Effective Facilitators

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There are many skills required to be a successful online instructor, and from those skills, successful techniques can be developed to ensure student success through facilitator excellence. Such excellence must be developed and cultivated in a dedicated educator who is willing to lead students and interact with them in a rapidly changing format and expanding student presence.

As an online facilitator, most – if not all – communication with students will be written: online discussion threads, private messages, e-mails, or possibly even text messages. Thoughts, ideas, and complex instructions must be delivered without the benefit of non-verbal communication cues such as tone, body-language, and facial expression. The only non-verbal cue available is word choice, and while it can be a powerful tool, it is only one of many. Online facilitators are obviously not the only modern professionals that require effective written communication skills; such skills are frequently featured in job postings of all types, especially for administrative positions.

Effective written communication skills are key for online instructors in order to promote interactivity in the online classroom and keep students engaged, not only with the instructor, but with each other (Palloff and Pratt, 2011). Generally, students come into a classroom expecting a certain level of interactivity with their instructor, and as an instructor, part of that interactivity is to provide instructions and support, as well as engage students conversationally in classroom discussion (Junk, Deringer, and Junk, 2011). Part of keeping students engaged in the active learning process is providing them with feedback that addresses any shortcomings in a constructive and helpful manner and getting that feedback to them in a timely manner so that they may make use of it.

It is increasingly common to find business writing courses at technical schools and as part of standard curricula, particularly in career-focused programs of study. There are also books on the topic available for private purchase, and such books are popular among job seekers and those looking to further their careers without taking a full course or class on the subject. Since business writing and effective written communication skills are so highly sought after, many companies even prepare examinations for potential job candidates to measure their skills.

Another vital skillset for online facilitators and instructors is the ability to engage students. These do fall into separate categories – engagement and written communication skills – because while written word can be used to engage students, there are other tools that can be used as well, and an individual can be a solid technical writer, yet not overly engaging. Since there are no face-to-face interactions in the online classroom, pressures and needs from students may feel somewhat different than in a traditional classroom and may require a different action and reaction.

Junk, Deringer, and Junk suggest the use of a specific set of online and electronic pedagogies to engage online learners and increase the quality of online learning environments (2011). Since students have spent a great deal of time online, likely perusing commercial sites of high quality, they will have high expectations for the text and media provided in an online course. They will also have high expectations since there are more opportunities for online learners than ever before. Junk, Deringer, and Junk warn against simply “repackaging” course materials from the face-to-face course for use in an online classroom as they typically do not translate well and will fail to engage the learners (2011).

Shattuck and Anderson followed a group of instructors undergoing a certification process to prepare them for online facilitation (2013). Their own instruction was conducted online to provide them with an engaging learning experience as online students. Two-thirds of the study participants relayed that the engaging experience had a direct effect on how they conducted their own classrooms following the course. The researchers also acknowledge that “experiencing … an unfamiliar … learning environment is the best way to help instructors approach their subsequent online teaching from a more student-centered perspective” (Shattuck and Anderson, 2013).

Herman (2012) observes that there is a significant lack of faculty development in universities and colleges with online instruction. While the vast majority of institutions offer faculty development programs – 80% – the consistency of such programs with respect to frequency was found to be very unsteady in most institutions (Herman, 2012). To increase the quality of online programs, organizational administrations must continue to invest in faculty development and increase that investment to provide quality online education for students.

References

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