**Introduction**

In my professional life at VCC my official title is “Manager, Online Learning Strategy and Design”. I manage a small team that oversees the LMS (Moodle) and the streaming video service (Kaltura) alongside other technologies.

As part of my role I support instructors in creating and delivering online courses, or the online components of blended courses. I work in a Teaching and Learning Centre that includes senior faculty who are responsible for advising on pedagogical approaches to teaching, both on and offline. Together we provide synchronous workshops and asynchronous support materials to instructors to help them use technology in the most effective ways. Our model is one where we provide a template for instructors to use, and support while they build or revise a course. Instructors themselves are responsible for building the actual courses. My role does not involve working directly with the students.

Instructors are not a homogenous group, but they do share some common features:

* They are subject-matter experts, and not necessarily trained pedagogues. Proficiency in the design and delivery of online learning is not a requirement for most instructor positions.
* They are busy! Often instructors are expected to begin delivering a course within a few days of being assigned to the course, and often using materials created by a previous instructor. Although professional development time is provided, instructors often complain that they do not have the time to develop their courses as well as they would wish.
* They are student-centered. There is a powerful institutional ethos that promotes student-centered learning. Student success is at the heart of everything that we do. During the recent forced move to online-only learning many instructors felt that this ethos was compromised, and that the social element of learning was lost.

Our students are from a very diverse geographical catchment area and bring a variety of values and life experiences to the online classroom. We promote the Community of Inquiry model, and the promotion of social presence is where we face the biggest challenges when creating online courses.

A key take-away for me from ETEC542 has been the idea that online spaces can themselves be said to have ‘culture’ -a ‘third culture’ that is influenced by, but independent of the cultures that each participant brings with them. Culture is expressed in the online environment through different types of communication and the creation and negotiation of online identities. For our online courses, discussion forums are a predominant tool for creating and maintaining social presence. However, discussion forums in our online courses are seldom very successful, if success is measured by the number of students who contribute. Several of the ideas presented in the course have helped me to better frame this problem.

The way an online culture is different from the various cultures of the students in a course was an important learning for me. I found Hewling (2005) to be a useful primer for this new way of thinking, and her ideas around the non-essentialist nature of culture were helpful: “the essentialist framework offers no means of understanding how collaboration happens among members of different national groups who do not share cultural understandings supposedly afforded by shared nationality” (Hewling 2005, p339). She reminded me that “cultures do not talk to each other; individuals do” (ibid., p339). I found myself in agreement with Hewling (and others [e.g. Macfadyen, Reeder]) in her criticism of Hofstede and Hall’s essentialism: “Ideas associating culture with nations or ethnicities are not without value, but focusing on these ideas is of limited usefulness in examining the interpersonal, intercultural interaction in the online classroom.” (Hewling 2005, p339). The possibility of instructors having a role in the creation of this “third culture” that can augment existing cultures among the students is an interesting one; as Hewling says “by assuming that culture is something that arrives online – and thus in class – with the student, the tutor(s) and the institution both are effectively accorded no cultural role at all.” (Hewling 2005, p 340). I’d add to this the formative role of the technology itself.

Leah Macfadyen’s ideas around communication online were also enlightening. As Macfadyen says “establishment of learner identities allows development of a learning community to begin.” (Macfadyen 2006, p110). This fits nicely with our ethos of Communities of Inquiry. As she also says “in the active process of identity construction in the online classroom, online discussions are the ‘nexus of cultural production’ (Reeder et al 2004) and the visible manifestation of individual interactions between learners and the elements that make up the online context: peers, instructors, delivery platform, course materials and institutional culture (Hewling 2005)” Macdafyen 2006, p 107. I also found Macfadyen’s concept of online communication being a new hybrid form of communication to be fascinating, and it reminded me of the dichotomy between utterance and text that (Olson 1977) that I had read about in a previous MET course (ETEC 511: New Foundations of Educational Technology).

Lastly, I found the paper by Reeder et al to be very though provoking when it comes to the way I now conceptualize online forums. As Reeder pointed out “the communicative space or platform created by the Internet is not a culturally neutral or value-free space in which culturally diverse individuals communicate with equal ease” (Reeder et al 2004, p. 91).

I intend to continue my readings and research along this particular path, with the aim of creating support materials and practices to help instructors to be more successful in the use of online discussion forums, and to promote other ways of enhancing the social presence in an online course. Some ideas that I am currently processing include:

* Creating self-help materials on how to manage online discussions in intercultural environments
* Looking at other tools for promoting social presence, being mindful of the non-neutral, value laden nature of any technologies that I consider
* Encouraging instructors to use previous discussion forum posts as feedback/data for continual improvement: were some students more communicative than others? In what ways can the online course be (re)designed to promote greater social presence, as expressed through online communications?

**References**

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