
STRATEGIES AND PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FACILITATION IN ONLINE EDUCATION

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Abstract

With the increasing uptake of technological advances, it can be expected that online educational solutions will become a permanent fixture in post-secondary education. As the number of online course offerings continues to rise, so will the need for research on effective facilitation practices in the online realm (Brewer & Dewar, 2003). This paper provides theoretical understanding, through the lens of Connectivist and Social Constructionist theories, on how students learn in online environments, and identifies the most prominent strategies that result in successful online course facilitation. Findings of the research reflect that successful online learning environments are characterized by implementation of frequent feedback, development of clear guidelines, promotion of engagement through presence, and use of varying teaching styles. Ultimately, this paper serves as a summary of practical strategies that can be used to foster an effective transfer of knowledge in online educational environments.

Abstract in Portuguese

Como ou aumento da aceitação de avanços em tecnologia só pode ser esperado que soluções de on-line ensino sejam uma coisa permanente em ensino de escola pós secundária. Como os cursos de on-line continuam a ser oferecidos e sua utilização aumenta; também vai ser necessário investigar as práticas efectivas sobre a área de on-line (Brewer & Dewar, 2003). Este documento fornece compreensão teórica visto pela Conectivistas e Construcionistas Social, e confirma como ou estudantes aprendem num ambiente on-line. Também pode-se identificar as estratégias mais provenientes que resultará em sucesso sobre uma ação mais fácil. Resultados confirmam o sucesso do ensino online através das opiniões da população geral, implementação de processos e envolvimento; que tem orientações claramente feitas usando vários estilos de ensino. Por fim este documento serve como um resumo das estratégias praticadas que podem ser utilizadas para elevar um ambiente de aprendizagem online.

Keywords: online learning, web-based instruction, distance education, connectivism, social constructivist

Online Education

Education in the 21st century continues to evolve to meet the needs of the ever growing, diverse student populations. Part of this evolution is the rising trend of offering educational programming online because of the many advantages it affords. Online education speaks to non-traditional adult learners who juggle many responsibilities. Because of this, online education is advantageous in its ability to provide asynchronous online environments which can be accessed easily, at any time, and from virtually any location in which an internet connection is present allowing students the ability to enhance their knowledge without sacrificing career and family life (Posel & Fleiszer, 2008). This flexibility affords learners an opportunity to further develop their skills and advance their careers, in addition to allowing interaction with others with from different cultures and worldviews. Likewise, it provides educational opportunities to individuals who cannot afford the cost of relocation and, in some cases, can be more affordable than traditional education. The flexibility of offering online education grants educational institutions opportunities to expand their target student

population to groups that previously could not pursue studies for lack of time, flexibility and/or remoteness.

Background

This paper focuses on successful approaches utilized in the administration of online courses, which have been positively received for enhancing an individual's knowledge or skillset, and for the opportunities they afford non-traditional learners (Rao et al., 2015). The concept of online education emerged from the need for greater accessible learning. The transition from traditional classroom learning to the online realm first began through correspondence, radio and televised courses. In 1969, the Open University, in the United Kingdom, was the first University dedicated to open and distance education and served as a model for future offerings (Open University, 2017). The following year, in 1970, Athabasca University became Canada's first Open University, providing independent online courses (Byrne, 1989). Since then many similar Open Universities have opened around the world. Online education began to flourish in the early 2000s, where "enrollment in distance education courses increased rapidly in almost every country in both developed and developing countries" (Walton-Radford, 2011).

Today, online courses can be offered through professional or educational institutions and also through communities of interest which are typically not-for-credit. When offered through professional educational bodies online courses typically have enrolment caps and related tuition costs. In contrast, other online courses have no enrolment limits, high numbers of participants and are considered truly open-courses when offered at no cost to the learner.

The Role of the Facilitator

While online courses can be facilitated offered without a course facilitator, it is important to acknowledge the role facilitators play in supporting student learning. Both Social-Constructive and Connectivist theories highlight the significance of the role and would provide disagreement with facilitating online courses without an instructor. Social-Constructivist theory argues that a facilitator's role is to serve as a guide, who provides assistance to students in the online learning environment (Anderson & Dron, 2011). Their secondary focus should be on course content, while their primary purpose is to assist in the building of course knowledge and content. Great importance is placed on the cognitive presence of learning, ensuring that knowledge is socially constructed and has individual meaning to students in which authentic context is rationalized (Anderson & Dron, 2011). Equally, Connectivist theories similarly highlight the significance of the facilitator's role in the building cognitive presence of learners by exposing them to opportunities and networks for learning (Anderson & Dron, 2011). Facilitators are seen as role models in the online learning environment and their teaching presence is formed by providing support, constructing learning pathways, and in helping learners "make connections with existing and new knowledge resources" (Anderson & Dron, 2011; para.26). While the facilitator may not be the exclusive party to define, generate or assign content, they are one part of the learning system in which the learner will build their own knowledge (Anderson & Dron, 2011).

Differences between Traditional Classrooms and Online Learning Environments

Different approaches to classroom teaching are required to foster a successful online learning environment (Mann, 2005). Boettcher and Conrad (2010) have identified five differences to teaching online. First is the change in the traditional instructor's role when transitioned to the online environment. In the online environment, instructors shift from a coaching, authoritative role to a facilitating mentoring role, where they may sense a loss in power over the students and the course progression (Mann, 2005). Secondly, while most are accustomed to learning occurring in person, the online environment requires facilitators to adapt to asynchronous meetings and discussions that are fundamentally different from the traditional classroom (Kamlaskar & Killedar, 2015). Online environments present a new

predicament where facilitators may be challenged by the limitless resources that students can introduce into the online learning environment. Because of the change in culture, greater emphasis is placed on the facilitator to monitor the online classroom and keep the course and participant on track. Finally, facilitators will find that traditional summative assessment methods may not be as conducive in online education. Instead, formative assessment methodologies such as class polling and/or one-minute papers, are preferred to truly represent the students' progress (Boettcher & Conrad, 2010). It is integral that facilitators have an understanding of the differences found within the online classroom, and utilize theatrical concepts that inspire best practices within their own online learning environments (Perkins et al., 2012).

Theoretical Framework

In order to appreciate best practices, it is important to first present a theoretical framework that explains online culture and provides understanding for how the learning or teaching processes take place. At the heart of both theories, Connectivist and Social Constructivist, both reflect on how education is dependent on the production of a social environment.

Connectivist Theory

Connectivist theory, first coined in 2005 by Siemens and Downes, is an alternative to behaviourism, cognitivism, and constructivism. It is a newer theory that is still in development (Kop & Hill, 2008). Connectivism explains how we gain skills and knowledge as a result of the social constructs and presence experienced in online learning environments (Siemens, 2005). The premise is that no single individual can experience everything, therefore individuals utilize other individuals to provide and pass on their knowledge of various experiences (Brindley & Walti, 2009). Online learners participate in a collaboration with each other to create knowledge by sharing and exchanging their current existing knowledge. While it can be speculated that there is no significant importance in further investigating the effects of technology on learning, Brindley and Walti maintain the importance of connections that are fostered by technology in online learning environments (2009; para.10).

Constructivist Theory

The Social Constructive approach was first acknowledged by Lev Vygotsky in the twentieth-century. Vygotsky suggested that social interaction has a central role in further developing a person's understanding and thus enhancing his or her learning (Boettcher & Conrad, 2010). The theory describes learners as individuals who understand the world through their own present mental framework; one way learning can occur is through the introduction of new information, which is then transformed and interpreted by the learner. The learner must then determine where the new information fits into their present frameworks, ideals and values (Boettcher & Conrad, 2010). It is an active collaborative experience in which participants must engage with others to negotiate meaning from multiple perspectives that can continuously evolve and create changes in opinion or world views (Conrad, 2004). Constructivist theory views knowledge as constructed understanding built upon previous experiences and influences that are interpretations of past experiences, whether they be your own or of others (Smith & Rayon, 1999).

Commonalities and Differences of Both Theories

A significant commonality between Connectivism and Social Constructivist theories is the important recognition of learning from classmates. Learning, in the form of altered views, ideas and understanding, transpires when exposed to new information by interaction with others. The more learners can interact with others, the greater their exposure is to different perspectives, thoughts and ideas. Where Connectivism and Social Constructivism differ is in the emphasis Connectivist theory places on individuals learning solely from the experiences of others. In contrast, Constructivism focuses on social presence as an avenue of questioning that prompts exploration and requires learners to integrate knowledge from

various sources; including, but not limited to their own and their fellow classmates' work or life experiences (Boettcher & Conrad, 2010).

Significance of this Study & Problem to be Addressed

This paper pursues a review of current literature on teaching in the post-secondary field, as it applies to online education and the effective strategies utilized for course facilitation. However, according to Moore (2013), historical inconsistencies in terminology used to describe online education and online learning have contributed to difficulty in researching best teaching practices in online course facilitation. Because authors assign different meanings to online learning, such as online education, web-based learning, web-based education and eLearning, it difficult to find consistent literature on theory and best practice. Therefore, for the purposes of this research, the following definitions apply:

- The term *online education* refers to participation in online courses taught by a licensed facilitator (Adams, 2009) and is the building of knowledge nurtured primarily through electronic means (Posel & Fleiszer, 2009). Depending on the online learning environment and participant schedules, online education can take place synchronously or asynchronously.
- The *online learning environment* contrasts with the regular classroom by different patterns of social interaction, specifically where it is not uncommon for students and faculty to rarely meet in person, let alone face-to-face online (Lister, 2014). A facilitator's responsibility is to form an online learning environment, such as a virtual classroom, where ideas are presented, exchanged and discussed, and includes safeguarding of student progress throughout the course.

Research Methods and Limitations

As the objective of this research is to identify prominent strategies that lead to successful online course facilitation, it is important to provide context regarding the literature reviewed. A review of over 200 scholarly articles was completed, focusing on facilitator-led online courses offered at the post-secondary level, with an emphasis on North American results. Results were not limited to one specific discipline, but instead comprised a comprehensive review of all facilitation practices across all disciplines. To ensure that the strategies identified would be relevant in this ever-changing technological world, only research published from 2005 and onward has been included.

While the study, and subsequent findings, offer strategies for success in online course facilitation, there are two limitations to keep in mind. First, the very nature of the study sizes causes concern for generalizing. For example, one study utilized in this research was obtained from small samples. This means that the information can only, empirically, represent a small portion of participants thus limiting the ability to generalize the findings. Secondly, there is another limitation found in the nature of the data collection. Most of the data summarized in this report represent self-reported progress, feelings and views of participants. While these findings help explain what students perceive to value in successful online course facilitation, they are not based on empirical findings of success and therefore can only be used to inform successful course facilitation.

Literature Findings

From this review, principles of Social-Constructivist and Connectivist theories were validated, with discussion about the role and presence of an instructor being integral to online learning. In summary, literature states that successful online learning environments are characterized by implementation of frequent feedback, development of clear guidelines, promotion of engagement through presence, and use of varying teaching styles (Boehmer et al., 2011; Boettcher, 2011; Lister, 2014; Posel & Fleiszer, 2009; Rao et al., 2015).

Frequent Feedback

Throughout the literature review, providing feedback to learners was a continuous theme of importance (Boehmer et al., 2011; Boettcher, 2011; Lister, 2014; Posel & Fleiszer, 2009; Rao et al., 2015). Facilitators should be aware of how highly students value prompt, consistent, timely feedback. In one analysis of seventeen studies, over half of students cited feedback from the facilitator as a significant contributing factor to their online educational experience (Lister, 2014; Rao et al., 2015). Likewise, it is vital that the facilitator creates a welcoming environment that will foster feedback from students (Rao et al., 2015; p.40). Facilitators should request feedback at the beginning and throughout the course to encourage an open communicative environment, and to quickly recognize areas for improvement early in the course. This allows changes to be implemented sooner which creates improvement more rapidly in the online learning experience (Boettcher & Conrad, 2010).

Facilitators should also give feedback, on a regular basis, during the entire course. Examples of this practice include general feedback (such as writing on discussion boards, making class announcements and commenting on class progression) as well as individualized feedback (such as responding to email inquiries, engaging in video-chat conversations, providing comment on assignments and communicating summative performance feedback (Boehmer et al., 2011; Kamlaskar & Killedar, 2015). It is important to realize that providing constant feedback helps to ease student anxieties, ensures students are progressing on the right track, is a good method of student retention, and a way to measure the overall growth of the students.

Guidelines

The next significant strategy identified in literature is the necessity of creating clear guidelines. (Lister, 2014; Abdulla, 2012; Rao et al., 2015; Boettcher, 2011). While guidelines are used in most classes, they are more specific and extensive in online environments. Providing students with guidelines regarding behaviour, conduct, and course progression can set the stage for successful course facilitation. In online education there is major endorsement of a formal syllabus as a common practice, since this document “serves as the policies and procedures manual for the class [and] it is best to err on the side of over explaining versus under explaining” expectations in the online realm (Hess et al., 2007; p.4). Commonly syllabi or guidelines detail how students are to communicate and should include examples of standard online etiquette. Since some students may be new and unfamiliar to online education it is essential to provide them with an idea and reference on how to engage with their peers and the facilitator (Rao et al., 2015; p.40). Other prudent details that might be included are expectations on how often a student should be participating and how much time per week the students should be spending on course work and assignments (Boettcher & Conrad, 2010; p.40). This last suggestion is especially helpful to students who are new to online education, since it aids them in transitioning into online learning and engaging with their online environment, both which differ from the familiar expectations found in traditional classrooms.

It is also particularly helpful to students when the syllabi or guidelines clearly communicate evaluation expectations (Abdulla, 2012). It was recommended that facilitators offer flexible approaches to assessment given that students vary in learning styles (Muir, 2001; p.12). The uniqueness of the online environment allows for opportunities in assessment for a student to showcase various areas of strength (Boettcher & Conrad, 2010). In this regard, a facilitator can create numerous opportunities, or ways, for students to display their knowledge. For example, rather than the course assessment relying on heavily weighted tests, facilitators can include flexible evaluation which encompass discussion posts, submitted assignments, and overall participation (Boettcher & Conrad, 2010; p.44).

Facilitators should also focus their efforts in the practice of continuously updating their syllabi. As facilitators continue to gain experience in online course facilitation, they can reflect

on previous teaching experiences to identify and address common questions into their syllabi edits. A helpful practice includes keeping track of the number of students that inquire about a particular area or concern and addressing it within the subsequent cohorts' syllabi.

Engagement and Presence

Being present and engaged from the onset of a course is one of the many fundamental practices which can build the foundation for successful online education (Boettcher & Conrad, 2010; Lister, 2014). A facilitator can promote engagement and presence in many ways, some of which include sending a welcoming email on the first day, and greeting students as they post to discussions (Rao et al., 2015). This imperative welcoming email or greeting post should welcome students, include profile or background on the facilitator, and convey to students' eagerness and availability to assist (Kamlaskar & Killedar, 2015). Ultimately, the "personality, motivation, enthusiasm, and communication style" of the facilitator are the key to engaging learners (Stutsky, 2008; p.15). This personality and enthusiasm helps drive participation in student discussions throughout the duration of the course.

A review of seventeen studies revealed that in all but four, creating opportunities for collaboration and interaction with the facilitator was of great importance and concern to students (Lister, 2014). Facilitators should let students know, in advance, the dates and times that they will be available for discussion so that students can plan ahead and because students are more likely to stay engaged and be present, instead of feeling like their contributions to course discussions may have gone unnoticed (Kamlaskar & Killedar, 2015). Equally, the importance of constant engagement serves a dual purpose: when students experience confusion or incidentally share incorrect information, the facilitator can be present to correct information or clarify. The sooner a facilitator can interject, the greater student satisfaction, given the facilitator's presence and clarification can help ease student anxiety.

Walters and Kop (2009) explain the necessity of recognizing that the facilitator, in the online realm, no longer has "exclusive responsibility for producing and transmitting knowledge" as they once did in the traditional classroom (p.5). Instead, the online environment has afforded access to widespread resources and information, which consequently requires the facilitator to play the role of gatekeeper. This gatekeeper provides as someone who can help ensure technological citizenship amongst students and validate the exchange of information to ensure accurate learning. For this reason, it is essential that the facilitator is present and engaged with students.

One crucial difference between the traditional classroom and the online classroom are the methods students use to communicate with each other and the facilitator; however, the nature of student discussion should not be impacted by this change of environment (Boettcher & Conrad, 2010). Instead, facilitators should prepare discussion posts that engage students in questioning and reflecting on the content with each other (Kamlaskar & Killedar, 2015; Boettcher & Conrad, 2010). The discussion postings should be made to replicate discussions equivalent to in-class, face-to-face discussions. Since discussion forums are asynchronous, and provide time for reflective thought, a facilitator can encourage students to be critical and creative in their responses (Kamlaskar & Killedar, 2015). Facilitators can further promote engagement and presence by frequently joining chats, and ensuring to provide timely response to email inquiries (Lister, 2014). Research has shown that to provide the "best learning experience to learners, [facilitators] are required to maximize interaction, discussion and spontaneous exchanges instead of only deliver[ing] information or course content" (Kamlaskar & Killedar, 2015; p.138).

Teaching Style

Many excellent classroom teachers have found it difficult to adapt to teaching online (Kamlaskar & Killedar, 2015). Because of this, it is essential that facilitators are cognizant of the teaching styles they often utilize, and consider adapting teaching techniques that

consider the differing abilities, experiences, ways of knowing, and background knowledge of students (Park, 2010). In practice, a facilitator can request a short introduction assignment where students write about their current knowledge on the course topic, outline past learning experiences, and identify their preferred teaching style (Rao et al., 2015). While this introduction assignment is helpful in providing direction to a facilitator, it should be recognized that students are not always the most intuitive and may not be able to easily identify their preferred learning styles. Nevertheless, facilitators should try to identify individual learning preferences and integrate strategies to support these into their teaching practice throughout the course (Posel & Fleischer, 2009). Park (2010) suggests inclusion of other teaching styles techniques such as; making practical connection of the course topics to everyday life, utilizing numbers and abstract concepts, using visual information supplemented by verbal information, and engaging students in discussion that really requires critical reflection of concepts.

In addition to a varied teaching style, facilitators should include varied evaluation styles. Students should be given options on evaluating their knowledge, such as offering high-stake tests (such as quizzes) and low-stake assignment options (such as discussion posts) for areas of evaluation (Rao et al., 2015). This allows students to choose which activity and method of evaluation would better represent their knowledge and understanding providing fair opportunity to the diverse background of students.

Facilitators of online environments also must be comfortable using technology and able to utilize discussion forums, videos, PowerPoint, learning management systems and animations to supplement student learning (Kamlaskar & Killedar, 2015). Furthermore, it is strongly recommended that in order to be a successful facilitator, individuals in the field should obtain first-hand experience as an online student and environment by completing a module of an online course themselves, "to know how to become interactive, social and accessible in online environment[s]" (Kamlaskar & Killedar, 2015; p.148). This experience will serve to construct an experiential based perspective for facilitators to help inform the design and facilitation of their own course.

Conclusion

As online education continues to evolve, it is imperative that facilitators continue to meet the needs of the diverse, non-traditional student populations. With online courses only coming into existence within the last few decades, the online course environment is often a new experience for many students who would benefit from facilitators that take on an active coaching roles to ensure course progress and learning. From a Social Constructivist viewpoint, online learning occurs through social interaction where learners participate in collaborating with their past experiences to create new knowledge. From the Connectivist perspective, new knowledge is gained by negotiating meaning from multiple perspectives and determining how new information can fit into their current frameworks of knowledge. Both theories are useful to new online facilitators in understanding the procurement of learning constructivism and how it can lead to higher understanding of content and student satisfaction.

Literature on the topic of online education focuses on four areas of strategy for successful online courses, specifically in the areas of feedback, guidelines, engagement and presence, and teaching style. Findings show that students value feedback the most, requiring the facilitator to take on a coaching role and serve as the guiding authority in the online environment. Facilitators should provide as an example of expectations and focus on clarifying guidelines early in the course. They should also utilize strategies in engagement and presence, in addition to exercising diverse teaching styles to create a welcoming, supportive, and progressive online environment with maximum opportunity for course success.

While some of the findings derived from this literature study came from small, self-reported samples, they are still indicative of utilizing the above approaches and theories to produce student satisfaction and success in online course. Teaching itself is not a sterile technical profession that can be achieved through specific training alone. The values of education require that facilitators be role models in the continuation of learning. Therefore, in order to achieve successful online teaching pedagogies, practicing facilitators should aspire to promote best practices in the field by engaging in study of emerging learning theories and contributing to the development of new innovative theories to improving the overall post-secondary education experience.

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