

TEACHING WITHOUT A “HUMAN” DIMENSION AND FEEDBACK ON BOTH SIDES OF THE CONTRACT IS NOT EFFECTIVE TEACHING

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***Abstract:** When a person of any age goes to school they are really entering a contract. This contract is between them and the teacher. The main term of the contract is that the teacher will impart information to the student and the student will learn. That sounds very clinical and straightforward but it should be neither of these. To learn, the student has to understand what is being taught - and both the teacher and student have to be engaged in that two way process throughout the course.*

***Key words:** human dimension, feedback, contract, teaching*

1.INTRODUCTION

While it can be a shock to discover, both teachers and students are humans. They have days when life is good and there are days when life throws challenges. In simple terms there are days when a teacher feels more like teaching than others and, similarly, there are days when students are more motivated than others. The difference is that the teacher is the paid professional who has a responsibility to their students.

They have to be interested enough to get to know the learning style of their students - and be emotionally intelligent enough to gear their teaching style to the individuals that are present.

The survey used in this study was developed by the author, based upon his experiences conducting a Listserv discussion in a college class. The survey was created with advice from this class of graduate students in an Instructional Technology program. The issues which arose during that experience with an electronic discussion were discussed at length during several class sessions. Interesting, significant comparisons were made between the electronic discussions that took place over the course of each week and the face-to-face discussion which took place in the classroom on the same topic. The group explored the advantages and disadvantages of each type of experience. Various issues were identified. The instructor prepared a survey to examine reactions to these issues, based upon the issues which emerged from the class experience. Before completing the survey, the class reacted to it, helping to clarify its wording and design. Several questions were then modified and two were omitted because they were considered redundant. The survey was used in this class and thereafter in a series of classes which also used a Listserv discussion in nearly identical fashion, as part of their class experiences.

1. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ONLINE AND FACE-TO-FACE DISCUSSIONS

Four critical aspects of the online discussion emerged during the development of the survey. The four elements which were felt to most definitively distinguish the online discussion experience from its face-to-face counterpart are summarized below. It is these four issues which are explored in the 20-item Online Discussion Survey.

Table 1. Key Differences between Online and Face-to-Face Discussions

<u>Issue</u>	<u>Online</u>	<u>Face-to-Face</u>
Access	technology	no technology
Timing	asynchronous	synchronous
Mode of expression	written	spoken
Visual cues	emoticons	expressions, gestures, etc.

Perhaps the most obvious difference between the two types of discussions is the technical element involved in electronic discussions. To what degree do the technical demands placed upon participants to get online interfere with their involvement? Another important difference is in the timing with which the discussions are conducted. A listserv discussion is asynchronous. Participation can occur at any time, over a lengthier time frame, with sequence possibly a less significant issue. This may be convenient, but the delays between responses may weaken the discussion. A third critical difference is that Listserv contributions are written, rather than spoken. How does this difference in mode of expression affect participants involvement and appreciation of the discussion experience? Writing can be more precise and its permanence may be helpful for review purposes. But it is more time consuming to write and writing cannot communicate the nuances of the human voice, which can convey the tone of the conversation. Finally, the visual cues involved in a face-to-face discussion are largely lost in the online experience. Keyboard symbols that represent faces [:)], sometimes called "emoticons," can substitute somewhat for facial expressions. But are these sufficient to communicate the range of conversational subtlety normally associated with expressions, gestures, and body language?

The study was conducted in the following manner. The 20-item Online Discussion Survey was administered to five graduate level classes in the Instructional Technology program of a Midwestern university, over a period of two years. The original survey was used throughout the study without alteration. Two different courses were involved: Distance Education and Instructional Applications of the Internet. The procedures associated with the online discussion experiences in all five of these classes were held consistent.

The instructor set up a Listserv on the university mainframe computer, specifically for his class. Students were required to participate at least five times during the course of the semester in Listserv-based discussions on topics established each week during class time. Each week, the instructor referred to the Listserv discussion in class, reacting to comments made over the course of that week, and suggesting a line of discussion for the following week, which the class would then agree to or perhaps modify. The instructor did not actively moderate the online discussion during the week between classes. He only participated online occasionally, usually to clarify some confusion that had arisen. Listserv discussions were held for ten straight weeks, during the semester, so that the minimal requirements to participate involved sending a message about once every other week. The instructor kept an ongoing record of each student's number of contributions, which was made available to the class each week. At the end of the online discussion, each student was given a letter grade for participation in the online discussion, based upon both the number of contributions and their quality. This grade constituted ten percent of their final course grade. At the conclusion of the ten week long Listserv discussion experience, the Online Survey questionnaire was completed. 66 of the 68 students who were enrolled in these five classes returned the survey, and all twenty survey items were completed on each of the forms which were returned.

Three preliminary items were included in the Online Discussion Survey to assess the degree of experience which subjects had with electronic communications. Here is a summary of the subjects' responses to these items.

2. HUMAN DIMENSION AND FEEDBACK

Human dimension in teaching and feedback is crucial for effective teaching. It is not enough for the teacher to have a: 'there are the facts, learn them' approach for at least one reason. Learning facts when you don't understand what is written will only mean that the student can be a parrot - repeating a series of words. Repeating words may take someone through an assignment or exam, but without understanding, being a parrot will not enable you to use the information in any real situation. Regurgitation is pointless, essentially.

In a Classroom, teachers can get visual pointers as to how the students are understanding, or not understanding what is being taught. Teachers can get encouragement and positive feedback that the points they are making are being understood, from the body language of their students. Similarly they can pick up on the confused face or the body language of the student who has switched off. Their role at that point is to regain the interest of the student. This is best done through deploying a different teaching style – perhaps opening the class up to role play or a questions and answer session, for example.

When teaching moves on line the job remains the same - the student must be willing to learn, and the teacher has to be creative in how they explain the concepts they are teaching. To a person who is not a teacher it may seem to be an easier task, to teach online. Some would see it merely as having to ask the students to read page x and answer questions y. But if the online class is merely a list of things for a student to read then is it really an educational experience or more a google results page?

Online learning should be a harder job to do well - as those visual clues as to how your students are doing, are absent. Teachers cannot see when students are confused and therefore can be blind to the struggles that the students are facing on their side of the computer screen. Human nature is such that people are often afraid of overtly stating that they don't understand something and if this is the case in a classroom that can be diagnosed, as I mentioned before, by their body language and remedies can be implemented. However in an online class situation, a small miscommunication or hurdle can become a very big obstacle, without the teacher knowing. That is, unless the teacher is actively teaching and seeking feedback from the student.

A teacher showing an interest in the work of a student is a psychological boost that is often underestimated. When a person has spent time doing an assignment / project, they will submit it – usually – with a sense of ‘was I on the right track in my interpretation?’ They will, often panic, to some degree, that it will not be what the teacher was really looking for. A good teacher will have carefully explained what the work sought, should look like and will have encouraged the class members to ask for clarifications, before leaving them to it. A good teacher will promptly mark the work of the student and return it to them with clear indications of the strength and weakness of what was submitted.

By seeing both the strengths and weaknesses, a student will gain confidence and learn what they need to work harder to perfect. By having this sense of direction it is like being on an unfamiliar road and reaching a signpost that is in your ‘Google Maps’. You get an endorsement from this that you are going in the right direction. Positivity begets positivity – and it is a positive cycle.

Where you get little to no feedback, your self-doubt increases with your paranoia – your work, you surmise, must be really bad when the teacher will neither return, nor comment on it. You lose enthusiasm for the subject and gradually your

interest in participating at all in the class may disappear. The only excuse for no feedback is a lack of professionalism – either through laziness or prioritizing something over your student. It is a negative cycle for both teacher and student. The student will never master the subject and the teacher has already proved that their love for teaching is gone – and it is a chore for them.

3. SUMMARY OF LEARNERS' EXPERIENCES WITH LANGUAGE COURSES IN PERSON AND ON-LINE

Recently we did the language course. It was a two hour, in-person class – with sixteen students. The Class was lively and funny. The tutor was creative in how she got us to learn – part of the class was serious with grammar and vocabulary taught via the board on the wall. Then there was the time to put the vocabulary and grammar together – if we were learning about clothes, we each had to be a model in the centre of the room and have the rest of the class name the different items of clothing we wore – if we were learning about directions one of the class had to give directions to another in the class and they had to walk around the room according to the directions being given. The style of teaching was varied and there were times when we were more challenged as students than others – but we were made to feel comfortable, as adults, to make ourselves look silly.

Due to the pandemic the classes moved on-line. Instead of the spontaneous, bright interactions that we were used to, we clicked onto Google Classroom, from our homes. We came to a list of instructions which read like: 'read the page with the twelve new words on it; watch the three minute video and see if you recognize any of the words and then write a few sentences using the words from the list'. Invariably I would think of a word that I would like to use, which related to the topic of the day and I would ask the teacher how to translate the word – I received no answer; I would watch the video and learn the new words, write my few

sentences and submit them – and receive nothing – not even an acknowledgement that they had been received. I felt like a balloon that had been blown up, and then burst. All the progress I had made in the ‘real class’ seemed to mean nothing – given that the experience had turned so abruptly from a positive one to a mechanical exercise.

Less and less people attended each week and, by the third week of on-line lessons it was clear that, for the teacher this was not how they wanted to teach – and for us, students we were learning nothing.

4. LEARNERS’ EXPERIENCES AND CHALLENGES OF TEACHING IN ONLINE ENVIRONMENT

To gather data that would serve to answer the question “what are challenges/experiences of teaching in online environment”, a qualitative content analysis of information-rich discussion threads from different sections of the Google classroom was carried out. I studied several discussion threads and selected 10 information-rich cases based on three criteria. First, the thread had to be marked as “done” by the student. Second, I searched for threads where three or more students have contributed in a discussion. Finally, I took as a sample threads that had quite a number of posts and information in them to be considered as a discussion rather than a question and an direct answer to it. The time frame for the study was from March 22nd, 2020 to May 15th, 2020. Most of the analyzed threads were active for a relatively short period of time (e.g., a week), two of the analyzed discussion threads stayed active for almost a year, and information in both of them was relevant for the study. The size of the online group, was determined based on the number of active students in the thread. Active students were considered those who were involved in the discussion with three or more posts. I sorted some of the analyzed discussion topics as normal, as people in them were discussing everyday

issues and concerns, such as poor air quality or slow economic development. Other threads discuss more specialized and practical issues. So, for this purpose a 20-item Online Discussion Survey was administered to four graduate level classes in the Language Center of a Southeast European University, over a period of one year. The original survey was used throughout the study without adjustment. Three different courses were involved: level 2, level 3 and level 4 groups. We set up a Listserv on Google Classroom, for these classes. Learners were required to participate at least five times during the semester in Listserv-based discussions on topics established each week as drawn by the syllabus. Each week, the teacher referred to the Listserv discussion in class, by reacting to comments made throughout the week, and suggesting a discussion for the following week. The instructor did not enthusiastically led the online discussion during the week between classes, but participated online sporadically, usually for clarifications of any confusions that had arisen. Listserv discussions were held for about ten weeks, during the semester. The instructor kept an ongoing portfolio of each student's number of contributions, which was made available to the class each week. At the end of the online discussion, each students was graded for participation in the online discussion, based upon both the value of the discussion and number of contributions. This component made up ten percent of their final course grade accruing to the grading scale. At the tenth final week of the long Listserv discussion experience, the online questionnaire was completed. 62 of students who were enrolled in these four classes returned the survey, and all twenty survey questions were completed on each of the discussion which were returned. For each of the actual 20 survey items, there was a statement about online discussions, followed by a Likert scale with five choices: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree. Participants were asked to circle one of these five choices, indicating their responses to the statement. The results of this part of the survey will be elaborated

below, summarizing feedback to all 20 by averaging Likert scale responses, using the following weighing system: strongly agree=+2, agree=+1, neutral=0, disagree=-1, strongly disagree=-2. Clearly, the more positive the mean score obtained, the more strongly learners agreed with the statement, and vice versa for negative scores.

Results from the Online Discussion Survey

Common overall responses to items based upon the following ratings:
 strongly agree = +2 agree = +1 not sure = 0 disagree = -1 strongly disagree = -2

<u>Rating</u>	<u>Item</u>
-0.62	1. Getting online was inconvenient for me.
-0.53	2. Some technological problems occurred when I used technology (e.mail ..ect..)
+1.26	3. Once I am into my account, I find it easy to work with technology (e-mail ect..)
+1.54	4. I liked the fact that I could read and respond to the electronic discussion group at a time that was convenient.
+1.52	5. I liked the fact that I could take as much time as I wanted to think about other student comments.
-0.23	6. In general, the asynchronous nature of the online discussion group deprived us from the experience of the spontaneity associated with face-to-face discussion.

-0.38 7. I believe that the lack of spontaneous interaction is a serious weakness of online discussion (compared with face-to-face discussion).

-0.23 8. The electronic online discussion was less focused than a typical face-to-face discussion, in that the discussion often went off on a digression.

-0.38 9. Keeping track of the order in which online contributions were made was somewhat challenging for me.

+0.91 10. One thing I like about online discussions is that, because it is writing rather than speaking, you can carefully organize your opinions.

+1.18 11. With the online discussion group, it was helpful to have a written record of notes to refer back to.

+1.03 12. I went back to some comments from the online discussion group, to analyze what had been said by particular parties.

-0.21 13. One thing I dislike about e-mail is the time it takes to write responses. I would rather speak with someone, than write to them.

+1.27 14. Non-verbal gestures, like body language and facial expressions, can be important elements of a communications experience.

-0.09 15. The fact that you cannot see your fellow discussion participants in an online discussion group is a unfavorable aspect of this experience.

+0.09 16. Because others were not really present, I felt more prone to express what I really thought in the online discussion, even if my remarks were controversial.

-0.15 17. On an online discussion group, I miss the emotional component associated with a face-to-face discussion.

-0.24 18. Since I am sometimes shy about speaking out in group discussions, I found participation easier in an online discussion group than in a face-to-face discussion.

+0.95 19. I enjoyed the online discussion group communication.

-0.36 20. I prefer an online discussion group to a face-to-face discussion.

5. WAS THE ONLINE DISCUSSION A USER FRIENDLY AND CHALLENGING

Involving online discussion in University classes can be challenging especially if students find the experience too difficult or inconvenient. How difficult was it for the students in this study to set up communication and work with an e-mail correspondence? One element that might have an impact on the results of survey on this question was the amount of background experience of participants online.

The first two preliminary items were intended to assess the amount of experience which the students of this study had with online communications. Responses to the first item indicated that almost two-thirds of the students had a significant degree of experience using electronic mail. Only 2 of the 62 students had never used e-mail before. So this group of subjects needed very little training in how to send their comments to the class Listserv. In fact, as indicated in the next item, most of them had already previously subscribed to a Listserv, and half of that number had participated in more than two Listservs. Consequently, very little direction regarding the Listserv practice was necessary. The third preliminary item aimed to determine how convenient it was for subjects to participate in the online

discussion. Most students had e-mail capability at home, so that they could easily access their classmates' messages and respond to them online. These survey responses indicated that inexperience with online communications and the inconvenience associated with it, were unlikely to be major obstacle for most of the learners involved in the study.

The first three survey items followed up on the issue of how easy it was for subjects to participate in the online discussion. On item 1, most students opposed that it was "inconvenient" to get online. This response is consistent with the previous indication that most subjects had e-mail competence at home. On item 2, most also opposed the idea that they experienced technical problems related with attempting to use e-mail. However, obviously some technical difficulties took place, since the level of disagreement was not particularly strong. On item 3, there was strong agreement that once subjects were connected online, it was easy to work with e-mail. These survey responses indicate that the majority of this group of subjects found online communications to be a rather "user-friendly" practice. One of the ways in which the online discussion differs from the face-to-face discussion is that it happens "asynchronous". Students often respond to one another online at a later time, sometimes even days later. In relation to this, on item 5, students unanimously agreed that having time to think about how to respond to other participants' comments was a positive feature of the Listserv experience, implying that asynchronicity has its advantages. As for disadvantages, on item 6, a small majority of students disagreed that spontaneity was lost to some extent because of asynchronicity. Similar to this reaction, item 7 indicated, by a small scope, that a lack of spontaneous interaction was a "serious weakness" of online discussions. Moreover, one more thing associated with asynchronous discussion is the possibility participants to get off topic. Item 8 and 9 looked at this issue, and on item 8 a small majority disagreed that the online discussion was "less focused" than

a face-to-face discussion and on item 9, another insignificant majority disagreed that they were confused about the order in which comments had been submitted. So, generally these online discussions were referred to mostly have remained on topic, and the amount of confusion about who was reacting to whom was not substantial. Yet, an online discussion clearly involves writing, not speaking. So, the next four items on the survey explored this issue. How does this essential characteristic of the online discussion affect its participants? On item 10, majority of participants agreed that they valued the fact that, in an online discussion, you can more carefully express your ideas in writing than you could by verbal communication. So, this seems a very clear advantage associated with the written form of online discussion on Google classroom. Listserv comments usually remain in a person's electronic mailbox until the user deletes them. If a participant chooses to leave comments in memory storage, they are available for review. The question now is, what are the advantages to this kind of written record? In relation to this, on item 11, students expressed strong agreement that this attribute of online discussion was helpful. Moreover, an almost equally strong proportion of respondents stated on item 12 too, that they looked back through the written record to judge comments that had been made earlier, before responding online. The easy reliability of writing seems to be another plus linked with electronic discussion. As for the disadvantages associated with written expression, like the time and effort it may take to write down a thought, as opposed to just saying it? There were diverse survey responses to this issue. On item 13, there was a split reaction, with a small majority disagreeing that they would rather be in favor of speaking than writing. And, a small majority preferred writing to speaking.

Another apparent difference between a written based Listserv discussion and a face-to-face exchange is the absolute lack of any visual prompts related with the individuals involved in the online experience. With the next survey items we

explored this issue, if it's an important deficiency? Did students feel that visual cues are important in a discussion? A strong majority on item 14 agreed that "body language" and "facial expressions" were important element of communication, and the absence of these visual cues might be considered a significant weakness of the electronic discussion. But still, on the next item, subjects disagreed with one another about this issue. And on item 16, an insignificant majority truly disagreed that the loss of visual cues is a disadvantageous characteristic of the online discussion. So there appears to be some contradiction in these two sets of responses. If this group feels non-verbal cues are important, why do they not consider their absence in the online discussion a significant issue? This evident contradiction remains to be discussed in any further study of this issue. A correlated issue was whether electronic discussion participants missed the emotional component that other participants can provide in a face-to-face situation. Again, results on the survey were mixed, and almost one-quarter of all respondents chose "neutral". A very small majority indicated on item 17 that they did not miss the "affective" component of a face-to-face discussion. This did not appear to be a significant issue. Item 18 explored the fact how speaking out in a group situation is difficult, because of insecurities about how they will sound. Is it easier for some people to join an online discussion, than for them to speak up in front of a group? On item 18, while 30 subjects pointed out that this was not so, 21 students acknowledged that this was true for them. While not the rule, some people are more comfortable with online interactions than face-to-face meeting.

The final two survey items inquired general questions about the degree to which the participants valued the online discussion practice. On item 19, a clear majority indicated that they "enjoyed" the electronic discussion (only 6 respondents of 62 indicated they did not). But would they prefer an online discussion to a face-to-face one? A majority indicated on item 20 that they did not. This item had also

a large number of subjects selecting the "neutral" response (almost one-quarter did so). So, as much as they enjoy the online experience, only a minority would choose it before face-to-face discussion.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Tens of thousands of children and adults have had to resort to on-line learning in the past year. Some teachers have put huge effort in to make it as like the real classroom as possible – working hard to keep the student interested and engaged. Some teachers have perhaps missed the ability to pick up the signals from the students and they have struggled to be creative, remotely.

The teachers who have failed their students, simply by not being able or willing to communicate – will know that they have failed their students. As for the students all most of them needed was a small endorsement; a simple acknowledgement that they exist; the small encouraging word and a little guidance that what they were doing was good or could be improved in ‘x’ or ‘y’ manner. Never underestimate the value of feedback and human dimension in teaching – especially when your student is, as they currently are in many places, finding life very remote. The teacher can make or break those same students and their futures. What a powerful role!

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