A Picture or 1000 Words?

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Online learning has prompted an array of learning practices and techniques that have been transposed on to the Web. These techniques are now mixing more and more with multimedia such as video, sound and graphic enhancements. With the development of online courses, seminars, and virtual universities, moderators and trainers are now trying to make the experience more personable, so that we don't all become anti-social extensions of the personal computer.

Especially in the area of online courses, instructors and developers are concerned with attrition (dropout) rates and how to compensate for the lack of face-to-face communication. As is natural with any new technology, there is a tendency to want all of the aspects of the former technology available in the new form, and the easiest way to do this is to apply an old standby to the new medium. As online courses become more prevalent and sophisticated, however, educators and learners alike are realizing that a good online course isn't simply a good classroom course converted to HTML. A designer of such environments needs to add 'human' aspects to the technology and make participants comfortable with the medium.

For those of us conversant with the etiquette of email, we have probably all used emoticons, such as:) and;-) to convey humor or sarcasm in our email messages. We use keyboard symbols to replace the gestures and facial expressions that would normally convey messages in a face-to-face discussion. In addition to these symbols, many of us use asterixed comments and gestures such as *giggle* and *wave* that come from MUD (MultiUser Dimension) games and of course, all those acronyms to save typing time (MHO = My Humble Opinion, BTW=By The Way etc.) all of which convey messages about our personalities, our level of computer/Internet knowledge and background.

Online courses naturally involve a lot of emailing where these types of personality clues appear, usually in a group discussion area or chat session, where all participants can read and respond to messages from the instructor and the other 'classmates'. However, emoticons and textual clues only go so far to demonstrate a personality behind the words. Although online learning offers a more direct mode of communication between the learner and the instructor than in many in-class situations, many students and educators feel that a deeper interaction is needed to feel part of a group dynamic online.

One way to compensate for the lack of physical communication is to invite students to add a photograph of themselves to the course site. This is used by many educators as a convenient way to create camaraderie amongst the students, who can now put a face to the words of their peers. However, does this actually help the student learn, feel part of the class, and control the attrition rate? What value does a photograph add to online learning?

I am currently a student of an online certificate program in Instructional Technology for educators. In one course I took this year, we were instructed to include a scanned photograph of ourselves with our introductory messages. I found myself asking the above

questions, and feeling reticent to submit a picture. I sensed an unchallenged perception that a photograph was a positive addition to the course, but I felt differently.

When we see a photograph there is relatively little left to fill in, it is visually complete and therefore does not require any interaction or involvement on the part of the receiver. In fact it might be argued that our biases naturally make connections of what the person in the photo may be like. Our imagination has no opportunity, or necessity at that point to fill in the gaps.

In an online environment, the photograph is a form of passive communication, yet an active form of communication to maintain student interest and involvement is actually necessary. The photograph can also eliminate one of the advantages of online learning, where the written word is the only factor that influences relationships between learner/instructor and learner/learner. Instructors are forced in an online environment to distinguish students by their comments and participation and not by their faces.

If the popularity of online learning is actually shifting the focus of education/training to a learner-centered philosophy, where the student is in control of a dynamic experience within the content of a course, how does a static image, that fixes a perception, help the learning?

I view photographs as an easy but problematic solution to socializing online learning. We need to address, instead, the ways that online learning can become the spectrum for a new type of 'social pedagogy'.

The advantages for online learning include an environment where different types of learners can coexist and shape their learning independently as well as within a group. Individuals in an online course control the pace, timing and how they participate to a greater degree than traditional learning. This is true for both the content and social aspects of a course.

I decided to post my concerns for using photographs to an academic listserv, WWWDEV, to see if I was alone in my opinion. The comments that came back were all encouraging the use of photographs. Only a few people saw a problem with this approach to socializing the online environment. One or two mentioned that perhaps the Internet is attractive to some learners precisely because we don't see who we are communicating with, while others seemed split:

> *"I agree that knowing the physical appearance of classmates helps with communication and it helps students feel more comfortable, but is it because it allows us to drag our prejudices that we depend upon so heavily in the classroom environment into the electronic environment?" (Dr. Gerry Fairbairn, Professor, Daniel Webster College, October 5, 1998)*

> *"I believe that the benefits of "putting a face to the name" and the increased sense of camaraderie that this can generate outweigh the cons." (Pat Letendre, Medical Laboratory Science, University of Alberta, October 5, 1998)*

After hearing other opinions, I still have the perception that this isn't the most creative or effective way to marry social interaction with technology. It seems to be the easiest, fastest way to solve the problem and that, in itself sends an alarm to look into this further.

There are many other ways that learners can get to know each other online. Here are some that I thought of:

- ➢ **Learners who write an 'introduction' including hobbies and goals offer a quick way to start private exchanges of messages between the members of the class.**
- ➢ **Learning partners are another good way to establish contact between students. The buddy system is set up to help stragglers, and allows students to talk privately about their learning progress and ask questions they may not feel comfortable posting to the group or instructor.**
- ➢ **Live chats can also be used to foster a group dynamic where the instructor is also available to answer questions quickly for the whole group.**
- ➢ **Small group work is another way that students work closely with each other and have to become a bit more personal.**

These are all text-based examples, but I see other ways to incorporate visual representations of learners as well:

- ➢ **Why not have the students go to a web site of cartoon characters and choose a cartoon that best represents themselves. The learner is using their imagination to pick a character and the other classmates have to use their imagination and some deeper, more active learning to fill in the gaps. The lower resolution of a cartoon leaves something for the eye and mind to complete.**
- ➢ **As part of an activity, have students participate in an avatar-based chat environment. The learners pick a graphic representation of themselves, such as a fish or a Borg, and enter the visual chat room as this character.**

There is also the question of anonymity. A photograph may expose an insecurity of a participant, which could cause a student to feel uncomfortable and self-conscious even if there is no open prejudice against them. My own discomfort as a student posting a photograph was a significant age gap between the other students and me.

The other disadvantage of placing photographs online to 'help' with the social interaction of a group is the potential for instructors to see this as the only tool they have to use.

Instead, I think educators and designers of online courses have to use every tool available and try different methods to compensate for the social interaction of a face-to-face communication. I am not convinced that a photograph is actually an effective tool to add to this list.

Rather than relying on old ideas, developers and educators need to address new solutions that meet the needs of the students. In a homogeneous small group, photographs may help the learners quickly feel comfortable. However, I would argue that this is not the best solution for every course. Educators and designers of online courses must be willing to adjust design and content for different learning styles, and use the Internet creatively to present a dynamic learning environment. And that's MHO.

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