Inviting E-Learning:
How Hard Can It Be?

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From an Invitational Education perspective, e-learning will only succeed as an educative environment if educators are able to provide an e-learning environment that preserves dignity and encourages communication. The converse: using an online environment to "throw information" at students has the opposite effect; it is experienced as deeply disinviting.

This article identifies some of the more common disinviting practices currently being experienced by learners who are new to an e-learning environment. It also examines practical ways in which e-learning educators can make the online environment more invitational.

Introduction

Invitational Theory originated from the work of William Watson Purkey and Betty Siegel at the University of North Carolina in Greensboro, USA. They spearheaded the establishment of the International Alliance for Invitational Education in the early 1980s. Since then, Invitational Theory has continued to be enriched by scholars from across the world. Invitational Education is a theory of practice based on trust, respect, a belief in cooperation, empathic understanding and genuineness. Its purpose is to create total learning environments and climates where people want to be and where they want to learn. Invitational Education focuses on all the forces that contribute to human achievement in an organisation, including the places, policies, programs, processes

and the people who create these forces (also referred to as "the 5 P's") (Purkey & Novak, 1996).

Whenever one of these five P's evokes positive feelings in a person, that person is said to be "invited". On the other hand, whenever one of these five Ps evokes negative feelings in a person, that person is said to be "disinvited." Everything in an educational institution either works to add to or to take way from being a beneficial presence in the lives of people.

E-Learning

For the purposes of this article, e-learning is taken to be a subset of distance learning, in as much as it draws upon the same strategies and philosophies of distance education. The basic premise of e-learning is to electronically connect physically separate teachers, students and learning experiences. The class always meets in a technological, information-rich environment where original content and learning experiences are placed online and links can be to anything and anyone via the Internet. Communication and other software connects people with each other (Heeter, 15 February 2003). Another term for *e-learning* is *online learning*.

"E-learning, if structured correctly, can be an invaluable support to the learner in a distance education as well as face-to-face environment where huge classes can sometimes cause learners to be lost in the system" (Poole & Axmann, 15 February 2003).

Disinviting E-Learning Practices

According to Oliver (Oliver, 2002), a quality learning experience meets the following criteria: it has authentic content; it provides multiple perspectives; it involves mindful engagement and reflection; it encourages collaboration; it incorporates authentic assessment; and it involves the teacher as a coach/facilitator. In other words education is a profoundly social experience.

Oliver further points out that most e-learning practices at present do not meet these criteria. He estimates that 90% of the resources being channeled into e-learning courses are spent on the development of content and only 10% on the learning strategies geared towards engaging the learner. In other words, there are indications that e-learning courses currently are often not being designed to be intentionally inviting.

Following a search of the literature, e-learning discussion groups, and the author's personal experiences as an e-learner, the following elements of e-learning have been identified as creating stress and feelings of deep frustration in new e-learners; that is they are deemed to be disinviting. This has a direct influence on the levels of motivation of the new e- learner:

- Feelings of isolation, the lack of an obvious "classroom community of learners" and the disconnectedness for the individual embarking on e-learning for the first time
- The perception of the absence of accountability arising from the "faceless" aspects of the environment
- The perception that the e-learning environment is not "real"
- The perception that e-learning educators/teachers don't have the opportunity to really "delve" into a student's thinking processes

- E-learning courses appear to be biased towards students with a learning style that favours digesting the written word
- There does not seem to be strong evidence that e-learning courses are validly and reliably assessed
- E-learning appears to create contrived discussions that lack spontaneity
- Attempts are often made to directly transfer conventional classroom activities to the e-learning forum
- Long delays are often experienced in receiving feedback on assignments submitted, or assignments are not being sent out on schedule
- E-learners often experience a lack of logistical support and rapid assistance with technical problems in the e-learning classroom and the lack of clarity with regard to navigating the specific course website

Solutions to Disinviting E-learning Practices: Make Them Intentionally Invitational!

Curtis Bonk, Associate Professor at Indiana University applied learner-centered principles from the American Psychological Association to design, implement, and refine e-learning educational psychology courses and laboratory experiences offered to pre-service teachers at Indiana University. As a result of teaching a basic undergraduate educational psychology course over the Internet to students at Indiana University at Bloomington, he came up with twelve recommendations (Bonk & Cummings, 1998). These recommendations for learner-centered e-learning form the basis of the suggestions in this paper for the successful implementation of Invitational Theory to e-learning practices aimed at fostering student thinking skills, problem solving abilities, teamwork, and social interaction and debate.

Problem: Feelings of Isolation and Disconnectedness

One-to-one teacher-student interactions can be initiated by the teacher more easily than in traditional classroom instruction. In the traditional classroom, between 20 and 500 students attend class together. When one student is asked a question, all the others must wait and watch. A few students will stay after class to ask questions while a few others may take advantage of the teacher's set consultation hours. Some students reported (University of Brighton, 15 February 2003) that they had felt the impact of the absence of the social aspects of being part of a class; having breaks together and developing friendships—things that did not occur in the e-learning environment.

In order to deal with this problem, three possible solutions are offered for consideration:

- Establish a safe environment and a sense of community. One way to do this is to ask e-learning students to introduce themselves by posting messages that describe themselves (hobbies, interests, major, learning strengths.) This gives fellow students and teachers a reasonable amount of student background information. In a survey conducted at the California State University, Monterey Bay, Armando (Armando, 15 February 2003) found that computer technologies had the potential to promote participation and learning in traditionally "communicative-apprehensive" learners such as shy students, limited English proficient students, and women who avoid verbally confronting men. The teacher can actively encourage contacts between students and the teachers, and develop reciprocity and cooperation among students

- Use public and private forms of feedback. In the traditional face-to-face classroom students usually submit written work to the teacher without others seeing it, and then expect to receive feedback within a reasonable period of time. In stark contrast, when an assignment is conducted in an e-learning conferencing environment, students can view peer contributions. Private and personalised forums and e-mail contact can also be used for individual consultation and feedback. These promote invitational practices where an individual student and the teacher can communicate one-on-one along with questions, reactions and comments. Moreover, individual differences in learning styles and motivation can be addressed, meaningful learning activities agreed and appropriately high and challenging standards established.

- Encourage informal peer mentors. Peers in the same class or sub-class can be effective e-learning mentors or e-mail pals. Graduate students can individually mentor the under-graduates and provide them with weekly electronic feedback. The notion of a formal system of mentoring is describe later in this paper.

Problem: The Perception of a Lack of Accountability

In a reflection (University of Brighton, 15 February 2003) one student reported: "During our exercise of e-learning I also noticed that I felt less committed to this part of the MA. There was no teacher to 'report' to; it was just me and the computer and the different exercises. I thought it was great that I didn't have to come in to class and do the exercises at one particular time of the week, but the danger was that I saw myself postponing things, and not getting things done. In a busy schedule you always have to prioritise, and I realised that I found it easier to postpone the work

for this module, than it was to postpone work for modules where we met up in person every week."

To deal with this disinviting aspect of e-learning, it is important to remember that both teachers and students are more accountable in an e-learning course. Unlike a discussion in the traditional classroom where no record is kept other than students' individual notes, in an e-learning course all the discussion content exists online in fully archived notes and can be viewed or reviewed later. Furthermore, teachers must be aware that prompt feedback is crucially important if the e-learner is to feel cared about.

Problem: The Perception that the E-learning Environment is Not "Real"

New e-learners can easily feel that because they are not in a traditional classroom something in the total learning experience is missing. In order to address this, the e-learning teacher should seek ways to personalise the e-learning experience for the student. This can be done in a number of ways:

- Videoconferencing and affordable webcams now "make it possible to view someone as clearly as if one were sitting opposite the person in a lounge chair, so that one is able to take into account both verbal and non-verbal communication" (Rheingold, 1994).
- Alternating e-learning and live class sessions. For example, one week of "live" class with two weeks of e-learning class.
- Cycle student electronic feedback or progress reports on two or three week intervals.
- Arrange forums for synchronous chatting with an expert on a given topic. This will serve to enhance the personal touch by giving students the sense that someone is listening and immediately reacting to their comments and questions.

- Use small groups and e-mail pal activities to enhance students' connectedness to the course.
- Hold role-play group discussions during which everyone assumes a role (school principal, vice-chancellor) or specific character identity (e.g. George Bush, Nelson Mandela), thereby giving students license to be creative and share personal insights and perspectives. This could also have the effect of raising the level of excitement, connectiveness and a sense of belonging within a class.

Problem: The Perception that E-learning doesn't "Delve" into Thinking Processes

A solution to this problem is suggested by Heeter (Heeter, 15 February 2003). She cites the work of Hara and Kling who demonstrated how relatively small changes in protocol and technology can have profound effects on e-learners. One example of this is the manner in which e-learning multiple choice examinations are administered. When the course developers added a form requiring students to explain why they thought the answer they chose was correct, the multiple choice examination "transformed into a sophisticated tracking tool to help the in-structor know what the students understood at any point in the semester" (Heeter, 15 February 2003).

Problem: E-Learning Courses are Biased Towards the Written Word

Central to Invitational Theory is the concept of learner-centered teaching, which maintains that students should be encouraged to be self-directed learners, making, wherever possible, their own decisions. Bonk's (Bonk & Cummings, 1998) student course evaluations reveal that students genuinely appreciate having some personal choice and alternatives within class assignments. They find value in exploring e-learning databases, joining in discussions and conversations and making selections from class assignment options.

To address the accusation from some quarters that e-learning courses favours a "written" learning style, the following strategies could be considered:

- Provide students with options which enable them to "capitalise on student interest areas and strengths, thereby dramatically expanding overall course accomplishments beyond the norm" (Bonk & Cummings, 1998)
- Use threaded discussion groups which offer an important added dimension for learners and educators by promoting a group dynamic where attitudes, interpretations learning abilities and styles interplay
- Build a sense of community and respect for diversity and different learning styles
- Enhance the learning experience by incorporating collaborative elements

Furthermore, the teacher can focus on creating balance by varying the pedagogical activities in the e-learning classroom. In addition to the obvious tasks of writing, summarising information, reading and debating chapter information, students can be asked to

reflect on personal experiences, create their own case studies and simulations, respond to the ideas of their peers, brainstorm and evaluate e-learning class activities. They can also facilitate the process of evaluating and comparing Internet websites to enhance course content. To encourage the last-named activity, e-learning educators could offer students prompt feedback on their website suggestions and base a portion of student grades on the quality of websites students locate and submit to the course (Bonk & Cummings, 1998).

Problem: E-Learning Courses are Not Validly and Reliably Assessed

One of the most frequently asked questions is how one can validly and reliably assess student learning in an e-learning environment. In order to address the criticism that there are serious flaws in the assessment of e-learning courses, teachers can embed thinking skills and portfolio assessments as an integral part of e-learning assignments.

Bonk and Cummings point out; "While conferencing technologies create complete records of student electronic contributions, such rich chronicles of student development can also overwhelm the assessor" (Bonk & Cummings, 1998). For the assessment of student portfolios, they suggest the use of dimensional scoring schemes of key skills and objectives rated on a 1 (low) to 10 (high) scale. For example, "Is the work insightful, clear, sequentially flowing, responsive, persuasiveness, inspirational, and original? How are new knowledge relationships drawn? Is sufficient knowledge growth displayed?" Group projects might similarly be rated for goals or purpose, originality, scope or impact, practicality, effort, and knowledge of topic displayed. "These dimensional scoring schemes not only help in the fairness

of the portfolio grading, but they also provide thinking skill-related feedback to students and help them construct more meaningful and coherent knowledge representations." This method of assessment would also work towards reducing the incidence of plagiarism.

Problem: Contrived Discussions Lack Spontaneity

E-learning discussions are often perceived as being contrived and this may have the effect of discouraging students from engaging. Many individuals prefer face-to-face conversations, which allows for impulsive input, spontaneous body language and energy.

One solution to this problem is to employ recursive assignments that build from personal knowledge and experience. E-learning teachers should strive to make course assignments integrative, as this allows students to combine text, online, field and other resources to build on their prior experiences and help them connect textbook information to real life. Bonk and Cummings (Bonk & Cummings, 1998) give the example of how, in one of their assignments, students were asked to write about their best teacher, thereby introducing concepts associated with effective teaching within familiar teaching and learning experiences. In a class discussion forum, students posted a description of the characteristics that distinguished their favourite teachers. These "best teacher" postings were used in other assignments as the semester progressed. In another task later in the semester, a field reflection activity required students to record the various strategies a teacher might use to motivate the students in a class. Prior to the observation, students read a chapter on motivation. They then were required to post their classroom observations in the discussion forum. "The recursive and intrinsically motivating part of the assignment came when the students had to later re-enter that forum and use some of the classroom

observations recorded by their peers. After reading peer observations, each student then assumed the role of an instructional consultant who based his/her classroom advice and recommendations on concepts in the text" (Bonk & Cummings, 1998).

Problem: The Direct Transfer of Conventional Activities to the E-learning Forum

The perceived direct transfer of conventional activities to the e-learning environment is one of the most common criticisms from e-learning students. It raises the question: what purpose does weekly e-learning lecture notes and tests serve when students now have access to information and course resources that extend thousands of times beyond the teacher's current and potential knowledge base?

The obvious solution to this disinviting practice is to exploit the potential of the medium for deeper student engagement. A significant challenge in creating invitational e-learning environments is to create learning activities that take advantage of the characteristics and assets of the medium, rather than duplicating activities that typify conventional classrooms. To elaborate on this point, Bonk and Cummings (Bonk & Cummings, 1998) explain how in one of their classes an e-learning debate was initially going to take the form of a traditional debate, with one side presenting a position and the other posting a rebuttal. As a result of the asynchronous conferencing time delay, students had the opportunity to consult the original sources for arguments used by their opponents, and in so doing significantly enhanced the quality of their rebuttals. Student surveys have revealed that the conferencing tools encourage students to participate "in class" without normal inhibitions, or as one student put it, "they aren't scared to say anything" (Bonk & Cummings, 1998).

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In an e-learning environment, the most a teacher can be is the "guide on the side" rather than the "sage on the stage." As Dale Spender puts it: "Teaching is on the brink of becoming an entirely new profession: that of learning management . . . it is a shift from the relatively passive and dependent readers . . . to the active users of the digital medium—who can *change* the information . . . create their own meanings as they go—who access rather than memorise" (Spender, 2002).

This paradigm shift is becoming apparent in e-learning courses where lectures ("sage on the stage" element), which are central to much face-to-face teaching, are almost nonexistent. When a lecture is inserted, it is usually after most students have completed their electronic contributions for the week or unit, and is usually directed at key concepts that were misinterpreted, missing, or understated.

A crucial mistake educators can make when teaching online is to interfere too much in students' learning. "While students certainly are anxious for feedback on their class contributions and are curious about the instructor's position on a topic, they typically want this after they have wrestled with key issues or problems on their own or in their small groups. If a teacher's long-winded opinions or pointed statements are inserted too quickly and forcefully into an electronic conversation, student interaction and knowledge building will be stifled" (Bonk & Cummings, 1998). To combat this, e-learning teachers could consider assuming a more collegial approach in the learning situation.

Problem: Grading Assignments and Providing Feedback

The obvious solution to complaints from e-learners regarding the grading and providing feedback on assignments is to provide

clear expectations and course structuring. As in any instructional situation, students in an e-learning course require detailed task clarity as well as appropriate and timely instructional guidance in such tasks (Bonk & Cummings, 1998). In online teaching the syllabus and course structure must be clearer and more concise than in traditional classrooms. In the latter, changes or clarifications are relatively easy to announce at the beginning or end of the class. However, in an e-learning class, any confusion regarding task assignments or due dates will likely result in student frustration and anger (with the resultant multiple e-mail queries!). Task structuring and set due dates and timelines can be dealt with via e-mail distribution lists.

Problem: Lack of Timely Logistical Support with Technical Problems

El-Tigi (El-Tigi, 2002) examined college students' perceptions of course Internet websites as an instructional resource for classroom-based courses. The focus was on identifying functions on the sites that students perceived as supporting and fostering their learning experiences. Students in this study found that one of the greatest barriers was the lack of Internet navigational skills together with the absence of technical assistance when needed.

While the introduction of the e-learning option has moved the emphasis on the educator from the "sage" to the "guide," there remains a great need for the teacher/instructor/mentor who is personally available when needed to assist students as they focus on communication tasks that promote learning.

In 1999 the staff of Florida State University's Office for Distributed and Distance Learning (ODDL) made the decision to offer four undergraduate degree programs online (Mullane, 15

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February 2003). However, in order to ward off any problems in this venture they decided to be proactive and to introduce mentors to serve as the students' primary point of contact, and to act as liaisons between the instructor and the student. These mentors are typically retired teachers, librarians or graduate students. All have advanced degrees in their mentoring subject area, experience in the field and a strong desire to help students achieve success in their course.

In order to become a mentor for the ODDL, selected applicants must attend a three-day workshop during which they meet the course teachers, learn the course management software (Black-board) and e-learning communication skills.

A mentor is assigned to a cohort of between 15 and 25 students. Their job involves contacting each of their students by e-mail and explaining the range of services they are available to provide, including acting as the student's guide and motivator. Throughout the course, the mentor monitors student participation levels. If a student goes for a week without engaging with the course material, the mentor will e-mail the student. If this does not elicit a response then the next step is a telephone call.

Two years into the mentor programme, great successes have been reported, as mentors have addressed several disinviting aspects of e-learning. They have also served to lessen the number of time-consuming interactions the course teacher must typically do in order to coach a student through the mechanics of an e-learning environment.

However, the greatest advantage of making use of e-learning mentors is in the relationships they form with their e-learning students. The isolation of e-learning environments can result in difficulty for the student to remain motivated and focused on the course. Tracking of a student's participation by the mentor has had

a significant positive impact on completion rates. And because "the more successful students there are, the more interest there is in the programs," this has also led to great increases in enrollments in the four e-learning degree programs (Mullane, 15 February 2003).

At the ODDL, mentoring programs continue to foster a "high tech, high touch" learning environment, aimed at providing "a zone of familiarity and consistency that the student can rely upon in an otherwise remote and unfamiliar environment" (Mullane, 15 February 2003). This results in the establishment of trust, which is fundamental to the goal of facilitating learning, and is indeed an underlying principle of Invitational Education. Mentors play a vital role in building this trust and creating a stimulating, successful and enriching e-learning environment: an invitational e-learning environment.

Conclusions

The literature clearly shows that "successful" e-learning courses have been able to overcome the disinviting aspects of the medium by applying the technologies to "humanise" the environment and establish a "social presence" of all participants; to encourage cooperation and collaboration between individuals, groups, and e-learning educators/facilitators; to stimulate a much more meaningful view of the subject matter being taught; and to use operational activities which specifically address the disinvitational aspects on e-learning.

In essence, effective e-learning is much more than "digital page turning" (as in the more traditional classroom teaching) it is a holistic educational experience that focuses on deep and insightful learning that includes discourse, discussion and debate.

This paper has considered a number of issues, that need to be addressed in order to make e-learning more inviting. However, of paramount importance is that it is ultimately the person in the process that drives the e-learning processes. The invitational e-learning educator embodies an intentionally caring stance that includes trust, respect, empathic understanding, genuineness and a belief in cooperation. Moreover, this stance is consistent, even during the most challenging times.

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