Podcast for Module 5: Design, Part 2

Welcome to the podcast for Module 5, the second part of the Design stage.

In this podcast we will take a look at the social aspects of online learning, using the following five principles:

1. deep learning occurs with the combination of both transmissive and transactive pedagogies, that is, when content is transmitted to the students from the instructors and when students interact with each other, debate topics, and encourage each other to dig deeper and defend their ideas better
2. students observe the feedback their fellow students receive and are then motivated to interact in a similar fashion if the feedback is positive or in a different fashion if it is negative
3. regular and meaningful contact between the instructor and students, and between students and students creates a sense of academic cohesion within the course and within the institution
4. that such academic social interaction provides better learning outcomes and satisfaction, leading to lower attrition rates, and
5. a sense of community of connected students and instructors -- where everyone is aware of and interacts with everyone else -- is a preferable model of online coursework than correspondence courses where each student sees only his relationship with the instructor and is not involved with any of his fellow students.

Some of the above points are supported by various theories and research projects while others are based on shared experiences between me and my colleagues. Now let us take a look at Essential Elements 8, 11, and 12 which all deal with creating a sustainable social environment.

In Essential Element number 8 we address the aspects of designing a learning community that is collaborative, engaging, and inclusive. Real learning happens when students share their ideas and interpretations with each other and discuss the similarities and differences thereof. It is important that we, as instructors, create assignments that encourage such sharing within an environment that fosters trust, respect, and security. We must understand that such a learning community does not spontaneously happen just because a course exists within which are found discussion forums and a list of student names. We must make an overt effort to create the guidelines of such a community, and then actively model the expectations -- and continually interact within the guidelines we have established. As we continue to teach online courses and have repeat students who will help us model the expectations, the establishment of each course community will get a bit easier -- but our responsibilities and interaction will always be necessary.

Here are eleven tips to create and sustain such an effective learning community, some of which are found in our text.

Tip 1: Be a role model. Make an effort to respect and encourage your students, providing positive and thought-provoking interaction with everyone. And practice the principle in the adage "Praise in public, punish in private." That is, be sure to create a positive public environment that promotes thought, but reprimand when necessary in private. If a posting contains errors, do be sure to publicly correct these errors so that your silence does not become an assumed affirmation, but save strict correction for private email.

Tip 2: Establish a rapport with your students. You can do this through your interaction in the public discussion forums, private emails, the posting of your picture and biographical information, and

especially through the use of synchronous text, audio, and video conferences. Because we are not able to interact face-to-face with our students, we must make an extra effort to establish a rapport with them. Think back to your days in college and grad school. How many times did you talk to your professors during class, during office hours, in the hallway? For me, my best bonding times with my professors did not occur during class time, but rather in their offices, as part of student committees, and off-campus. We want to provide opportunities via email, phone calls, Skype calls, etc. in addition to the discussion forums so that our students can get to know us better, and us them.

Tip 3: Outline your expectations for the community. Allow me to quote from our authors on page 47: "Communities function best when the expectations and outcomes for community involvement are stated up front." Let your students know what you expect and require of them them in the discussion forums. For instance, as I have mentioned before, I put all of my expectations into the syllabus. This way, my students have access to what I want and how they will be graded from the get-go. Whether they read the syllabus at the beginning of class or not, well, that may be another story. But at least everything has been made available.

Tip 4: Shift from instructor-driven communication to interactive communication. Dr. Sebastian Mahfood began using the term "transactive pedagogy" in 2002 in his and Fr. John Paul Heil's presentation *Palms in Turkey and other Sacred Scripture Practica*. They discussed the value of portable libraries to study tour groups at the University of Indiana Wabash Center's "3rd Information Technology Conference" at the University of Indiana, Indianapolis, Indiana, 8-9 August 2002 in which "transaction-based pedagogies" were juxtaposed against traditional transmission-based pedagogies. See also Mahfood's *The Value of Instructional Technologies in Seminary Teaching*, in which he developed a one-day workshop on the value of instructional technologies in seminary teaching for the full faculty at St. John's Seminary in Camarillo, California, 23 August 2002 where the term "transaction-based" was truncated to "transactive". A change in our focus from our role as content deliverer to content guide will greatly increase the amount of student-to-student interaction that will take place. We want to move away from a course that is primarily composed of one-on-one interactions between the students and us that tend to isolate students from each other. Rather, we want to create assignments that encourage students to learn from each other as they work with the course materials (I will address this a bit more in Tip 11). This is why we want to avoid private conversations with students regarding course content (unless absolutely necessary), moving such conversations into the public arena so all can benefit and join in.

Tip 5: Start off with the right tone. We must set the right tone for the course by building a sense of community during the first critical weeks of the course. Make an extra effort to communicate a bit more than normal during this first week, whether through additional discussion forum postings or time-bound announcements, podcasts, or videos. What do I mean by "time-bound announcements, podcasts, or videos"? I mean artifacts that could otherwise be mistaken as "old," that is, as having been created sometime in the past, and simply placed within the course. For instance, my videos, or mini-lectures, are not created anew each semester. I recycle them and only update them as needed. But I like to create a new one for the first week of class (as well as every couple of weeks thereafter) that is obviously new -- tailor made to that week, like mentioning the date or the current seasonal conditions, like a recent snowfall. I do this to impress upon my students that I am not just using a recycled course, but am creating new, albeit it minor, artifacts just for them -- that I am alive and well, really present to them. And that the course is alive, fresh, and dynamic. On a secondary note, our authors recommend that the first week not include any graded assignments, but this may not be a feasible option for some of us (such as my courses that exist within accelerated semesters).

Tip 6: Get acquainted with the class. Our authors suggest using icebreakers throughout a long

semester, but I have found that one icebreaker at the beginning is sufficient -- the required interaction within the discussion forums keeps the familiarization process alive. As I have mentioned already, a great way to foster a sense of community, which is also an icebreaker, is an introduction forum where we and our students tell each other a little bit about ourselves, our lives, our hobbies, and include a recent picture.

Tip 7: Include a social forum. As presented in an earlier podcast, you can include an "Open Forum" discussion forum that is primarily meant for non-course related conversation. I encourage my students to discuss school-related issues, the birth of children, interesting events, etc. in this forum. This gives our students a place to interact about life issues, because without such places so designated, I have found that students simply engage in fewer social conversations.

Tip 8: You are part of the community, too. Remember that in a face-to-face class our students are able to get to know our personalities, senses of humor, quarks, talents, preferences, and even if we are staying healthy or getting sick. In the online world, we need to make an overt effort for such aspects to be made available for our students. I have mentioned techniques for accomplishing this, but the main point is that because our students do not see us in a classroom every week, we need to make it obvious to them that we are active and alive, and engaged with them. Otherwise, the principle "out of sight, out of mind" can creep in and make our students wonder if we still care about them or came down with the flu.

Tip 9: Do not get in the way. This tip may seem to be the antithesis to Tip 8, but it is meant to bring balance to our course presence. Recent studies have shown that the most effective online instructor participation is one of less involvement rather than more. As I mentioned in a previous podcast, if we post too many thoughts in the discussion forums, we tend to squash the conversation. It seems as though once the professor has spoken, there is little else for the students to say. I make it a point to show that I have read everyone's initial posting (the one due on Wednesday) and value their thoughts and efforts. But I do not become involved in the different conversations that then ensue, unless I see a problem or misunderstanding that needs addressing. I want the students to discuss amongst themselves the issues, their interpretations, their struggles -- and only post enough to let them know that I am listening and able to intervene if necessary.

Tip 10: Be sensitive to your students. Be aware of American slang, regional differences, and cultural expressions -- including your own. It can be a struggle to communicate in terms that are accessible to all our students, but we must make an effort to do so. Conversely, we may have students who interact within our courses with grammar and lingo that are influenced by cultural themes. Ebonics is a perfect example of such an influence. I have to make allowances in my grading policies for such differences, sometimes focusing less on grammar and syntax and more on the treatment of the topic. Here we ride a delicate line between demanding academic quality and being so demanding that our students may have second thoughts about sharing their ideas if they cannot wrap them in erudite-sounding language.

Tip 11: Structure discussion forum questions and topics around andragogical principles. Our adult students need less transmissive assignments than children while greatly benefiting from those assignments that tap into their prior knowledge, a desire to self-direct their learning, and their need to immediately apply their learning to their life situations (both socially and vocationally). I address the transmissive need to impart the content that I want them to learn by providing various resources, such as the text, my mini-lectures in video format, podcasts, online resources, etc. as I have explained to you before. The summary portion of the discussion forum assignments deals with these transmissive elements. But then the remaining portions of the discussion forum assignments and final project use andragogy to bring the students' current experiences into the discussion, tap into prior

knowledge to compare and evaluate the content, use their desire to link the course content with immediate applicability in their own lives, and leverage self-interest in choosing the direction and topic of their final projects. By addressing their needs as adult learners, my students willingly share a treasure house of experiences and interpretations, making for lively discussions. I always learn a great deal from my students when they open up and share, and have noted on more than one occasion that their contributions to the courses expand the content to which everyone else is exposed. This makes for a challenging environment for me, but a very rich learning and social atmosphere for everyone.

In Essential Element 11 our authors present us with the challenge of using a combination of individual and group learning activities. The idea is to strike a balance incorporating individual learning activities such as reading assignments, papers, email communication between a single student and the instructor, etc. with those activities that occur in the public space of the course and that rely on the energies and dynamism of the group setting.

You will want to think about how you want individual work to be submitted: privately via email or an electronic "in-box," or posted in a discussion forum so that other students can view and comment upon the work. You may want to consider having some large projects broken up into pieces, and having some of these posted for class comment while the final version is private between you and the student. For instance, you could require that students post a draft version of a paper a couple of weeks before the final version is due, thus allowing the students to critique each others papers and refine their own before submitting them to you for a grade. If you do decide to have students help each other in this fashion, I recommend that you create a table or list of items to be used in the critiquing process along with specific directions as to what you want them to do. Without such direction, I have seen students simply tell each other that they like the topics without giving any useful feedback.

This latter technique also fits in well with our authors' admonition to assign a little bit of a large project every week. This will greatly assist your students with their time management issues -- for most of our students have many other competing activities in their lives that demand their immediate attention. Providing a long period to complete a complex task, without setting intermediate goals and deadlines, can lead many students to put off the complex task until all other demands in their personal and professional lives are temporarily silenced. In other words, they will put off a final project until the very end, and their work will likely suffer as a result. I break up my students' final project in what is called a Capstone Project. My students must first submit a topic sentence about half-way through the course. This gives me a chance to work with them on their topic and the direction their research will take. Once we agree, each student then must submit an annotated bibliography a week later, thus giving me a second chance to redirect if needed, as well as having the students space out their work. The following week may see a rough-draft due and posted for the class to read and offer feedback. I have, in the past, broken the students into groups of three and had them share with each other, rather than ask the entire class to read every other student's paper and comment. A week later the final version is due, followed by a synchronous presentation in which the students present their findings and applications. This presentation session uses either text chat or voice chat -- I offer both types of activities to accommodate the students' learning styles, access to high-speed Internet service, and typing abilities (referring back to the Universal Design for Learning idea of accommodating the students).

Group activities are another way to create a dynamic class of learners. Our authors spend eight pages on this technique, and I do not wish to duplicate their efforts here. Do read these pages and consider the possibilities of incorporating group-projects into your courses.

The last Essential Element within the Design stage here presented is number 12: Recognize that

pacing in an online course is different. I have touched on this concept several times in these podcasts, such as discussing the weekly activities that I use, using a predictable schedule, dividing up a complex final project into multiple due dates, and trying to make allowances for the other, non-academic, demands that my students must face. I have seen other courses that are based around a topical or module format, with assigned readings and activities revolving around three or four topics for the semester, with only three or four due dates. For a typical 16-week course, this leaves the students about a month to complete each topic or module. It has been my experience that students often leave the bulk of the work until the week in which their assignments are due; they do not pace themselves each week and they rarely engage in consistent interaction throughout the semester. The long space between content exposure and community activities does not build a cohesive class but rather leans in the correspondence course direction. Just keep in mind that within the face-to-face class, you and your students are able to pace the instruction because you meet at least once per week throughout the semester. We need to recreate this format of systematic and consistent contact within our online courses, and having a consistent weekly schedule that equally divides up the course content is a great tool to accomplish this pacing.

This podcast wraps of the Design stage of online course creation. In the next podcast we will look at how the rubber meets the road in the Execution stage, that is, the teaching stage.