Engagement, Excitement, Anxiety, and Fear: Learners' Experiences of Starting an Online Course

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This study was conducted to increase our understanding of learners' perceptions about how the first "class" in an online course *should* be and to further understand how learners' experiences in the first class contribute to their sense of well-being and engagement in online courses. The study revealed that learners' sense of engagement with courses is more dependent on their connection with the learning materials than with instructors or colleagues, that learners are most comfortable with a generous amount of time to prepare in advance for courses, and that the role of instructors at the beginning of courses is very much a functional one. Instructors are judged on the clarity and completeness with which their course details are presented.

Nowhere is the support fostered by cohesive group spirit more important than in distance learning (Gunawardena and Zittle 1997). How, though, in the absence of traditional classroom physicality, is the sense of engagement and togetherness that bonds groups of strangers in a learning community established? What role should the first "class" play in students' journeys toward engagement in online courses? When does class begin? The purpose of this study is twofold: to increase our knowledge of how learners understand what the first class should be and to further understand how learners' experiences with the first class contribute to their sense of engagement in online courses.

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The Study: Background and Rationale

Both learners and instructors are often confused about the technicalities of introducing the first class in online learning environments (Conrad 2002). When should instructors first present themselves? What should they say to students? When and how should learners expect to enter the course as engaged participants?

This study was carried out at a dual-mode university using learners in a new online graduate program—a part-time program that allows participants to complete their studies in a minimum of two years while continuing to work. All formal class interaction takes place on a course Web site. The entire course is posted on the Web site before students access it. The administrators of the program have some flexibility in choosing when to open online courses to learners.

Historically, feedback from online learners has shown confusion about what constitutes the beginning of a class. Many students do not realize that beginning consists simply of clicking—in solitude—on to a course Web site.

The program under investigation uses a cohort-based model where a complement of approximately twenty-two students is admitted each year and the courses are rolled out one at a time over a period of two years. Two on-site face-to-face Spring Institutes allow learners to complete several core courses and orient themselves to the university and to graduate processes. Learners complete most of their course work online using asynchronous text-based Internet communications software. Online courses are supplemented in most cases with a textbook and/or a package of reading materials.

Population

To gather data around the experience of the first class, a survey was sent to 45 learners who were taking courses in the program under investigation. Of that 45, 28 students—62%—responded to the survey's yes/no questions, ranking questions, open-ended questions, and questions delivered on a Likert-type scale. Of those who responded, 57% were female; 43% were male. This split approximates the gender balance within the program, where two-thirds of the students are female and one-third are male. A breakdown of participants' status and gender demographics is found in Table 1.

Most respondents in this study were program enrollees. Those not enrolled in the program were either graduate students in other programs at the university, Open Studies students, or graduate students at other universities. The study's respondents spanned both cohorts that currently populate

Table 1. Participants' Status and Gender Demographics

	Male	Female
Novice cohort	5	8
Returning cohort	4	6
Noncohort members	3	2

the program. Respondents from the first cohort had completed more courses than those from the second cohort.

Methodology

This study was constructed to determine how online students responded to the experience that could be labeled the first class: the occasion of entry into a course Web site for the first time. The survey asked the students to describe some of their experiences from their first class, to itemize behaviors that should occur there, and to outline some of their expectations of the first class. Open-ended questions probed their perceptions of instructors' roles in establishing procedure and mood for the learning experience on which they were embarking. They were asked to provide adjectives to describe their feelings during the first class.

Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected for this study. This mixed-method approach brings new meaning to learners' experience of the first class through the description and analysis of their insights and responses to the study's questions.

The survey requested responses in the following areas: when learners preferred the course site to be made available to them (relative to a hypothetical start date), when they expected to find the instructor's initial presence, whether or not they expected or wanted to find messages from instructor or classmates at the time of starting, when they felt it was important to enter the course site for the first time, what beginning-of-class events were important to them regarding their sense of engagement, and the recollection of "good" and "bad" course beginnings.

Several questions in the survey asked participants about their engagement process relative to the first class: Did you feel it was important to enter the course Web site on the first day it became available? When did you *prefer* to be given access, relative to the official start date? What did you want to find there? Could you recall a really good course beginning? A really bad one? When did you feel engaged in the course for the first time?

The survey also gave respondents the opportunity to provide qualitative responses to the topics mentioned previously. Because of the small size of the study ($N = 28$), it was through analyzing and carefully reflecting on qualitative data that the author found meaning in learners' first online class experiences. Following the narrative tradition, experience located within the story can, with care, be drawn out for widespread observation and to find similarity to other situations (Connelly and Clandinin 1990; Crites 1971).

Results of the Study

Following is a discussion of the findings, organized by theme. Each theme is discussed in the context of the literature that frames our current understanding of online learning.

Adjectival Anticipation: Curiosity and Fear

Following a constructivist, collaborative orientation, the author believes that the most successful and satisfying online learning occurs when adult learners are in continual and fluid exchange with each other and with the instructor—exchanges that encourage the flow of both content and socially oriented information (Gunawardena and Zittle 1997; Jonassen 1992). Such exchanges recognize the value of peer learning and experiential richness and envelop and acknowledge the contributions of group members. This dynamic teaching-learning reciprocity assumes levels of cognitive maturity and technical confidence that build over time; the building of this level of "flow" is a part of the online instructor's challenge (Conrad and Kanuka 1999; Woods 1994). But what is the tenor of students' starting positions?

When asked on the survey to provide an adjectival description of their feelings when starting a new course online, learners responded with descriptions of fear and anxiety. A number indicated eagerness and excitement. In some cases, this was coupled with statements of apprehension. This response held true among the program's novice learners who were beginning their first online course; among the program's experienced online learners, who had completed one or more courses; and among nonprogram learners who were taking courses as electives. Many nonnovice learners had completed more than four online courses at the time of the study.

Both male and female respondents described similar emotions, although female respondents contributed more, and more varied, adjectives. Several respondents did not supply an adjective, and several contributed nouns (most of these nouns are listed in Table 2 in their adjectival forms, for con-

Table 2. Students' Adjectival Descriptions of Precourse Feelings

	Curiosity	Excitement	Fear	Challenge
Male	Questioning Anticipatory (2)	Excited (2)	Anxious Apprehensive Cautious	Focused
Female	Uncertain Curious (2)	Excited (2) Engaged	Scared! Intimidated Vulnerable Anxious Trepidation Cautious Apprehensive (2) Terrified	Eager (2)

Note: Parenthetical numbers indicate that number of listings of particular adjective.

sistency). Perhaps some respondents could not distinguish adjectives from other parts of speech and did not want to embarrass themselves by writing down the wrong type of word.

Learners Becoming Engaged in Their Learning

Within the adult education literature, the following tenets underlie the discussion of learners within their learning environment (Brookfield 1990; Wlodkowski 1999):

- Engagement in the learning environment encourages learning.
- Learning is a constructive, social process.
- Adult educators can foster engagement through series of activities and processes.
- The successful engagement of learners in face-to-face learning environments is a noticeable and predictable occurrence.

Adult educators depend on engagement. They work toward its presence through inclusion; they acknowledge the journeys of their learners as they unfold and reach fruition (Oddy 1992). Optimally, the adult learning classroom becomes a community of learners with shared goals and character (Poonwassie 2001; Renner 1993; Wenger 1998): "Trying to re-create community in the electronic classroom becomes easier if the students themselves are committed to a real community or shared social purpose" (Spencer 1998, 350).

Brookfield (1990) and Wlodkowski (1999) are among those who have described useful techniques that facilitate learner engagement in face-to-face environments. Many of their techniques involve using the "flow" (Wlodkowski 1999, 210) of dialogue among learners and instructor; others include caring for the physical arrangement of the classroom (Renner 1993) and relying on the balance between authenticity and credibility in instructors' presentations (Brookfield 1990). All assume the iterative dynamic of the visual and immediate feedback afforded in face-to-face environments. Being able to see, hear, and interpret levels of learner engagement on a continuous and immediate basis allows skilled instructors to manipulate and improve their presentation stances.

The virtual classroom does not permit the existence of such tangible clues to learners' levels of engagement. At any time, a learner's nonpresence in a computer-mediated discussion may be due to any or all of these factors: technical glitches, physical absence from the learning venue, boredom, cognitive difficulties, illness, dissatisfaction with course material or instruction, and impatience with fellow learners.

As with face-to-face learning in adult learning environments—where, as adults, learners make conscious choices that include withdrawal or noncompletion—in online learning environments, situational difficulties can lead to attrition. However, before that, building community by engaging learners in their learning tasks is one of the first necessary steps toward successful online learning (Gunawardena and Zittle 1997; Stacey 1999).

Gaining Access to the Site: When Is the Best Time?

Overwhelmingly, respondents preferred early access to the course site. Given a hypothetical course start date of September 4, only 14% of the learners indicated that they would be satisfied with waiting until that date for access, whereas 36% indicated that they would be satisfied with access one week prior to September 4. The majority of learners preferred to be given access at least two weeks prior to the official course start date. One respondent indicated "months"; another, "as long as possible"; and several others, that they preferred a period of approximately three weeks.

The most significant cluster of responses came from female members of the returning cohort. These students, describing their precourse feelings, contributed strongly to the number of anxiety/fear-related adjectives.

Respondents gave the same types of reasons for wanting early access either one week or two weeks prior to the official start date. Their responses

have been categorized into three themes: (1) comfort and familiarity, (2) checking for completeness, and (3) getting prepared and integrating learning into life.

Comfort and familiarity. Learners wanted ample time to preview the course site and learn how to navigate it before the course actually got under way. They wanted time to read introductory material. Several indicated that having access to the site allowed them to "mentally prepare" for the upcoming task. One learner who wanted a two-week period of early access felt that more "comfort" time would lessen uncertainty.

Checking for completeness. Many learners seemed not to place their complete trust in the comprehensiveness of the Web site. They indicated that they wanted "to check for details not included in the [print] package" and "to find details of other books I may need." In fact, one of the few respondents who indicated that a September 4 date would be satisfactory added the caveat that the date would be fine "as long as the course syllabus has complete information on assignments."

Getting prepared and integrating learning into life. Learners wanted preparation time in advance of the course, "especially if life is busy with other things at that time." They indicated especially that they wanted to check assignment due dates, "so I can plan life around assignment due dates." Many indicated that the rhythm of the course would dictate their calendars for the course's duration.

Some learners indicated that early preparation and getting an early start on readings were their common learning behaviors. Several wanted to print all the class notes prior to the course start. Some wanted to "read ahead and ponder assignments." The respondent who wanted months of access prior to the course explained: "I need to budget my time very carefully, working full time and carrying extra assignments." Because of the anonymity of respondents, the nature of these "extra assignments" is not known; however, all the respondents were busy midlife people: adult professionals who are committed to family, work, community, and volunteerism and who suffer time-management issues accordingly (Wiesenberg 2001). The differing amounts of time desired by learners to accomplish similar tasks speak again to the broad range of learning styles that adult learners expect to have accommodated by their course providers.

Learners' Expectations of the Instructor in the First Class

The instructor's role in online education, in the constructivist view, is a facilitative and collaborative presence that invites peer interaction among learners and a more democratic sharing of responsibility than what may have occurred in some traditional classrooms (Garrison and Archer 2000; Palloff and Pratt 1999). Sullivan (2001) noted, in fact, that in online courses using synchronous chat, learners were likely to continue their conversations with each other before or after the instructor's appearance online, so comfortable were they with the notion of learning from each other.

Garrison and Brook (1992), researching what learners expected of instructors in the first session of face-to-face courses, found that adult learners had definite expectations of the first session. Receiving information about the impending course—instructor's expectations, assignments, objectives—was most important to them (Oddy 1992). They also wanted to come away with some personal knowledge of their instructor: background, teaching style, and perspectives.

The online venue offers the additional variable of *when* the instructor should make his or her presence known, unlike a face-to-face situation in which both teacher and students arrive slightly prior to a predetermined class start time. In many cases, especially in undergraduate education, learners see the instructor in person for the first time at the first class meeting.

In responses that echo the site-access question, respondents in the study indicated, for the most part, that they wanted instructors to post their first message from one week to three weeks before the actual course start date. Only 14% of respondents indicated that September 4 would be an appropriate posting date for the course instructor. Most (78%) of the respondents indicated that they *wanted* to see a message from the course instructor already posted if they were able to visit the Web site before the official opening date of September 4. Only slightly fewer respondents, 69%, indicated that they *expected* to see a message from the instructor posted on the site prior to the official start date. Several respondents who *wanted* to see an instructor's message did not *expect* to see one. There were no noticeable differences in expectations reported between male and female students, nor between novice learners and more experienced learners.

Respondents placed a strong emphasis on the nature of the instructor's first message: Sixty-four percent thought that it should be a mix of personal and instructional information, written conversationally. Three respondents thought that the instructor's message might be just informational; three respondents did not care. However, the four respondents who felt comfort-

able *not* accessing the course until its official start date also indicated that they did not expect instructors to post their first messages until that date.

The relative importance of instructional presence to learners was also indicated in responses to the question that asked respondents to prioritize the events that would contribute to developing their sense of engagement with the course. Only 25% of respondents indicated that the instructor's response to their initial "hello" message helped develop their sense of involvement in the course. An equal number of respondents ranked the instructor's initial response to their hello message as the least important in developing their sense of engagement. Several respondents did not even respond to items pertaining to instructional presence in their rankings.

Learners' Expectations of Their Classmates in the First Class

The respondents in this study seemed neither to want nor expect early postings from fellow students. The majority (72%) indicated that they did not *want* to find messages from their colleagues on the site when they first accessed it. Even more (80%) indicated that they did not *expect* to find messages from their colleagues upon first access. And although no respondents placed interaction with their peers at the top of their list of events that contributed to developing their sense of engagement at the beginning of courses, 25% ranked "having a classmate respond to" their initial posting as the third most important factor. For two respondents, "the sudden emergence of many postings by classmates" helped them feel engaged; for most, this was not a contributing factor. Several respondents did not rank that phenomenon as contributing at all to their sense of engagement. Primarily, as indicated elsewhere, learners' sense of engagement blossomed through their own interactions with course content. One explanation for learners' initial reticence to engage with fellow learners came from a novice learner: "Disembodied words on a chatline or posting board are impersonal. I want and need to know the people. After that everything can be done online."

At the same time, 50% of the study's respondents chose the response "a lot" to answer the question, "Do you value the opportunity to begin a course with a 'meet and greet' posting?" To this same question, 29% answered "somewhat," and the remaining few indicated "not very much." The largest cluster of positive responses came from female students, both novice and returning. When asked if such opportunities for social meeting and greeting

should take place in a separate area on the Web site, 50% said "yes," whereas the remaining votes were split between "no" and "it doesn't matter."

Overall, the involvement of peers in the "class beginning" period appeared to be only marginally important to these learners when contrasted to the value placed on comfort levels with course materials and process.

What Makes a "Good" Beginning?

By definition, adult education is a voluntary activity wherein learners can remove themselves from learning situations that they deem not valuable. Although the discussion of the notion of "voluntary" attendance can become perplexingly philosophical (Selman et al. 1998), we assume that adults who return to the classroom have decided, for themselves, to do so—although we recognize that their "choices" are usually driven by financial and career-oriented motivations.

That said, adults need to see relevance in their learning, and "student satisfaction with the first session in voluntary adult education courses is crucial for continuance" (Garrison and Archer 2000, 147). For these reasons, skilled adult educators take the time to meet adult learners' needs while building the sense of community that will provide lingering support for the learners (Garrison and Archer 2000; Poonwassie 2001; Wlodkowski 1999). Poonwassie (2001) elaborated on the constant monitoring that occurs in adult education classrooms as mindful instructors "watch their flock"—in the parlance, a common metaphor used to describe what adult educators do. Engagement in the learning process is the ultimate result:

> Instructors who are consistently empathic, genuine, accepting and respectful generally develop a more open and trusting relationship with students and facilitate the opportunity for students to develop more open and trusting relationships with each other; the result is usually a climate of collaboration and mutual exchange in the learning process. (Poonwassie 2001, 150)

Beginning an online course, from the deliverers' perspective, lacks much of the potential for the creation of the ambience described by Poonwassie. It is hard to demonstrate empathy without a facial nod or smile. Words alone, which are all online educators have at their fingertips, often fail to convey a deep sense of humanness. There is a limit to how much instructors can input on their keyboards, regardless of how caring they are.

Still, adult educators recognize learners' levels of anxiety as they begin new learning endeavors, and we believe that their learning will thrive in en-

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vironments of trust, care, safety, and pleasantness. The study asked learners to describe course beginnings that had met their needs and propelled them to as strong a start as possible.

One chagrined learner wrote, when asked how course beginnings could be improved, "Opening the site on the day the course begins rather than having a lot of prepostings. I feel like I am behind already when I enter the site the day the course begins and people have already started forming groups for assignments, etc.... My level of anxiety goes through the roof."

The same student continued: "As I am becoming more familiar with the course style, I am becoming more relaxed." (This student had completed four online courses, each one with the same format, featuring early course openings that allowed students to familiarize themselves with the online course and, in some cases, to form groups that would make online presentations throughout the course. Students are always alerted to course progress and opening dates through direct e-mails, so it is interesting that this student was surprised to find the level of course activity that she did.)

This particular student's predicament could be accounted for by her emotional disposition (the adjective she chose was *anxious*) and brings to mind Bullen's (1998) observations of students' levels of vagueness and confusion no matter how explicit the online instructions. Bullen's study involved younger undergraduate students, whereas this study focused on older, midlife professionals. However, both types of students experienced initial discomfort with the online medium and expressed the need for detailed instructions.

In telling about "good beginnings," learners' responses addressed instructional roles, the organization of the course, and the social ambience of the course. These categorizations coincide with the breakdown of online learning experiences into three overlapping and interactive components—teacher presence, cognitive presence, and social presence (Garrison, Anderson, and Archer 2000)—which in turn support constructivism and its earlier thinkers, Dewey ([1938] 1967) and Lindeman ([1926] 1989).

The instructor.   Most students wanted to see a message from the instructor when they first signed on to a new online course. It was not important to their sense of engagement that the instructor responded to them personally, via a welcoming message, but they wanted to witness his or her presence and used it in various ways: as a measure of reality (that the course was really under way), as a welcome, and especially as a source of course-related administrative details.

"Online responses from the professor allowed me to ease into the whole idea of communicating online," wrote one learner. Other learners commented on instructors who supplemented their online postings with e-mail messages sent to the students' outside-the-course e-mail addresses. In one case, the instructor's "request for information about my learning needs and preferences, and the expressed willingness to tailor content to students' input" created a favorable impression. Learners appreciated instructors' efforts to "make clarifications, welcome, and ensure everyone was in the loop from the get-go." Overall, learners were encouraged by instructors' efforts to establish a learning community through welcoming messages.

Learners also were explicit about their need to have workload expectations explained, revisited, and clarified—"revisited" because this information already appears in its entirety in appropriate places on the program's course Web sites.

Learners were happy to glean a sense of instructors' personalities through the lens of the first postings. As in their face-to-face first classes, coming to know the humanness of the instructor was important to adult learners (Brookfield 1990; Garrison and Brook 1992). One learner alluded to the "enjoyment [of] reading a message from a professor I am comfortable with and look forward to learning from."

Course organization. Learners were pleased when their first visit to the online class provided them with all the information they needed to begin their learning effectively and in an organized manner. Their many anxieties seemed often to revolve around the fear of not receiving all the pertinent details of assignments and course organization when they needed them—which, in many cases, was perceived by learners to be "as soon as possible." Finding the course "organized, [with] good use of time, brief introductions, clear expectations and explanation of course outline" created a good beginning. Clear timelines, well-written course notes, and "clear and early descriptions and establishment of group work" were also important contributors to a good course start.

Social ambience. From Lindeman ([1926] 1989) and Dewey ([1938] 1967) forward, the social condition in adult learning environments has been paramount (Cross 1981; Wenger 1998). Adults do not learn in a vacuum, and both students and astute instructors tend to the social dynamic with great care, both in face-to-face and online environments (Garrison, Anderson, and Archer 2000; Gunawardena and Zittle 1997). The acceptance of the importance of social presence and students' willingness to par-

ticipate in activities fostering an inclusive social ambience varies; learners find their own levels of immersion—levels that are, in part, determined by their learning style and personality type (Bullen 1998).

Social presence can be measured by the success and levels of activity that exist within "social café" types of areas that provide noncontent-associated forums for social chat (Palloff and Pratt 1999; Yeoman 1995). In this study, respondents were divided into those who said, "Yes, there should be a separate social area created" (47%), "No, don't create a separate area" (25%), and "It doesn't matter" (25%). A few respondents did not declare. The salient point here is that *all* the respondents who were taking the courses as electives and who were *not* cohort members of the program indicated that there should be a separate place for social activity online, indicating a greater-felt need for collegial communication with the group than that exhibited by *full-time* members of the cohort group.

Students who indicated that the establishment of social ambience contributed to their sense of a good course beginning spoke favorably of the creation of a nonthreatening environment by "laying out the ground rules." They felt that the meet-and-greet posting opportunities gave them "a sense of camaraderie and [of being] part of a collective."

Of the twenty-eight respondents, three3 left this question about good beginnings unanswered. Of seven (25%) who indicated that they could not recall a good course beginning, one stated, "Both beginnings have been poor because of password difficulties—an event that is totally out of my control and leaves me very frustrated."

What Makes a "Bad" Beginning?

Only four of the ten respondents who did not respond positively to the question on good beginnings offered reflections on what constitutes a bad beginning. In response to the question, "What made it so [bad]?" their responses indicated sloppy course starts. They had been distressed by confusion around when they could actually access the course site. As a result of online confusion, "a frenzy of e-mails, a monster avalanche of personal, off-topic postings" also had distressed them.

Learners' Perceptions of Their Sense of Engagement in Online Courses

Smooth and rocky beginnings notwithstanding, courses move on. The literature recounts stories of the community building and bond forming that

ultimately occur online (Palloff and Pratt 1999; Yeoman 1995). Does the first class spawn this process? Do learners recognize the rhythms of early behaviors as contributing to what is understood in online learning to be the "collective good"—that is, to their sense of social presence that keeps distance learners engaged (Garrison and Archer 2000; Gunawardena and Zittle 1997)? The study asked learners about their sense of engagement in online courses. When do they feel that a course has really "begun"? Three different factors emerged.

The role of the instructor. Not surprisingly, given their responses to other instructor-oriented questions in this study, there were few indications from respondents that instructor-driven events were major contributors in helping them feel engaged in their learning. Only two out of twenty-six respondents described incidents of any kind related to the instructor per se: one learner felt engaged in the course once she had received her first marks from an assignment, another when the instructor posed the first "serious question." (All content questions are embedded in the course. Opportunities for instructors to pose different, "serious" questions would arise in resultant discussion areas.)

These data, reflecting minor roles for instructors at the beginning of courses, resonate with data that indicate that instructors' responses to students' initial meet-and-greet postings were not primary factors in helping students become engaged with the course.

Learner-content relations. Moore (1989) identified three major categories of interaction that occur in the teaching-learning exchange: learner-teacher, learner-content, and learner-learner. Since that macro identification, the quality and quantity of possible exchanges have increased considerably, reflecting the number of planes upon which communication, interaction, and collaboration can be measured in the matrix of online learning (Anderson and Garrison 1998; Wagner 1997).

In the context of getting started in online courses, data from this study indicate that the learner-content interaction is by far the most important for helping learners feel initial engagement with the course. In response to the question, "When do you feel that a course has really begun?" 65% of the respondents listed types of learner-content interactions.

Several stated outright that the acts of becoming involved in content discussions created a sense of engagement. Posting answers to questions, becoming involved in discussions on topics of interest, and receiving feedback from others on their postings were some of the engaging incidents

related by study respondents. One respondent described the dialogue among students as "when the content starts to flow"; for her, the course was then under way.

Several needed to "commit" to a topic of interest for group work or to a group assignment before they felt drawn into the course. One student stipulated that it was getting the first literature review completed that made her feel engaged in her learning.

Still others experienced a sense of engagement even before visiting the course Web site: they felt engaged in the course as soon as they obtained their print materials and began to read. (Students in the program receive materials before the Web site has opened or at the same time. Sometimes, as a result of slow mail service, their print packages arrive after the Web site has been declared open—a situation that frustrated students.)

Time considerations. A few respondents (14%) expressed their sense of engagement in terms of time. An indication of "the first week" begs the question of the stimulus behind the actual sense of engagement, and one could assume content engagement. One respondent, however, clarified her stipulation of "the third week:" "Because students and instructors, I think, retrace what went wrong and refine their language and styles of communicating online." For this learner, once the initial excitement or anxiety of a course beginning settled down, a perceived change in online behavior—presumably, to a calmer, less postings-intensive climate—marked her own sense of engagement. (This respondent was one of the few who outlined a "bad" beginning that involved competitiveness among her classmates, producing "well-researched monologues, none of which connected to others. People tried to outdo one another with their brilliance.")

Discussion of the Findings: The Singularity of Getting Started

Research on the formation of community and its social value to the quality of online learning experiences indicates favorable responses by learners to opportunities to collaborate and build strong emotional networks with online colleagues (Bullen 1998; Gunawardena and Zittle 1997; Palloff and Pratt 1999). In the program under investigation, continued course and program evaluations support this knowledge. Learners who are learning online, part-time, have demonstrated strong senses of kinship with their peers, such that they construct social activities outside of program activities, where possible. They have driven long distances to visit or confer with each other and

have arranged social occasions when one student happens to be visiting the hometown of another. Hiltz and Wellman (1997, 49) described the impact of this type of increased social activity as a part of the twenty-first-century phenomenon: online learners' lives are "likely to become more fragmented as [online learning] fosters their participation in more organizations and [virtual] communities" outside of their daily local commitments.

The data would indicate, however, that the instance of the first class differs from the period of prolonged learning contact that follows. The start of the course has its own prerogatives; as with face-to-face learning, students have an agenda of course-driven details—readings, assignments, schedule—to master and with which to become comfortable. Their anxiety level is universally high, even among those who have already completed many online courses.

The range of adjectives that adult learners used to describe their precourse jitters points to the degrees of anxiety. Conrad and Kanuka (1999), using Woods's model, noted a steep and emotionally difficult learning curve for learners adapting to online technologies. The results of the current study indicate that learners re-experience strong degrees of anxiety when beginning subsequent online courses.

Future research should seek to compare levels of anxiety suffered at the beginning of online courses with those suffered at the beginning of traditional face-to-face courses. Researchers of such a study should realize that online part-time programs, such as the current program, are designed for adult professionals as opposed to younger students. The literature indicates a vast array of potential stressors and burdens with which such multitasking adults must cope as they squeeze graduate study into already busy lives (Wiesenberg 2001).

Cohort Membership Versus Nonmembership

In Hiltz and Wellman's (1997) study of the virtual classroom, participants had taken only one Virtual Classroom course. Appropriately, the authors anticipated that

> instances of negative behavior (such as flaming and normlessness) will decrease when students see themselves not in one-time experiments but in long-term learning communities. The number of friendships formed among virtual classmates should also increase as the length of interaction increases. (48–49)

This study included both cohort members (72%) and noncohort learners (18%). Of the latter, some were perhaps taking their first online course. Noncohort learners appeared to differ from cohort learners in two ways: (1) the degree of importance they attached to entering on the first day and (2) the qualitative variation in their adjectival description.

1. Whereas cohort learners indicated a range of responses regarding the importance of visiting the Web site on the first day, nonprogram "visitors" responded enthusiastically (100% of them) to the option of jumping in to the course on the first day.

2. Noncohort learners' adjectival descriptions of precourse anxieties differ from the many adjectives supplied by cohort members, although the small number of respondents renders meaning-making tenuous. The display of adjectives by visitors to the program leaned more toward being "excited" than being "nervous." Of the five noncohort participants, one abstained from responding; the others noted "eagerness," "curiosity," "excitement," and "focus," and one confessed to "nervousness." One respondent combined "apprehensive" and "excitement." Overall, it appeared that respondents not enrolled in the program felt more confidence and less fear as they began classes.

The differences in their approaches could be explained in Hiltz and Wellman's (1997) notion of normlessness. These learners, who were either from other programs or were taking Open Studies courses, had established no stake in the program as an entity or as a long-term host to their learning. They also had not had the opportunity to establish the social bonds with other learners that could potentially result in emotional closeness, commitment, and/or tension, competition, or friction.

The Role of the Instructor

"The literature indicates that the role of the instructor in computer conferencing environments is crucial to the success of the course" (Bullen 1998, 21). This study does not contest this well-accepted view, as myriad course evaluation data indicate that Bullen's observation is true within this program. However, it appears that the role of the instructor is less certain at the very *beginning* of an online course: Brookfield's (1990) "authentic" caring facilitator is less needed than the content-oriented information giver. Certainly, in face-to-face beginnings, skilled instructors must wear both hats (Garrison and Brook 1992; Oddy 1992). Online learners, however, are

seeking clarity and comprehensiveness of instructions to lessen the anxiety of beginning new courses. The presence of the instructor is noticed and desired—not as a personality, but as a course resource.

The participants in Bullen's (1998) study were younger and probably less sophisticated than the mostly midlife professionals in this study. However, his observation that, despite clearly stated expectations, many students in his study "only had a vague idea of what an online course was and what they were expected to do" (19) rings somewhat true in this study also.

Confronted by a steep learning curve (Conrad and Kanuka 1999), learners in the program under investigation focused intently on instructors' expectations as explained in various ways on the course Web site. They indicated a devotion to mastering the cognitive demands being placed on them before attending to aspects of social presence.

Timing Is Everything

The implications of timing and schedule in online learning are often overlooked in pedagogical discussions as a "poor cousin" to loftier and more academic concerns. Time and timing are among the major decision-making factors in students' pedagogical choices—taking precedence over content topics and opportunities to enjoy collegial collaboration (Conrad 2002). Learners in this study indicated strongly that their comfort levels in online courses were connected to their ability to enter courses with sufficient preparation time. By this, they were referring to a period of time when they were able to make decisions about when (and where—at home or in the workplace) to study the course syllabus and other important course details. Most online learners printed online information into hard copy—another time-consuming chore.

The study's respondents felt, for the most part, that their engagement with the course began when they first accessed the materials, either in hard copy or via the Web site. Building a sense of commitment to the course, and a level of comfort in the course, therefore, can occur concomitantly if the timing of the course start can be integrated into learners' lives with as little stress as possible. A more gradual start was deemed to be stress reducing for most.

The majority of learners preferred weeks to prepare for online courses, and only 4 respondents (14%) indicated that they were happy to access the course Web site on its "official" opening day.

Implications for Practice

The data from this study indicate that it may be pedagogically advantageous to provide early access to online learners. However, innovative programs sit at the very edge of a university's ability to accommodate flexibility. For example, at this study's institution, the course's asynchronous text-based communications software is supported by technicians who are meeting the demands of other university commitments, not just the unique learning needs of online learners.

Similarly, arranging for courses to begin a week or so before the official start date—which is often the contractual date for instructors—exceeds the expectations of some instructors when they commit to teaching online. Online teaching remains a challenge to some of the professoriate who cannot devote as much of their time to the online experience as it requires (Bates 2000). Indulging students' wishes to make the first class available to them when they want it, therefore, places even greater pressure on instructors, administrators, and course developers to mount online courses on a tightened schedule.

Conclusion

Adult learners engaged in this online graduate program wanted access well ahead of the stipulated course start date. The advantage of accessing courses early assumes courses' online completeness. Learners want a relaxed and manageable amount of time to preview courses and to determine that they can obtain all of the necessary information.

During this critical browse-the-course period, most of the respondents were not concerned about interacting socially with the instructor or colleagues. In fact, the few learners who strongly disagreed with "pre-starting" the course objected on the basis of finding meet-and-greet postings there from other students.

Learners reported engagement with the course as soon as they made contact with either materials or the Web site—but not particularly with the instructor. Upon their entry to the course site, most learners wanted to witness the instructor's presence via an informative welcome posting. They appreciated noting the humanness of instructors through the tone of instructors' messages, but they felt no need for instructors to personally acknowledge them in a meet-and-greet reply at the beginning of the course.

Still, the role of the instructor is critical to the ultimate success of the online course (Bullen 1998; Palloff and Pratt 1999). Savvy online educators

encourage, nurture, and manage the burgeoning interaction of course activities as they foster knowledge building and critical thinking (Kanuka 2002). Their involvement, however, apparently evolves over time and is appreciated and respected by learners in different ways, for different contributions, at different times.

Learners' views on the rhythms and demands of distance learning also change over time (Conrad 2002). This study did not attempt to correlate opinions between those expressed by novice learners, those from more seasoned learners, and those who could be classified as veterans. Future research in this area could contribute further to our understanding of how to ensure optimal satisfaction and efficacy as learners begin online classes.

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