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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to demonstrate the benefits of on-line learning for adult learners and to further demystify three common misconceptions concerning on-line learning: students certainly do receive support from their on-line professors, the professor is pro-active rather than passive, and students may be more motivated to learn than in a conventional classroom. The author registered in a one semester on-line Teaching Business English course for already practicing professors of English language sponsored by the University of South Carolina in association with the American Department of State. She details the experience through concrete examples from the course and stresses that adult learners may successfully complete such a course by becoming used to time-management techniques particular to off campus, modular type learning, familiarizing themselves with strategies used in on-line learning such as community building exercises and highly structured assignments. The author concludes that there are several similarities between high quality on-line learning and conventional classroom learning. Factors that encourage high quality on-line learning such as clearly structured, attractive, varied assignments that are given quick, detailed feedback are also found in a traditional classroom setting. The author encourages university professors who are not in close proximity to in-service training to register in on-line courses.

On-line learning: One Way to Bring People Together

Statistics published in 2001 stated that the typical online student was over twenty-five, already working, a caregiver, and with some higher education. However, only two years later, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that all age groups showed an interest in online courses. Recent research has shown that e learning expands the scope of the classic university (Hall 1995). Not only are university students taking online courses as part of their degree programs, but high school students and adult learners have also been encouraged to take advantage of the possibilities online learning offers and are doing so in larger and larger numbers. (Palloff and Pratt 2003, 4). Due to fantastic technological advances, it is safe to affirm that the world economy is becoming more and more knowledge-based. Technological development may have been blamed as being a motor for unemployment in some domains, but it is also undeniably the source of many new jobs, new businesses and opening up of new markets throughout the world. Online learning is one means countries have to enable their labor forces to improve their present skills, or acquire new ones (Roberts, 2001, 28). The term, “life-long learning” employed by educators so frequently ten years ago has taken on an additional connotation today. Originally referring to skills students should acquire at school or university which would enable them to meet challenging learning situations throughout their careers, it now also means that professionals must be willing to update their knowledge, learn new skills and sometimes even make career shifts in order to remain employable. English language teachers are not exempt from this trend. Perhaps due to the increased use of the English language as a means to conduct business and research worldwide, instructors are obliged

to stay abreast of most recent methodologies and curriculum advances, cross-cultural business communication, research techniques among other subjects. Online learning offers unlimited opportunities for English language instructors to do so.

During a recent class session, one of my Sophomore Rhetoric students, a very enthusiastic lover of argument, proposed the issue “whether or not e learning was a favorable option in higher education after all” as a topic for the argumentative position paper due at the end of the semester. I asked the student what claim he would defend and he responded very quickly that he was against. I engaged him in a discussion and asked him to specify his arguments against e learning. He responded very quickly that, in his opinion, there was no physical support for the student such as in the traditional classroom setting; he added that the professor’s presence would not be felt, and finally that the motivation to do one’s work could not be as high since the student would feel isolated from the rest of the classmates. I asked if he had ever taken a course through e learning and he responded with a shy “No, but I assume that.” Taking his no as a cue, I asked the entire class to join in the discussion and share what they knew about e learning. Most of my students were already enrolled in courses that were supported by “Blackboard”, one of the delivery platforms many university professors use to support their online assignments, course materials, grades, etc. Most students agreed that “Blackboard” is a practical aid, but of course they were also attending the course itself. As I moderated the students in their “debate,” I enthusiastically presented the students with counterarguments to their unsupported claims. My own students’ comments were actually similar to mine before I registered in an online course and began to take advantage of the opportunity to become a student again and improve my teaching skills.

This article will demonstrate that in an efficiently run, highly structured online course students do receive support, the professor's presence is felt, and motivation to learn can be similar to that of a traditional classroom.

In the case of adult English language instructors, an online course offers the possibility to further one's education without taking a leave of absence from work. The article will also show that an online course for English language instructors provides very practical suggestion that can be quickly applied in the classroom.

In June of 2005, the department chair sent a forward of an email from the American Embassy and the State Department inviting us to apply to take any one of several online courses designed to update English language instructors living in Asia, the Middle East, North Africa and parts of Eastern Europe. As I often teach Business English / Business Communication Skills, I applied to take "Teaching Business English." I had two objectives: update my teaching skills, and participate in e learning for the first time. This particular course is offered in collaboration with the University of South Carolina and the United States State Department. I received notification of my acceptance to the semester-long course in September and began work. One lead professor and her assistant give the course. There are guest lecturers for two modules and one computer trouble-shooter is also available for technical questions. The course is supported by "First Class" for the actual day-to-day class work and "attendance"; there is a website linked to the University of South Carolina as well.

Adult learners taking an e learning course may be skeptical at the outset, but I learned immediately that a well-run e-learning course does provide "physical" support to the student. The course web site for Teaching Business English is very structured; it is

divided into assignments, course materials, student evaluation, course evaluation, discussion room, and professor's office hours. In her article, Lao (2005) stressed that the more structured an online course, the more comfortable students feel. The first assignment in the TBE course is indicative of the support and structure students received. The step-by-step procedure like organization of this assignment gave me the impetus I needed to complete each section and proceed to the following. By completing Assignment I, students also become familiar with elements of an online classroom. Step five encouraged students to practice copying and pasting of their answers and forwarding them to someone else. Step seven gave practice in saving time by pasting a question rather than re-typing it.

Figure 1. Assignment One.

Assignment #1: Introduce yourself to the group, and read everyone's introductions. Ask questions of each other to get to know each other better.

1. Read "Community Building" on Alexandra's website at http://fc.epi.sc.edu/~alexandra_rowe/.
2. Read the Faculty Introductions found on Alexandra's website.
3. Complete the "Introduction Protocol" found in Course Materials on the teaching Business English website.
4. Post your answers to the Discussion Room. (Please post by September 25, 2005.)
5. Read our colleagues' answers. Then ask any questions of your colleagues that you may have. Please ask at least one question of at least one colleague, and send the question to your colleague and copy teacher and Leila.
6. Try setting an appointment with a colleague and then use the "Chat Room" to have a "live (real-time, synchronous) chat."
7. If you are asked a question, please post your answer in the Discussion Room. Select the question by dragging your cursor through it, then go to "Message" in the top menu, drag your cursor to "Reply Special," and select "Reply with Quote." Then release. Your new message should contain the question. Then answer the question and send the message to the Discussion Room. (Please post by October 1, 2005.)

The purpose of this assignment is to support community building.

In both of their textbooks on e learning, Palloff and Pratt (2001, 2003) encourage professors teaching online to open the course with an exercise to promote community building. As Dr. Rowe also stated in her reading, “ we can facilitate second language acquisition in our classroom if we create a comfortable language-learning environment in which the learners will take risks, that is, communicate without fear of making mistakes, for only by making mistakes can learners actually increase their language proficiency.” (Rowe 2005). Thus, the purpose of Assignment I was two-fold: to implicitly encourage those of us novices in the world of cyberspace to experiment with the software and to take risks by sending messages to fellow classmates and get to know our fellow colleagues. At first the messages concerned our own background as English instructors, our biographies and interest in teaching Business English. We were being prepared for the more complicated work required in later assignments.

In a conventional university course, enrollment varies from 25 to 35 students. I hold one office hour per week for those students. If office hours are inconvenient for the students, they may make appointments. I respond to their emails and feel that I am available for them. But the e-learning professor and I have what I believe is a special relationship. All of our “class” may feel the same thing as I regularly receive personal feedback on each of my assignments; it is not written in a red pen on my paper, but it is in the form of an email note, personally addressed to me. There is always a personal salutation, a positive comment, and the notes do not only come after an assignment. I can write my professor anytime, and I do, and she writes back. In fact, when I open my mailbox and see that I have a message from “e teacher”, I feel quite special. She is not “virtual” in the sense of the word since the website has posted her and her colleagues’

biographies and pictures. We know when she is available to “chat.” When an online professor is at a conference, a replacement takes over. The assistant professor is well versed in the course syllabus. There are no “make-up” classes; everything goes on as scheduled. Perhaps because email seems to make people more comfortable about sharing personal information, our instructors share some of their personal lives with the class; we were informed that one family member was ill, we received detailed accounts of a vacation trip. The fact that the instructor is in North America does not take away from her “presence” at all.

The motivation to do one’s work for an online course may actually be higher than in a conventional course. Not only am I able to read the other students assignments since they all appear in the Discussion Room, but also as part of my own assignments, I am asked to evaluate the work of my classmates. This provides added motivation to do my work very seriously so as to reach my colleagues’ level.

Assignment 2 required preparation of a general needs assessment for use in business English classes. My questionnaire was indicative of my method of teaching; I asked what topics my university students were already familiar with; I also asked whether or not they had had experience with writing resumes, cover letters, or complaint letters. My classmates in other parts of the world who were teaching working adults rather than university students wanted to know what their students actually did during their full-time jobs. Their questions gave me valuable insights for my own syllabus. I have added a module on Everyday Office Routine that includes correct telephone language, fax and email guidelines as a result of my interaction with others.

After having become comfortable with community building among students, writing a needs assessment tool to better plan a course, and reading extensively on the topic of Communicative Language Teaching, Assignment five required a full lesson plan for a business related topic. The selection of assignments turned in by students worldwide gave me access to new ways of teaching business communication. Some teachers used game-like activities; others emphasized conversation as a means to ensure learning; still others encouraged students to listen first, and then write. I did notice that the module on Communicative Language teaching had had its desired effect. The majority of the assignments were student-centered; instructors emphasized what the students should “do” during class time.

For example, one of the assignments that was extremely valuable was the 7th Assignment which was to create a CLT, learner-centered business vocabulary activity and post it in the Discussion room. The format for the activity had already been set for previous activities, but I learned to be more disciplined in my lesson planning and more specifically to write down my objectives and then to evaluate the lesson’s success. I now give more thought to the specific objectives of my class activities than I did before taking the course. I feel my classes are now more focused on accomplishing a specific goal rather than teaching a unit in a textbook. I immediately integrated Assignment 7 into my own class syllabus and it was a meaningful addition to the class activities.

Figure 2. Assignment 7

TITLE OF ACTIVITY: Don't Take it Personally

DESIGNER: Carol Ann Goff-Kfour

HOME SCHOOL: University Notre Dame of Louaize, Beirut, Lebanon

HOME CITY: Beirut

HOME COUNTRY: Lebanon

HOST UNIVERSITY: University of South Carolina

CONTACT INFORMATION (Optional):

Activity Specifics

PROFICIENCY LEVEL: Intermediate/ general

TARGET AGE: 20-22

FOCUS: correcting a very frequently made error. Speaking and writing correct English

THEME: Using Words Correctly

TIME REQUIRED: 20 minutes

OBJECTIVES: Upon completing this activity students will be able to:

1. differentiate between 2 terms
2. use those terms correctly

MATERIALS REQUIRED: paper, pen, transparency or computer

PROCEDURE:

Ice Breaker: 2 minutes. Teacher begins by putting her book on a student's desk. IS this yours? The student will respond, no, it is yours. The teacher responds by saying, Oh, you mean it is my personal copy. Student may say, yes or no, depending on knowledge level.

The teacher then writes the two terms on the board, transparency, **personal**, **personnel**

She says to the students. Please write a sentence using these two terms correctly.

Students take 3-4 minutes. Teacher asks students to exchange their papers and correct each other. She asks if there are errors?

Teacher puts on a transparency with this little story on it.

When I went to the Personnel office of Gino's Furniture I saw the Personnel Director, Ms. Smith sitting outside her office reading her personal copy of *Gone with the Wind*.

I introduced myself. "Ms. Smith, I am here to apply personally for the position of Assistant Personnel Manager", I said."

Ms. Smith, the Personnel Manager, was thrilled and replied, "SPLENDID. I have so much personal work to do, I barely have time to get to Personnel affairs." I handed her my application form, my c.v. and my cover letter, and asked when I might contact her for an answer. She replied, "HMM, personally, from barely looking at your credentials, I will recommend you for the position. I will meet the entire Personnel department and get back to you within ten days." I left the office disillusioned with personnel work, and thought that I may try another field where there would be more personal satisfaction.

Teacher then highlights the terms **personal** and **personnel**.

Ask the students to read the story. (5 minutes)

They have students write the rule. (5 minutes)

Teacher writes correct rule on board or it is done verbally.

EVALUATION: Teacher asks students to use the term correctly in sentences that apply to their own lives.

In the section of the course devoted to cross-cultural business communication, the benefits of online learning were also made very clear. Students were asked to translate a letter from their native language into English, and to compare the translation to the standards accepted in successful business transactions worldwide. I was able to see that letters written in Russian, for example were much more formal than those in English. I am now able to understand why non-native speakers of English sometimes have difficulty in accepting the “direct approach” of getting directly to the point when they write business correspondence. Their native languages require an introduction to the subject, as well as a comment on the reader’s personal situation.

Motivation is generally not a problem with online learning though it has been reported that 30% were less satisfied with their classes, (Palloff and Pratt 2001,2003) but time management is crucial in successfully completing one’s work. As the website and the course are available twenty-four hours a day every day of the week, it is tempting for working students to put off logging on until “tomorrow.” As the bank of assignments, deadlines for submitting the assignments, readings, postings in the discussion room grow, so does the time needed to complete them increase. I found that by logging in every day from 10-10:30 a.m. during my break from my own classes, check my mail, read the new discussion room comments and the other students’ assignments I could keep up to date. I also needed to log in at other times to complete my assignments. A conventional university course is usually designed for 45 contact hours per semester, not including the work students must do outside class. The number of hours a student needs to devote to

an online course is similar. Taking an online course as an adult is an excellent exercise in self-discipline.

Surprisingly enough, there are striking similarities between a traditional English language classroom and an e-learning one. Student behavior is sometimes similar. Some students do “come in late.” Because of late registration, or because of technical difficulties, some students turn in two assignments at the same time; they write their excuses for late assignments, but in this case, the whole class knows everything. University students often make friends as they take courses; I am certain that some of my colleagues will keep in touch with those they have met during Teaching Business English. The readings that are posted in the course material site and the assignment site are also similar to a library. However, the stacks in an e learning course are always open.

According to Whitlock (2001,188) the characteristics of a well-designed online course are the following: clearly specified objectives, attractive presentation, clear signposting, ease of use, appropriate language, modular structure, variety of questions and problems, feedback on progress, testing diagnostic and achievement, and logical sequence. E learning classrooms have perhaps taken their cue for success from successful conventional courses that must also take these factors into consideration.

Among the many definitions of technology, Haughey (Burge and Haughey 2001,3) presents one that is appropriate to my limited, but happy experience with online learning. Technology is the “creative application of the known to achieve different goals or resolve particular problems.” Ambitious learners eager to take advantage of alternative education opportunities can then provide further tools to their own students so that the knowledge-based economy can be expanded to include as many people as

possible. I now feel that I am a more informed English language instructor than before I took my course, and I believe that I am on the same wavelength with at least 25 other English language instructors in this world. We are now all teaching our students in Russia, Algeria, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Morocco, Kyrgyzstan, Madagascar, Tajikistan, Togo, Yemen to name just a few of the participants' countries that it is indeed possible to do business together using the English language as a tool for success.

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