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Building Quality Relationships in a Technologically Mediated Learning Environment (TMLE)

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Abstract

As teaching technology continues to improve, the popularity of Technologically Mediated Learning Environments (TMLEs) continues to increase. Commonly, questions are raised about the ability of instructors to build quality faculty-student and student-student relationships when teaching courses in these modalities. In this article, the authors explore the primary issues related to building and supporting relationships for the enhancement of learning in these relatively new environments in higher education. Primary criticisms, best practices, and future directions of TMLEs will be explored in the context of training graduate psychology students.

In the 21st century, we have seen rapid advances in technology. Students are now growing up with cell phones, computer tablets and 24/7 Internet access. How can we capture the attention of the next generation of undergraduate and graduate students, and not only find a way to make technology work, but enhance and improve upon traditional educational models? More specifically, professional development and socialization are considered essential in becoming a psychologist and must be consciously fostered as learning technologies continue to improve.
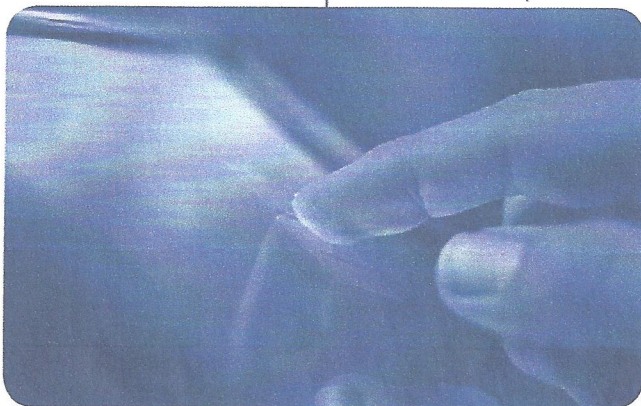
In this article, we will focus on building quality relationships in online and blended courses in higher education, but it is essential to recognize that use of advanced technology forms only a part of a complete educational package, especially in the training of psychologists. By meeting face-to-face with students on a regular basis, a foundation can be created and built upon with the online portions of the learning program.

Primary Criticisms

"Relationships" and "electronic" are often seen as incompatible, at least when it comes to higher education. Thus, when it applies to technologically mediated learning environments (TMLE), critics state that the education must somehow be sub-par. By better understanding the criticisms, we can become more knowledgeable about how relationships can and do exist within an online course.

It is widely accepted that information can be disseminated electronically. However, the concern is often raised that social interaction is missing in an online forum and that students cannot have adequate opportunities for relationships and true dialogue, which is essential to learning course material and developing as a professional. Further, it has been suggested that faculty cannot truly "know" their students in a meaningful way. Some may even believe that online coursework is as impersonal as correspondence courses by mail. There are large differences in the amount of interaction that occurs between various traditional classrooms (e.g., some are large

lecture rooms with no discussion, while others are small seminars), and significant differences in the teaching styles and interaction abilities of instructors (e.g., some are dry and dull, while others are charismatic and engaging). Similarly, online programs are not all the same and vary in the degree of interaction that occurs amongst students and between students and faculty. Thus, it is dangerous to lump them together as one entity. It is well known that student learning outcomes are affected positively by supportive, cooperative, and responsive interactions between faculty and students (Arends, 2001; Hativa, Barak & Simhi, 2001; Kember, 2004 as cited in Vermeulen & Schmidt, 2008). Burge (1994) identified four areas (participation, response, effective feedback and focused messaging) that can enhance interactivity within an online learning environment and where differences can be found in the quality of interpersonal interactions, particularly from the students' perspective. Similarly, Burge (1994) identified several instructor behaviors that enhance the online learning experience. These include the ability to manage class discussions, encourage creativity, support self-directed learning, and assist students by giving timely and relevant feedback.

There also tends to be a "one size fits all" approach to higher education, in the assumption that the traditional, face-to-face model works best for every student. In fact, there are students with very different needs, who may respond better to different approaches. What about the quiet, reserved student who sits in class but does not participate in the discussions? Is it possible such students might feel more comfortable and effective expressing themselves through other formats? What about the highly motivated student who does not live near an institution of higher learning? Online learning experiences push students to be more active and self-directed in their learning.

If we believe the assumption that effective social relationships cannot occur in an online setting, how do we explain the social media explosion through platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn and dating sites? These platforms are popular for their very ability to grow and expand social networks. Of course, sometimes the friendships formed are superficial, but oftentimes deeper, more genuine relationships are created. Within the ever enhancing technological world, there is more opportunity than ever for faculty to become engaged, to know their students, to provide meaningful discussions amongst students and with students, and to be more accessible to the students.

Best Practices

Building quality relationships in a TMLE requires communicating with students often and with intention. Rather than using technology for technology's sake, learning experiences must balance reflection and discourse (Garrison & Anderson, 2003). Vermeulen & Schmidt (2008) provide evidence that student learning outcomes are strengthened by high quality faculty-student and student-student interactions around intellectually meaningful subjects. Below are best practices in building strong one-on-one relationships with students, as well as facilitating collaborative inter-relationships among students, in an online learning environment in higher education.

Building Faculty-Student Relationships

The key to building strong faculty-student relationships in any learning environment is to focus on the quality of the interaction and to relate to students as individuals (Dykman & Davis, 2008). When inquiries are addressed promptly and in a personal manner, people feel appreciated and respected in their relationships. In a TMLE, this can be accomplished by setting up regular meetings with students to listen to and address their questions and concerns (Dykman & Davis, 2008) and by responding to students' email communications in a timely manner, making a point to address them by name in all correspondence (Cerniglia, 2011). For example, faculty in our program have adopted a policy of responding to student inquiries, whether submitted via email, discussion post, chat, or telephone, within 24 hours. Additionally, efforts to determine whether a question was answered or a concern addressed to the student's satisfaction invites further interaction.

There are a number of ways for faculty to effectively communicate with students outside of the course itself. Private emails and phone calls are likely the most common, but in a TMLE, the use of online collaboration tools, such as wikis, blogs, Voice Threads, or Skype, can supplement interactions and further enhance communication with and among students. Once they are comfortable communicating in these ways, students tend to interact more often and more informally than they would in person (Dykman & Davis, 2008).

Learner interaction and engagement is addressed by the Quality Matters rubric (Quality Matters Program, 2011), a faculty-centered, peer-reviewed set of standards used to evaluate the design of online and blended courses in higher education. This model indicates that strong relationships are fostered when a course includes learning activities that nurture faculty-student, content-student, and if appropriate to the course, student-student interactions; clear standards for faculty responsiveness and availability (e.g., turn-around time for email, grade posting, etc.); and openly articulated requirements for student interaction. As an example, a typical syllabus in our graduate psychology program includes posting guidelines, as well as a grading rubric detailing the evaluation criteria (i.e., quantity, quality, relation to assigned material, critical thinking and professional application), for participation in threaded discussions. Khoo, Forret, and Cowie (2010) also emphasize the importance of providing clear guidelines and expectations for student contributions and participation in an online environment.

Building Student-Student Relationships

Vygotsky's (1978 as cited in Stacey, 1999) understanding of learning as a particularly social process, with language and dialogue being essential for cognitive development, supports the notion that social interaction is a key component (Nichol & Blashki, 2005 as cited in Hutchinson, 2008). Orientation activities, such as ice breakers and student introductions, along with instructor empathy, interpersonal outreach (e.g., welcoming statements, discussion of one's own online experiences, etc.), and humor (Bonk, Kerkley, Hara & Dennen, 2000 as cited in Hutchinson, 2008) can promote a sense of community among students as they work toward a common learning objective.

A TMLE can be a rich environment for facilitating collaborative student projects and interactions (Stacey, 1999). Participation in discussion forums is an effective strategy for building quality student-student relationships when thoughtfully designed to encourage perspective sharing. Assigning weekly discussion leaders among students, whose role it is to facilitate a more complex discussion by sharing ideas and experiences relevant to the course content, allows for a deeper discussion overall, and leads to real connections

among all members of the learning community (Cerniglia, 2011). Some students have reported they learn more from interacting with their peers in a TMLE than from other aspects of an online or blended course (Dykman & Davis, 2008). Faculty can model for students good online communication practices and "netiquette" in how to extend, expand, clarify, or challenge their peers' ideas appropriately (Cerniglia, 2011; Khoo, Forret & Cowie, 2010), thereby creating an environment where students feel safe to share their ideas and experiences even when their perspectives may be challenged. Instructors should be mindful to participate in discussion boards without dominating the conversation and to tailor their participation level to the needs and abilities of the students (Cerniglia, 2011). Other discussion strategies, such as ensuring ideas that are overlooked are addressed and both providing feedback to and seeking feedback from the students (Hutchinson, 2008), serve to enhance social skills and interactions.

Though a number of strategies that faculty can utilize to improve the quality of the interactions in a TMLE have been presented, the responsibility for effectiveness does not rest solely on the instructor. The behavior of the students themselves, in terms of motivation and level of engagement, which can be mediated by a quality learning environment, leads to superior academic performance and career success (Vermeulen & Schmidt, 2008).

Future Directions

The advancements being made in the delivery of education within a TMLE lead to the reasonable conclusion that these methods will continue to be highly utilized. The concerns related to relationships lessen as improvements in technology fill in existing gaps.

In support of the instructor-driven best practices above, there are a few basic technologies that have been used for many years to foster interaction and relationship building within TMLEs and will likely continue to develop. These include course management platforms such as Blackboard, Moodle, WebCT, CampusWeb, and communication tools such as discussion boards, chat rooms, and audio/video conferencing. These technologies have allowed faculty and students, from the very beginning of the class experience, to connect with each other in a way that bridges the physical distance. It is evident that today's students are clamoring for more technology for building relationships, communicating, collaborating and engaging in the learning process (Revere & Kovach, 2011). As we move forward into more student-centered learning environments, we will see increased use of web-based applications, communication tools, and networking outlets such as Facebook and Ning. Individuals are already using social networking outlets to communicate, share observations, and lend support; in other words, to engage in relationships.

While some instructors may experience slight panic at the thought of using these diverse tools, most students, current and future, are already familiar with them and, in our experience, are eager to apply their "tech savvy" to their educational and professional experiences.

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