**7**

*Without proper planning, the cyberclassroom can seem remote and impersonal. This article offers advice for humanizing the classroom, making it a more personal experience for students and professors alike.*

# Humanizing the Online Classroom

*Renée E. Weiss*

A concern among educators who have considered online learning is the loss of personal contact between them and the students and among the students themselves. (See Article Eleven for an in-depth discussion of this and related issues.) The thoughtful professor knows that teaching is not simply a matter of delivering a commodity as one would deliver a pound of meat or broccoli; teaching is infinitely more complex because in many subjects it also involves leading the student to analyze, synthesize, and exercise critical judgments (Neal, 1998; Palloff & Pratt, 1999). These advanced skills require a high amount of interaction between professor and student, as well as collaboration among students. How can professors of online courses ensure quality interaction despite the loss of personal contact? To answer this question, this article will analyze the problems introduced by distance learning and then offer possible solutions to these problems.

## The Problems

An obvious deficiency of any course that uses only text and graphics is the loss of auditory inflections that we take for granted in our daily personal contacts. Sometimes it is important to know not only *what* is being said but also *how* it is said. The entire meaning of a statement can change depending on whether the speaker says it in jest or in anger. How can the tone of a statement be conveyed in a technological environment that does not use live video or audio?

Clearly allied to the problem of no audio inflection is the lack of actually seeing the individual who makes a statement in the cyberclassroom. Professors' and students' facial expressions add meaning to a message. An arms-folded posture or a warm smile can communicate volumes. Facial

expressions and body language can contribute subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) meanings or attitudes (Bauman, 1997; Knapp & Hall, 1997; Levitt, 1964), but kinesthetics are lost in the online classroom.

However, the problem in online learning is more than the lack of audio and kinesthetic clues: the very environment of a classroom is nonexistent. Most of us remember professors and students from past classes. We remember their sense of humor (or lack of it). We are impressed with professors' preciseness or their disorganization. We remember students who worked hard on assignments and others who seemed uninterested and slept during class. For better or worse, proximity helps us connect with others. All of these interrelations have an influence on us, and some believe them to be an important part of the educational process (Bauman, 1997).

Because of the absence of audio and visual cues and the removal of the classroom environment, students often feel that they are alone. They feel that they are not communicating with other human beings; instead, they are communicating with hardware—piles of metal and circuits. At best, the perceived removal of humanity can lead to an antiseptic and boring learning environment. I even would argue that the removal of the human element creates an environment that is not conducive to maintaining ethical behavior among students. If the student does not see the pain of a hurtful remark, then it must not exist. If students do not understand that breaches of academic ethics (such as plagiarism or cheating) have "victims," then they are more likely to compromise the integrity of the online classroom.

## The Solutions

The solution to the problems inherent in the cyberclassroom is to supply the elements normally found in the face-to-face classroom. In this section, I suggest six ways in which educators can humanize an online classroom.

**Solution 1: Add Tone.**  Because written language does not supply auditory cues, professors of online courses should supply—and encourage students to supply—tone through the use of written cues. For example, if there is any question concerning the tone of a statement, it is appropriate for the author to make clear how a statement is to be understood: "I say this in jest." Or, "I am sorry to say."

Supplying tone through written body language and facial expressions can also make computer communication a more human experience. This requires more thought and effort than we are accustomed to in our daily conversation, but the effort will be rewarded by better communication.

One easy way to get participants to include body language is to encourage the use of well-known notations, such as emoticons. A smiley face **:-)** or a frown **:-(** can speak volumes about tone. A glossary of these notations could be supplied as part of the course for those who are unfamiliar with them. Many examples are more complicated than a simple smile.

| `:-&` | tongue-tied |
| `<:-)` | the dunce |
| `*:0)` | bozo |
| `8-)` | wearing sunglasses |

A more complete list of emoticons can be found at www.Newbie. netJumpStations/SmileyFAQ.html.

Emoticons should be used by writers to help express their meaning. They are not to be used to describe the tone of others; such usage would be dehumanizing.

**Solution 2: Use Expressive Language.**  Often, students and professors in online courses write  something and give little thought to how others interpret their words or little thought to the impression they are creating. If they were to consider how to communicate effectively with their audience, they would see that a vivid metaphor (Davitz & Mattis, 1964), an ironic twist, or even humorous hyperbole can enhance the expressiveness of their writing. As a result of more expressive writing, professors and students can better communicate their full engagement in a course. (For a discussion of how to evaluate students' written expression in an online course, see Article Nine.)

**Solution 3: Create Biographies.**  To solve the problem of not having face-to-face contact with the professor and fellow students, the professor could supply biographical information and a photo. This could also be required of each student. The first assignment might be for each student to create a biography and post it to the course bulletin board. Information, such as hometown, previous schooling or experience, hobbies, educational goals, and future plans, can provide opportunities for students to see their similarities and appreciate classroom diversity.

A word of caution, however: students should not publish their home addresses or home phone numbers. Even though many software packages help the professor to password-protect a course Web site, sometimes the sites are compromised.

**Solution 4: Create a Virtual Break Room.**  If students have hobbies or interests in common, they need a place to explore these similarities. In the traditional classroom, students can linger in the hallways after class to argue about who will win the various weekend sporting events, for example. Online students need similar opportunities to "hang out" and chat, outside the pressures of a formal classroom environment. Students must be able to talk with each other but escape a formal forum in which class discussion takes place with the guidance and input of the professor. More important, a virtual break room will provide opportunities for students to discuss the difficulties of a course informally. Not all such discussions should be within the purview of professors.

The details of how break rooms are created will depend on the technology being used. Some software offers built-in cyberlounges. When such software is not available, chat rooms and bulletin boards can be useful for casual conversation. (For an in-depth discussion on the definitions and advantages of synchronous and asynchronous delivery, see Article Three.)

**Solution 5: Model Appropriate Interaction.** Students should know that the professor is available and intellectually involved in the work of the course. Students should be aware of the professor's full participation in the interactions of the course, yet the professor must take care not to dominate the discussion. Appropriate participation on the part of the professor provides a model for appropriate interaction among students.

One way to model appropriate participation is to pay careful attention to details when communicating by computer. For example, one member of a discussion group in a course conducted using a listserv was offended by the repeated improper spelling of his name (Weiss & Morrison, 1998). This would be equivalent to mispronouncing a person's name repeatedly in class, which is something no one would want to do. This kind of faux pas can be dehumanizing.

In addition, learners need a classroom environment where they can feel free to experiment and to express themselves in appropriate ways. This means the environment needs to have a sense of safety and trust as well as openness. Giving well-conceived feedback to students is one way the professor demonstrates honesty. Another way the professor models honesty and trust is to communicate to each student a sense of goodwill and caring. Professors can accomplish this by offering an invitation for personal discussion and interaction. As one of my colleagues says in his online syllabus, "Drop me an e-mail about things in the course that interest you and confuse you. You never have to have an agenda to contact me. I'm here to help you."

**Solution 6: Create an Ethical Community of Learners.** Challenge the students to think about the ethics of online relationships (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). It is possible to challenge their ethical relativism in a way that will be educational (Speck, 1997). Students must understand that a breach in ethics has victims, that real people sit at the cyberdesk next to theirs.

Of course, freedom must exist within the online course, but freedom comes with ethical responsibilities. For example, because online courses require students to offer detailed explanations of their ideas, privacy may be an issue. Also, an atmosphere of acceptance will foster a sense of community. Students must understand that a spiteful reaction to a student's ideas—often called "a flame"—will burn when it is received. There will be open communication among students only if they are guaranteed that their ideas will be kept confidential and be accepted within the community of the online course. Such online course characteristics foster community.

Part of the process of building a sense of community often involves resolving group conflict and ethical breaches. The professor must help resolve the conflicts (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Proactive resolution would

involve an open discussion of how to respond to classmates' ideas in a meaningful and accepting way. Professors must teach students how to debate and discuss issues within an ethical framework.

Discussions about plagiarism also can help professors create an ethical community of learners. Sometimes students don't understand how to avoid plagiarism; other times, they resort to plagiarism because they do not have enough to say. To avoid both situations, students need collaboration (a strong sense of humanization). Not having enough to say is the result of isolation. A strong sense of community can help students connect with each other intellectually and feel that they are a community of learners bound by similar ethical responsibilities.

## Conclusion

If an online course is handled in the proper way, the personality of the professor and camaraderie of fellow students can be achieved even in the absence of face-to-face contact. However, this will not happen automatically. The course must be taught in a way that cultivates relationships. If this is done, the professor and the students will be rewarded with a satisfying personal relationship despite the distance that separates them.

## References

Bauman, M. (1997). *Online learning communities.* [http://leahi.kcc.hawaii.edu/org/tcc-conf97/pres/bauman.html].

Davitz, J., & Mattis, S. (1964). The communication of emotional meaning by metaphor. In J. Davitz (Ed.), *The communication of emotional meaning* (pp. 157–176). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Knapp, M., & Hall, J. (1997). *Nonverbal communication in human interaction.* Orlando: Harcourt Brace.

Levitt, E. (1964). The relationship between abilities to express emotional meanings vocally and facially. In J. Davitz (Ed.), *The communication of emotional meaning* (pp. 87–100). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Neal, E. (1998, June 19). Using technology in teaching: We need to exercise healthy skepticism. *Chronicle of Higher Education,* p. B4.

Palloff, R., & Pratt, K. (1999). *Building learning communicates in cyberspace: Effective strategies for the online classroom.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Speck, B. W. (1997). Challenging the validity of students' ethical relativism. *Perspectives,* 27(1), 55–70.

Weiss, R. E., & Morrison, G. R. (1998). Evaluation of a graduate seminar conducted by listserv. *Proceedings of Selected Paper Presentations at the Convention of the Association for Educational Communications and Technology* (pp. 463–478). Ames: Iowa State University.

*RENÉE E. WEISS is the interim director of the Center for Academic Excellence at The University of Memphis in Memphis, Tennessee.*