Teaching Style in the Online Classroom

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INTRODUCTION

As with the long line of learning technologies that preceded it, the integration of online classrooms has progressed beyond the experimental stage and entered the mainstream at many colleges and universities. Today, more than three-fourths (76.6%) of campuses offer online course registration, compared to 70.9% in 2002, half in 2001, and a fifth (20.9%) in 1998 (Campus Computing Project Survey, 2003). It should be noted that the larger the institution, the greater the percentage offering distance education courses, with 87% of institutions with over 10,000 students offered distance education in 1997-1998 (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). In addition to classes offered entirely online, it is projected that 50% of all college courses will be hybrids (i.e., include both online and classroom elements) within a decade (Arnone, 2002). Many proponents of online learning see hybrid or blended learning as a way to correct mistakes of the past and to create a new and better form of active learning (Gold, 2001; McDonald & Postle, 1999).

Despite this general sense of optimism, little research has been done that examines the conditions necessary to promote successful online learning (Quitadamo & Brown, 2001; Toki & Caukill, 2003). Much of the research conducted comparatively studies distance and traditional methods of education (Diaz & Bontenbal, 2001; Hall, 1999; Russell, 1999). Results from much of this research, however, seem to indicate that the technology, while a catalyst for major change, is itself not nearly as important as other factors, one of which is the role of the instructor (Berge, 1996; Glassman & Barbour, 2004; LaMonica, 2001; Masie,2000, 2003; Phipps & Merisotis, 1999). Many experts suggest that the key to radical change, and ultimately the true success of online learning, will not result from advances in technology, but rather changes within the instructor and with the instruction (Barker & Baker, 1995; Berge, 1995; Girrod & Cavannaugh, 2001; Hicks, Reid & George, 1999; Johnston, 1998; Matuga, 2001; Morse & Truman, 1996; Palloff & Pratt, 2001).

Despite current trends toward an increased emphasis on the use of online technology-based learning environments, surveys of faculty computer usage indicate that there are wide variations in the levels of receptivity and involvement to their use. Jaffee (1998) estimated that only a relatively small percentage, 20-30%, of the faculty population use new instructional technologies such as asynchronous learning networks. Many faculty continue to view teaching in the virtual environment, without a classroom, as an unattractive alternative. To many, the classroom has taken on the status of a sacred institution. It has historically centralized all the power, authority, and control into the hands of the instructor and, in doing so, has heavily shaped and reinforced their identity as a teacher. Teaching, for these educators, in the virtual environment is incongruous with their basic understanding of the essential nature of teaching (Arnone, 2002; Jaffee, 1998; McFadden, Marsh & Price, 1999; Schifter, 2000). Why do some instructors quickly and easily embrace changes enabled by advances in technology while others do not?

Through a review of literature, this paper explores whether an instructor's personality type and teaching style can be used to help predict those who will be more apt to easily and successfully make this transition and/or whether it can be used to suggest ways to ease the transition for instructors faced with the need to do so. The research approach used will first examine the demographic profiles of those instructors who are predisposed to being innovative, and review the changing role of the instructor occasioned by the transition to the online environment. Key principles by which effectiveness of teaching in higher education can be judged are used as the basis upon which to examine if any particular teaching style(s) appears more suited than the others to the online environment.

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF THE ONLINE INSTRUCTOR

According to the National Education Association survey (2000) of its members, distance instructors have a similar demographic profile to those that teach strictly in the in-person classroom. After all, many of these instructors also spend much of their time in the traditional classroom. According to the survey, the majority is full-time, tenured faculty, split evenly between full professors and lecturers/adjuncts, and represents a cross section of all academic disciplines. Areas in which they differ somewhat is that distance learning faculty are more likely to teach at a community college, and they are slightly less likely to be over the age of 51 (National Education Association, 2000). This is contrary to common perceptions of the typical online educator being a young teacher; the majority are seasoned, senior educators with extensive experience in their field (Harasim, 2000).

DIFFUSION OF INNOVATION

Perhaps the most accurate way of differentiating the profile of the online instructor from his/her traditional peer is to recognize that individuals who are predisposed to being innovative will, in all probability, adopt an innovation earlier than those who are less predisposed (EFILWC, 2004; Fuller, Norby, Pearce & Strand, 2000; Surry, 1997). Following a pattern for the diffusion of innovation defined by Rogers (1995), at one extreme are the "innovators" who make up no more than 3% of the population. These pioneers, intrigued by new developments in technology, take the risks to adopt an innovation very early in the diffusion process. At the other extreme are the "laggards" who have absolutely no interest in using new instructional technologies and resist change until late in the process, if ever. Between these two extremes are the "early adopters," "early majority," and the "late majority," with the widest chasm in the overall distribution occurring in the transition from the early adopters to the early majority. The early adopters, who make up about 10% of the population, combine their interest in and competence with technology with the desire to incorporate it into their teaching repertoire. The early majority, who comprise approximately 35% of the population, combined with the late majority, who comprise another 35%, represent the majority of all faculty members (Jaffee, 1998).

The online instructor's profile most likely fits that of the early adopter—a largely self-sufficient, visionary, horizontally networked individual (e.g., has a high proportion of interdisciplinary and cross-functional links in his or her personal network) who favors revolutionary change, is visionary, and possesses a strong technology focus (Geoghegan, 1995).

CHANGING ROLE OF THE INSTRUCTOR

The profile listed above is a snapshot of an individual who is perhaps most likely to voluntarily make the transition to the online environment. This profile, however, does not necessarily reflect the individual who will achieve the most success online. The tendency of many instructors who are making the transition to the online environment is to simply transfer their experiences and methodologies, often untouched, into the online environment. They appear to be lingering under the impression that the same conceptual framework, teaching styles, and approaches used in their traditional face-to-face classes will also work in their online classroom (Diaz & Bontenbal, 2001; Gold, 2001; Johnston, 1998; McDonald & Postle, 1999; McFadden et al., 1999; Quitadamo & Brown, 2001; Rossman, 1999).

Although technology-driven concerns must remain secondary to well-designed learning goals and objectives for effective learning to take place (Berge, 1995), online learning technology, especially asynchronous, changes the teaching process and the role of the faculty. In general, four categories of role functions tend to emerge as the more common encapsulation of the roles of the online instructor (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison & Archer, 2001; Berge, 1995; Coppola, Hiltz & Rotter, 2001; Gold, 2001; Mason, 1991; Paulsen, 1995; Rossman, 1999). These can be categorized as follows:

- **Pedagogical (intellectual; task):** Certainly, some of the most important roles of online instructors revolve around their duties as an educational facilitator. The instructor uses questions and probes for student responses that focus discussions on critical concepts, principles, and skills.
- **Social:** Creating a friendly, social environment in which learning is promoted is also essential

for successful online teaching. Thus, promoting human relationships, developing group cohesiveness, maintaining the group as a unit, and in other ways helping members to work together in a mutual cause are all critical to success of any online teaching.

- **Managerial (organizational; procedural; administrative):** This role involves setting the agenda for learning: the objectives of the discussion, the timetable, procedural rules, and decision-making norms. Managing the interactions with strong leadership and direction is considered a sine qua non of successful online teaching.
- **Technical:** The facilitator must make participants comfortable with the system and the software that the course is using. The ultimate technical goal for the instructor is to make the technology transparent. When this is done, the learner may concentrate on the academic task at hand.

DEFINING "EFFECTIVENESS"

In simple terms, the effectiveness of online teaching, as with any mode of teaching, is judged by its ability to provide a quality learning experience to a target group of learners (Hicks et al., 1999). Although much has been written about teaching effectiveness, a review of recent literature yields no commonly agreed upon standard or clearly articulated definition. Neither does it yield any agreement regarding the qualities that effective teachers possess (Cuevas, Casella & Verhey, 2000). In fact, to a large degree, the exact nature of the relationship between good teaching and effective learning remains unclear. Nothing actually confirms that good teaching will consistently, much less always, result in high-quality learning (Carpenter & Tait, 2001).

Nonetheless, there is a plethora of information available online and within educational journals, university policy guidelines, professional development programs, and the like that address teacher effectiveness (Cuevas et al., 2000; Graham, Cagiltay, Lim, Craner & Duffy, 2000). To the extent these "measures" support the transformation of education from teacher-centered, lecture-based, passive instruction to learner-centered, self-reflective, active learning (Lan, cited in Quitadamo & Brown, 2001), they can help guide online teaching.

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

The concept of individual differences (e.g., temperament, character, personality, style, etc.) have intrigued, challenged, and motivated many educators for centuries (Guild & Garger, 1998). Based on research dating back to antiquity, an estimated 5,000 reports on temperament and character alone had been written by the early part of the twentieth century (Kiersey, 1998). Over the past several decades, numerous studies have been specifically conducted into the different ways in which people learn—that is, learning style. Although there has been a relative paucity of research and literature regarding teaching styles, the basic premise is the same: people differ from one another, and if one truly accepts this as fact, it can be logically deduced that teachers will bring their own unique qualities to the classroom (Guild & Garger, 1998).

DEFINING TEACHING STYLE

It seems intuitive—and probably few people would disagree with the idea that people are different—that defining and/or identifying the elements of "teaching style" have proven to be difficult. Many educators have traditionally viewed the concept of style in a derogatory and depreciating manner. Thus, "to define style, to understand it…to use it effectively entails moving beyond the negative sense in which it is sometimes perceived" (Grasha, 1996, p. 1). Perhaps the most important aspect in the application of styles within the domain of learning is merely to acknowledge that several valid models exist. Although they may differ in their approach and the terminology used, the reality is that underlying all of them is the major concept that we all differ from one another, and by understanding one's own weaknesses and strengths, we can all gain insight that might not otherwise be possible.

In simple terms, style is "what one is" (Elbe, cited in Grasha, 1996, p. 1). It is the preferred way of using one's abilities (Sternberg, 1997). The difficulty with this simple definition is that, if style is what a person is and every person is considered to be uniquely different, then there are potentially as many different teaching and learning styles as there are people. It is only by categorizing specific types of styles and common qualities

that are seemingly shared by a group of people that we can approach styles in a more systematic manner.

A number of factors influence what teaching styles an individual will adopt. These include the teacher's response to student learning styles, the need for the teacher to directly control classroom tasks, and the students' capabilities to handle course demands independently, without significant action on the teacher's part (Grasha, 1996). It is important to note, however, that a person's teaching style is broader than the immediate teaching strategies they are using at any given moment in time and, as such, cannot be determined by merely looking at an isolated action on the part of that instructor. An individual's teaching style reflects the comprehensive and distinct preferences they display that tend to remain consistent from situation to situation. A style, in itself, represents one's preference, not their ability. Styles are fluid and not fixed. Styles can and do vary over the course of one's lifetime and are influenced by changing role models. While everyone has a style profile, no one is locked into any one profile (Sternberg, 1994). Although the potentially most damaging mistake an instructor can make is to pretend to be a personality they don't possess (Paulsen, 1995), instructors can vary their style to suit different tasks and situations.

An individual's teaching style is in part dictated by and intertwined with their personality, philosophical orientations and theories toward education, sense of their role as an instructor, and the facilitation techniques that they use (Paulsen, 1995). Instructors are more apt to adopt alternative teaching methods if these methods provide a comfortable match with their personal dispositions (Grasha, 1996). As such, many instructors tend to teach the way they, themselves, like to learn.

However, other factors also influence an instructor's teaching style, especially in their initial transition into the online environment. Many instructors acquire a definition of their professional selves, in large part based upon the nature of their academic discipline. Research shows, to some degree, that students' styles come to match their teachers', just as teachers' styles come to match the predominant style profile at their school and within their academic discipline (Sternberg, 1994). As such, they adopt many of the teaching strategies that they experienced as students, while undergoing an extensive, but sometimes inconsistent "apprenticeship of observation" of what teaching in their academic discipline is supposed to be (Ekroth, 1990; Anderson et al., 2001). Like an actor or actress who is typecast, it can be difficult for some instructors to break out of this mold (Grasha, 1996).

TEACHERS-CENTERED VS. LEARNER-CENTERED

Using a very simplistic approach to teaching styles, all instructors can be assumed, albeit to varying degrees, to be representations of one of two archetypal forms: teacher-centered or student-centered. Even though variations can and do occur as a result of how the individual instructor interprets each of these forms, these two styles do serve as an underlying foundation that guides their approach to teaching and interaction with students (Grasha, 1996). Some instructors may find that they want the comfort of the past and are extremely comfortable with the authoritarian role. If they believe in a rigid status hierarchy in their teacher-student relationship, they may resist change and find it difficult to make the transition to the online environment.

COGNITIVE APPROACH TO STYLE

For Gregorc (Fuller et al., 2000; Guild & Garger, 1998), the style reflected in one's teaching is an indication of the qualities of one's mind. Combining the way people perceive things—abstractly or concretely—with the way they tend to order things—randomly or sequentially—Gregorc identified four distinct patterns of style:

- **Concrete Sequential (CS):** Consistent and efficient. Prefers an orderly environment in which he or she plans and organizes his or her time and space. Uses step-by-step methods of instruction.
- **Abstract Sequential (AS):** Organizes ideals logically. Concerned with excellence and strives for recognition. Tends to follow traditional procedures and uses demonstrations to model when teaching.
- **Abstract Random (AR):** Likes flexibility and adaptability; personalizes information. Stresses affective domain of learning and is spontaneous in teaching.

- **Concrete Random (CR):** Likes to try new approaches to solve problems, often using trial and error. Tends to enjoy brainstorming and open-ended discussions.

PERSONALITY TYPE AND TEACHING STYLES

Addressing the question of whether personality type and preferred teaching style influence instructors' comfort level with the notion of online instruction, Fuller and colleagues (2000) conducted a pilot study in 1999 that included 20 faculty members from a small, Midwestern university. They used a battery of personality assessments, including the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and the Gregorc Transaction Ability Inventory. Noting that they had found no other studies that had measured instructor tendencies when teaching online, they selected these instruments because of their validity and credibility in the educational psychology field of assessing teaching style.

Among the individuals who volunteered to take part in the study, 35% were of the type AR, 35% were of the type CR, 23.5% were of the type CS, and one individual did not complete the style inventory. No one in the group of respondents was of the type AS. Based on their study, Fuller et al. (2000) reached the following conclusions:

- **Concrete Sequential (CS):** These faculty members often have difficulty acting without specific direction. They can easily become overwhelmed when designing an online course.
- **Concrete Random (CR):** When designing an online course, these faculty need to learn to prioritize. In managing the course, they need to persevere and pace themselves and the course.
- **Abstract Random (AR):** These faculty need to focus on critical time limits for both themselves and their online learners. They need to take care that they explain things fully and do not simply assume the learners understand everything.
- **Abstract Sequential (AS):** These faculty members need to be less concerned with perfection and may need to work on facing the unpredictable events that can offer occur in the online technology-based environment.

TEACHING WITH STYLE

In 1988, Grasha (1996) began a program of research into the stylistic qualities of teachers and students. Along with analyzing his personal experiences and reviewing literature, Grasha held discussions with colleagues, interviewed people, and observed classes. As a result of his observations, he concluded that five teaching styles were pervasive in the college classroom:

1. **Expert:** Possesses knowledge/expertise, is concerned with transmitting information to students.
2. **Formal Authority:** Concerned with the standard/correct ways to do things. Provides structure.
3. **Personal Model:** Teaches by example. Guides and directs students by showing how to do things and encourages them to emulate his/her approach.
4. **Facilitator:** Guides/directs students by asking questions, suggesting alternative options. Overall goal is to develop in students the capacity for independent action, initiative, and responsibility.
5. **Delegator:** Concerned with developing student's ability to function autonomously. Available to students upon request.

Although it is tempting to categorize teachers by placing them into one of the five categories listed above, Grasha's observations suggested otherwise. He noted that everyone who teaches possesses, to a varying degree, each of these five styles. In a recent case study on the quality of student learning as a function of teaching style in an online learning course, Quitadamo and Brown (2001) concluded that the instructor in their study used all five styles to various degrees. They found that Facilitator and Delegator teaching styles were used extensively, characterized by such activities as online group discussions and debates, self-discovery exercises, and independent research. The Personal style was used when illustrating alternatives and sharing personal viewpoints. The Expert and Formal Authority teaching styles were used when providing content expertise. Like "colors on an artist's palette" (p. 153), each individual's approach to teaching reflects a unique blend of these styles. However, Grasha (1996) also observed that four combinations of styles seemed to prevail in capturing the majority of approaches used by college teachers, with 38% being within Cluster One,

22% within Cluster Two, 17% within Cluster Three, and 15% within Cluster Four. The order of each style in the following list of clusters reflects the degree of significance of that style in the blend:

- **Cluster 1—Primary:** Expert/Formal Authority Secondary: Personal Model/Facilitator/Delegator
- **Cluster 2—Primary**: Personal Model/Expert Formal Authority Secondary: Facilitator/Delegator
- **Cluster 3—Primary:** Facilitator/Personal Model/Expert Secondary: Formal Authority/Delegator
- **Cluster 4—Primary**: Delegator/Facilitator/Expert Secondary: Formal Authority/Personal Model

TEACHING STYLE WITHIN THE ONLINE CLASSROOM

Teaching is a complex process. In order to foster quality learning experiences, one must first determine the desired outcome(s) and then create the necessary conditions to facilitate the achievement of these outcomes. The literature provides an abundance of information regarding what many feel are necessary styles and style combinations for success in the online environment. However, it is the instructor who clearly understands the possibilities and limitations of his or her own teaching style who can best judge how to modify their approach to implement these measures and, in doing so, transition from the way they were taught for so many years in the traditional classroom (Center for Teaching and Learning, 2004). While everyone is uniquely different in their teaching style, examining each of the four clusters (e.g., primary blends of the five teaching styles) identified by Grasha (1996) as loosely representing 92% of college educators, can provide a starting point upon which to view individual teaching style.

Teachers with an inclination toward the expert/formal authority approach (Cluster 1) tend toward teacher-centered classrooms. They will probably find the information transmission capabilities of the online environment useful. However, unless they take care to actively involve students, they may continue to reinforce a passive-dependent learning style in their students. This category represents the majority of educators in higher education (Grasha, 1996). If, as most of the literature suggests, interaction and communication are keys to facilitating knowledge in the asynchronous online learning environment (Harris & Muirhead, 2004; McVay, 1998; Ragan, 1999; Swan, 2002), it can be deduced that this style probably reflects the style least conducive to achieving success online.

Teachers with an inclination toward the personal model/expert/formal authority approach (Cluster 2) also tend to follow a teacher-centered approach. Generally well suited to technology, they emphasize teaching strategies that make use of modeling and demonstration. Their belief in "teaching by example" can help to establish a model for students to emulate. Instructors displaying this style, however, must take care not to dominate the discussion.

Teachers with an inclination toward the facilitator/personal model/expert approach tend to follow a student-centered model for teaching. They encourage the participatory and collaborative aspects of students' learning styles with less dependence on the instructor as the central expert. The strategies often employed in the traditional classroom to facilitate interactions, and indirect instructional processes to encourage active learning, can generally be easily adapted to the online environment. Teaching in this style is generally the most time consuming. With an emphasis toward student-centeredness and interactivity, collaboration, and active learning, it can be deduced that this style perhaps best epitomizes the approach needed in the online asynchronous environment.

Teachers with an inclination toward the delegator/facilitator/expert approach follow a student-centered model for teaching. They are generally most concerned with developing a student's capacity to function autonomously and, as such, tend to adopt the roles of consultants or resource personnel. While this approach contributes to students perceiving themselves as independent learners, instructors must take care to ensure they provide sufficient guidance and direction that students do not find themselves floundering aimlessly.

CONCLUSION

The online learning environment, while still in its relative infancy, offers educators unique opportunities and challenges. Perhaps more importantly, however, it also affords educators a rare chance to re-examine the

ways in which the educational process is approached, shaken free of some of the traditional trappings. In their initial transition to the online environment, the majority of innovators, early adopters, and the early majority have not had the years of pre-conditioning to how instruction "should" be conducted in the online environment. Many are breaking new ground, having never been online students themselves. However, not seizing the opportunity for change, many attempt to simply translate the approach they took in the traditional classroom online and fail to obtain the potential promise of student-centeredness and interactivity that this environment holds. The time is now for instructors to look within at their own teaching style, and examine their own strengths and weaknesses in light of the measures of effectiveness for the online environment. The opportunity for change in the magnitude described by Stukel (1997, quoted in University of Illinois, n.d.; i.e., as the third modern revolution in higher education) is but a fleeting moment in time, lest a new generation of instructors undergo a similar "apprenticeship of observation" of what teaching in their academic discipline is supposed to be in the online environment and the opportunity for change is lost. While technology provides the framework for online learning, the instructors have the opportunity and responsibility to lay the blueprint for the educational environment that future generations will inhabit. As Winston Churchill once stated: "We shape our dwellings, and afterwards our dwellings shape our lives."

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KEY TERMS

Changing Role(s) of the Online Instructor: Online learning environments or even adding Web components to face-to-face classes changes the roles of the teacher and the learner (see, e.g., Berge, 1996).

Diffusion of Innovation: The spreading of an innovation, its emulation, and copying throughout firms, industries, and countries. Intra-firm diffusion is the rate by which old technologies are displaced by new ones (Parker, 1978).

Individual Differences: Many of a learner's personal characteristics can affect how he or she learns. Individual differences are often explanations for differences in learning and performance among learners. The study of individual differences among learners' permits is done with the idea that results can help educators design instruction that better meets the needs of each learner's needs.

Learning Technologies: Media, computing, and telecommunications tools used to support the learning process either on or off campus such as audio and video recorders, fax machines, CD-ROMs, video projectors, computers, modems, telephones, audio and video conferencing systems, satellite systems, film, and television.

Online Learning: Education that is delivered using a computer or computer network, often actively connected to the Internet.

Personality Type: Used to explain temperaments that affect behaviors which create actions. Allows people to understand their personality preferences, particularly with respect to energy source, information gathering, decision making, and lifestyle/work patterns. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® is a well-known example of an instrument used to develop an individual's personality type profile.

Teaching Style(s): Teachers approach their classrooms differently. This approach profoundly affects the design of the online course. Grasha (1996) identified the following five teaching styles as a description of prevalent aspects of faculty presence in the classroom: expert, formal authority, personal model, facilitator, and delegator.

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