

IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY COMMUNITY: INSTRUCTOR IDENTITY IN AN ONLINE CLASSROOM

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Abstract

This paper explores the evolving identity of instructors in online classrooms, drawing from the author's extensive experience in developing and teaching courses within the University System of Georgia's eCore. The study highlights the pedagogical, managerial, social, and technical roles that online instructors must assume to create dynamic learning communities and ensure student engagement. It reflects on the challenges of disembodiment, technological limitations, and high dropout rates, while emphasizing the opportunities for instructors to redefine their professional identity in virtual spaces free from traditional markers such as race, gender, or nationality. The author argues that effective online teaching requires a balance between technical expertise, consistent online presence, and the ability to foster collaboration, critical reflection, and community building among learners. By leveraging asynchronous communication, personal narratives, and collaborative activities, instructors can transform the online environment into a space of meaningful interaction, identity formation, and academic growth.

Keywords: *Instructor identity, online classroom, e-learning, asynchronous learning, pedagogical roles, community building, virtual education, digital pedagogy, instructional design, distance education.*

My exposure to online instruction began in Spring 2001 when the University System of Georgia's eCore issued a call for instructional faculty to develop English 2111 World Literature course. In preparation for online teaching, I was asked to enroll as a student in an online class that exposed us to the basic pedagogical and technological issues involved in online learning. Following that, I taught the newly developed, entirely online World Literature 2111 class.

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While teaching online, I also participated as a coder in Georgia Institute of Technology's Artificial Neural Network Project where human coders were used to categorize and analyze discussion board messages to assess students' cognitive efforts. The project hoped to develop an evaluation tool that would eventually facilitate online instructors to assess the voluminous body of discussion board messages in their classes. Two years into online instruction, I worked on a Learning Outcomes Assessment Project sponsored by the Institute of Higher Education, University of Georgia, and analyzed how learning objectives were met within the entire course content and evaluation tools in two online courses. Active engagement in key aspects of online instruction has inevitably influenced my perception of asynchronous learners and the learning process. I believe that online education affords instructors more control and a range of possible options in assuming an identity. Disembodied and surely disoriented as a novice, the instructor can eventually shape her identity without the hindrance of visible markers like race, gender, and nationality. Teaching a composition class online where the written text is the only mode of communication, the instructor can also assume multiple avatars to reach a diverse array of students, and thus empower herself to reach beyond her known and comfortable zone of expertise. I presume this is why I am drawn to online instruction semester after semester despite long hours in front of the computer screen, imperfect technology, (sometimes) apathetic students, and dubious recognition among peers and administration.

The World Literature (2111) course development experience gained as part of a six member team comprising of four content experts (faculty) drawn from four different System institutions and one instructional designer and a web design expert, was invaluable in understanding the full scope of the project and the instructor's role in the evolution of the course. This collaboration afforded the opportunity to conceptualize students as the seminal part of the learning process and aided us in negotiating content areas and appropriate course management tools. During our course development exercises, one important concern for all faculty was the creation of adequate room for instructors to choose and establish their own identity within the course. Interaction with instructional designers afforded us the unique opportunity to stretch the limits of technology to present "the real thing" to students, and certainly made us appear technically savvy. Oftentimes, when students assume that the instructor is their only online saviour and address their technical problems, experience in instructional design saves time and

avoids frustration. The instructor's frequent online presence, quick assistance, and eager cooperation during the first few weeks of class is critical as the dropout rate in online learning is high during the initial few weeks of enrolment as students are frustrated when faced with a new learning platform. University System of Georgia offers solid technical assistance for eCore through their Online Support Network that provides live technical advice via phone as well as online, and this certainly lends credibility and validates the instructor's presence in the online community.

While many instructors worry about the paradigmatic shift that has occurred in the online classroom where the instructor is relegated to a "guide on the side" rather than the "all knowing sage on stage", researchers have identified four main roles that instructors assume in online learning - the pedagogical, managerial, social, and technical (Berge et al.1996) and the subcategories within these broad roles include but are not limited to "direct instruction; direct questioning; providing modelling or examples; giving advice or suggestions; fostering student reflection or self-aware- ness; pushing students to explore other sources of information; prompting feedback or praise; weaving students' contributions into a single summary in order to capture and re-focus students on the essence of ongoing or completed discussions... managing individual students, managing discussion and working groups; and managing course functions" (Harasim et al. 1995). Juggling these different roles, the online instructor expands her range of skills and evolves an identity allowing only her online cohorts and their engagement with the course to define her limits. Teaching simultaneously online and on ground, oftentimes the same course, I thrive in the expanding domain of online instruction and am excited as a new facet of my own identity unfolds and dispels my fear of anonymity in the online world. Students' individual talents and interests oftentimes generate parallel discussion threads where animated exchange on a variety of topics emerging from their professional and personal lives enrich the participants, thus building a community of learners who are willing to acknowledge each other's' presence and share and learn from each other. The asynchronous presence of their wisdom eventually draws in reluctant onlookers and thereby generates a rich teaching opportunity.

Building a successful learning community is another fundamental responsibility of an online instructor. While some assignments are built in with the specific intent of developing learning communities, challenging students to work in groups and report the findings to the larger class also affords vibrant communication. As elaborated by Robert Woods and Samuel Ebersole

(2003), personalized email, online group discussions, and live chat function as successful "Community Building Activities" and enable members to trust and share information in a non-threatening manner.

After the initial rules of engagement are laid out, students feel safe to express themselves and engage in creative dialogue that furthers their understanding of the material outlined. The instructor as the architect plays a critical role through regular responses, frequent feedback, and relevant updates, thus maintaining a balance between the all-knowing expert who has the final word and the silent grade stamping tool whose presence is rarely seen on the discussion board but only validated in the My Grades section of the course. Online instructors have to "... recognize the strong connection demonstrated in the research between positive social dynamic and cognitive learning. Practitioners must also recognize that a positive social dynamic requires intentionality that is, community just doesn't happen but is created through a variety of verbal and nonverbal communication cues" (2003, p.11). Careful strategy and patience on the instructor's part sometimes will draw forth brilliant responses from students. On the other hand, constant prodding is also necessary sometimes to get reluctant participants into the fold. Timely responses indicate to the students that the instructor cares about them and what they say; Established policies and clear guidelines regarding the quality and quantity of online postings certainly aid in the building and nurturing of a solid network of learners.

Primarily written mode of communication in online learning offers several perks in a writing class. Initial student postings invariably include emoticons, acronyms, and text message lingo, however, once students observe that carefully thought out responses evoke more comments from peers than hastily penned acronyms, they gradually adapt to a more formal writing environment. It is amusing to see this change reflected in the community forum which is exclusively devoted to students. When students realize that their postings are taken seriously and have a place within a larger context of communal knowledge sharing, they are inspired to compose more deliberate, thoughtful, and well edited responses, thus creating an exclusive identity within their peer group. It is my observation that fewer incidences of cheating or plagiarism happen in an online classroom than in the face to face class. Having invested significantly in the creation of their own identity, students hesitate to compromise it. The written text is the heart of the online class and we know each other only through our writing.

Personal narratives work well as initial assignments in the online class. Conceived as an icebreaker, on the first day of class students are asked to post a brief biography and the constant

online presence of their biography provides them unlimited opportunities to get_ to know each other. The first assignment students write in my English 1101 class is a personal narrative that asks them to write about:

- a. an experience you have had that seemed insignificant at the time but later you discovered had been very important.
- b. an experience you had in which you were the outsider.
- c. an experience that involved a minor event, which provided insight into your life or social conditions.
- d. a moral dilemma in which you were forced to make a major decision.
- e. a brief but dramatic narrative about an event you experienced or witnessed.

Publishing these assignments for the whole class to respond adds significantly to their knowledge base and strengthens community building efforts undertaken via discussion board postings.

The asynchronous mode promotes collaborative learning as students work at different segments during the day, and when a peer posts a help question, oftentimes the query is answered within minutes even before the instructor responds. Freed from the constraints of time and place and blessed with free and continued access to learning resources, online students tend to approach their education with a more positive attitude - especially after the first few weeks of class by which time, most students who find themselves unsuited to online learning drop out. Course management tools - learning units, discussion board, assessment and assignment tools, chat board, white board, and email provide students unlimited learning potential and serve as fertile sources of knowledge. Abundant online references and URLs listed within the course, further challenge the student's interest in the material. The hypertext format facilitates intuitive navigation within the course and students have some choice regarding the sequence of inquiry they choose to pursue. I see a higher percentage of students earning As and Bs in my online classes than in the face to face class I teach, which could very well be attributed to the high dropout rate in online courses and a number of other contributing factors that I blissfully choose to ignore.

In the future, I plan to explore other possibilities - personal homepage, podcasting and video streaming - in my efforts to create more spaces within online classes for students to seek and shape their online identity. Online classes, like face to face classes, have taught me more

about myself and have helped me step out of the comfort zone that body language and visual identity provide, and have enabled me to explore and nurture a virtual identity.

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