything that has not been explained properly to them and in which they believe they have little or no ownership.

As Barry Jackson stated "Significant changes have occurred in the funding, direction and mission of higher education, all of which have an impact on the teaching of students, and therefore on their learning. Many of the problems facing higher education have arisen from friction between emerging mass education and the elite values which characterize traditional academic organisations. Reduced resources have worsened the ratio of students to staff, which at the same time institutions are diverting resources to the development of learning resource provision to enable distance and open learning." [3].

In order to gain effective change, I believe it is essential that considerable time and effort is spent on preparing educators for the change that is already happening. The radical changes that the

developing telematic teaching tools are causing need to be introduced in a way that the educators will understand and accept. Robin Mason believes that " Others characterise the change required as a move away from content to process: ability to communicate, especially across cultures, ability to work in, form and lead teams, and particularly the ability to find, synthesise, and manipulate information." [4]. If she is correct, and I believe that she is, getting educators to accept such changes will require a good deal of thought, implementation and planning. "Many institutions are converting lecture notes or other paper-based materials to HTML, for the World Wide Web, but, with little support provided for the student, the gains are minimal. Simply translating material from familiar media into electronic form is rarely productive – and is certainly inadequate for supported distance education, which aims to engage the student in a 'community of learning'. If we hope to improve rather than translate, we must understand the whole teaching and support process through a critical examination of its functions". [5] This is essential, if any real benefit is to be had from CSCL.

In 1997 I ran a workshop at the Online Educa Conference in Berlin, entitled the IMPLEMENTING CMC WORKSHOP. Some 36 educators attended this from some 20 countries. One group looked at the issues that they considered affected educators. I believe some of their findings are worth reproducing here: -

- Traditional older teachers may have difficulty in coping with this method of course delivery. It is hard to change the mentality of some teachers. The workshop participants recounted a number of examples of this. They believed that 'techno fear' was one of the greatest inhibitors here.
- Many organizations failed to plan for realistic staff training, when introducing this medium. This often resulted in people with little or no understanding of the medium being expected to undertake tasks of which they had insufficient knowledge. The hardest part of introducing CSCL was to motivate and train the educators and trainers.
- Enthusiastic Staff members were expected to develop their online skills and design online courses in addition to their already demanding traditional role. Innovators were rewarded with extra work.
- There was recognition that the role of the teacher will change when using CSCL. The teacher will be much more of a mentor than a teacher.. Most experienced CSCL tutors recognise that they needed to undertake lot more of a 'hands off' facilitator role.
- There is the question of added value for the student, when using CSCL. Students received more individual attention from the tutor in online learning.
- Another advantage to an educator who was skilled at running courses, using CSCL, was that they could take part in the delivery of courses, in collaboration with institutions in other parts of the world, without having to waste time and money on travel. This should result in the earning power of skilled CSCL practitioners increasing significantly
- The ability of a University to be able to run an effective course worldwide was already a reality. This meant that traditional 'catchment' areas were no longer a significant factor, in the recruitment of students.

Getting Started

Not many people undertaking mountaineering for the first time would attempt to climb Everest on the first day. Yet many educators acquire some conferencing software and then try and design and run some kind of pilot 'online' course. When their experiment fails, they then rarely blame themselves, often stating that the medium is not very suitable for learning. They do not have any

experience of studying, using CSCL. This contrasts shaply with their face-to-face learning experiences, which they subliminally draw upon when conducting a traditional class.

I have found that it is essential to give future educators an extensive opportunity to experience collaborative learning online. Having undertaken intensive, CSCL course of not less than 10 weeks duration, they experience the advantages and disadvantages that their online students are likely to face. This makes them more sympathetic and supportive when they eventually tutor online, themselves. I find it helpful to start such courses with a one-day face-to-face workshop, a form of learning that they are familiar with. The day is structured with the intention of exploring, sharing and reducing the educators' fears. It also permits them to be able to learn how to use the basic functions of the conferencing software with readily available 'hands on' assistance.

Another stratagem is to try and reduce the fear many traditional educators have of computer technology. As Daniel V. Eastmond and Rae W. Rohfeld recognised when they wrote: "Many adult students resist computer technology. Much of the initial training and ongoing support deals with reducing computer anxiety and helps people gain confidence in their ability to use the technology. Once they are successful, students often become "hooked" on computer communications". [6]

Many educators will give a number of reasons as to why they think that CSCL is a 'fad' and not worth pursuing. This is often a mask that hides their fear of the technology involved in the medium, sometimes even from themselves. The aim is to get educators to be able to communicate, study and collaborate with their students using the technology with the minimum of fuss. We want them to be able to view the technology as simply being a tool that allows them to communicate effectively. To this end, they should be given a meaningful group-learning task at an early stage. This task should only require them to be able to log into the conferencing system, read a message, send a message and then log out. This can give the future online educator an intrinsically rewarding learning experience, without requiring them to make a major commitment to learning complex computer programs. A student on a previous course reported " *"When I enrolled on to this Course, I felt I had very little experience of computer technology, however I was soon to realise that some of my fellow students had never switched 'the box' on - my first lesson, if they were willing to try so was I.*

My first task was to discuss my hopes, fears and expectations of the course, how reassuring to discover others felt the same way.

What really fascinated me was how quickly I was became an online Junkie and how my thoughts differed from those of other peoples. By reading fellow students inputs I soon discovered how my own thoughts could be challenged, how I could enlighten my views and broaden my horizons by 'mulling over' other peoples opinions. [7]

This initial face-to-face day also permits the students to start to develop some rapport with their course peers and their tutors. The development of online learning groups is often given a significant boost by some of the collaborative exercises that the students engage in, during their initial face-to-face meeting.

Developing the Online skills.

In our Online Trainers course, the first online module last 3 weeks and is designed to encourage the participants to explore Computer mediated Communication. It is also designed to ensure that

non-IT literate participants gain sufficient knowledge to play an active part in the collaborate learning process, during the 10 week online course phase. We encourage participants to adopt the 'little and often' approach. This is connecting to the conferencing system for short periods and as often as possible.

Psychologists maintain that most people can assimilate between 5 and 9 new concepts at any one time. Trying to get participants to learn too many software features early in a course tends to frustrate and demotivate them.

This module also permits participants to experience a 'just in time' non-collaborative type of instructional course, which we use to get them to explore the communications software. We are able to point out the limitation of this type of course in exploiting some of the learning potential of the medium.

During this first 'online module participants are introduced to some small group collaborative exercises. A typical early exercise might be: -
"Task 4
Contributions should be posted in your tutor group areas.

Individually
I want you to think about the educator/ trainer (or other person) who has had the most beneficial influence on your development.
What were the skills/ attitudes and attributes that that person displayed?
What was it about that person that helped improve your motivation to develop?
First: You should post your thoughts to your tutor group area
Then comment on your colleagues' contributions

The summariser should produce a list from these contributions (with reasons where appropriate) that cover the main areas of: -
Skills
Attitude
Attributes
We will revisit your summary later in the course to see what (if anything) a good 'online' tutor might need to add to your list.

I would ask the summariser (Milverton- Group 1, Chris -Group 2,Sarah-Group3 & Tony- Group 4) to try and complete this task by **midnight on Wednesday 26th May**"

The role of the summariser is rotated between the tutor group participants. This is another technique that encourages participation and helps to keep the members of the group actively collaborating.

This period, at the start of course, is designed to cater for student who may have initial teething problems with their computer equipment or their ability to connect to the virtual college. Help is provided, either by a telephone help desk or online, if appropriate. By leaving the more important concepts towards the end of this module, participants with initial technical problems are less likely to miss participating in vital learning stages.

It can be helpful, in a perverse sort of way, for participants to experience some technical problems, as it gives them some first hand experience of the intense frustration that their students will encounter, if they have similar problems.

Participants start to experience the ability of students to form social relationships, using CMC. They often witness 'real process' taken place in these early online discussions. There is something about the medium that seems to encourage more open responses. Maybe it is the lack of the embarrassment factor due to the lack of body language? participants may start to notice that there is a much more even spread of student contributions than usually experienced in a conventional class. Because of the 'built-in' time delay, in this form of asynchronous communication, the more extrovert students are not able to dominate discussions and activities. The students with Theorist or Reflector learning styles (as used in the Honey and Mumford Learning styles theory) contributed much more than they would do in a conventional face-to-face session. Reading about a concept is one thing, discussing what one has read with one's peers it is a much richer learning experience.

Course participants should experience the need for small groups to prevent a common problem that bedevils online training – that of Information Overload. As Anita Pincas states " In order to allow this kind of fruitful collaboration, it is important for the student groups to be quite small, otherwise the number of tasks and messages become too difficult to follow. Just as in f2f contexts, a discussion among more than 8 or 10 people is unlikely to succeed if all want to play a role in it." [8].
From experiments we have conducted, we now advocate groups of 5 or 6. Less than 4 people tend to restrict the interchange of ideas. More than 6 people in a group, we have found that one person tends to become a 'browser' (someone who reads others contributions but fails to contribute to the discussion – also know as a 'lurker'). Larger groups are more difficult to manage and often result in a small number (2/3) of people dominating the discussion, with many of the others then ceasing to access the group discussion.

It is important that educators are given a chance to carry out tasks designed to enhance their skills in communicating with groups, using CMC. Netweaving is the art of being able to link together many points in an online discussion. Some of these will have very tenuous links (typically found in this medium). The course participants undertaking the summarisers' roles enhance this skill. A real advantage is that this type of training permits educators to experiment with their online style of delivery. It gives them the chance to identify differing personal styles and assess how their peer group may receive a particular style.

The intensive exposure, as online students, gives them first hand knowledge of many of the advantages and disadvantages of this medium as a learning tool. Such training should also expose the participants to the various techniques that assist in creating a learning community that motivates collaboration. This would include creating a friendly, social environment, acknowledging the early contributions, giving supportive feedback and fostering the various discussions in the small groups, by asking appropriate questions.

An important additional stimulus, is the concept of the individual online tutorial and online profile. Each participant will experience the reflective online tutorial on two occasions. This gives them personal experience of the power of this very reflective learning tool.
Most educators and trainers deliver some very successful traditional learning experiences, which they have developed over time. They are reluctant to have to start from scratch. Luckily, Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL) will often utilize material used to support conventional face-to-face teaching, with little or no alteration. CSCL also benefits from the personal touch that most educators and trainers bring to their classes.

Conclusions.

Too often Educators and trainers are asked to develop online skills alone. There is little understanding in many organisations of the knowledge needed to become a successful online tutor. People are being asked to discover the lessons learned by online practitioners since the mid nineteen seventies, from scratch. It is highly unlikely that any single person will be successful in doing so.

Good online training should make educators feel confident to deliver effective online training. It should equip them to know when online training is appropriate, and equally important, when it is not likely to be effective. It should give participants practice in giving online feedback and being able to deal with particular problems associated with CMC, such as information overload and non-participation.

The vital role of the online tutor in establishing successful online delivery needs to be recognised and provision for effective training made. With most governments now developing policies for the provision of online education, this medium is here to stay.

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