E-Personality: The Fusion of IT and Pedagogical Technique

E-Personality is a pedagogical technique designed to let an instructor's skills and ability shine through when teaching online courses

By **Peter Chepya**

When university course delivery first went online in the late 1990s, there was little guidance on how to do it, almost no thought given to teaching, and no consideration of the aesthetics of online pedagogy. A typical course contained instructions to read specific chapters from an assigned text each week, followed by a list of questions to answer.

Since that time, Internet delivery has flashed across our computer monitors in a series of dynamic and innovative developments. One advance in online pedagogical technique is an online teaching technique called "e-Personality," which I developed to support my own courses. The theory behind e-Personality, since proven in practice, was that whatever made a professor successful in the classroom could be "migrated" to Internet teaching.

My online teaching relies on the "human element," expressed in features such as companionability and presence. The cumulative effect creates an atmosphere I call "presence learning"[1] as opposed to the outdated misnomer "distance learning" often used with Internet courses. Presence learning creates a palpable connection between the instructor and the student, engaging students in "reality," not "virtual reality"—another outdated aphorism.

Once while delivering a paper at a conference of online educators, I was challenged by a participant who thought my online course (being projected onto a screen) was "heavy on the text." Upon learning that the questioner's field was American literature, I asked him if he thought *Moby-Dick* was "heavy on the text." If the work is compelling, the medium disappears and the experience becomes actual.

The concept movement from virtual reality to reality and from distance learning to presence learning has at its basis multiple transitions of human awareness in relation to technology. We came to accept the telegraph as "real" communication, as we then did the telephone, radio, recorded music, television, and cinema. We forgot the medium in each case. Synchronicity is not an issue, since any of these media can be asynchronous, like most of Internet delivery.

For a theoretical instructional framework, I adopted the experiences of early film makers, who realized they did not have to place a camera on a stage and film a theater production. Rather, they could film a production at any point in its sequence. They could also create sets that would allow viewers to feel they were in a theater or an actual place, not a mediated space. We accept movies as real because of the grammar of film developed by early film makers. I infuse my online delivery with these notions by looking at the computer screen as a vehicle for expression—a theater that should teach, in part, by captivating.

Information technology capabilities are crucial as instructors explore their individual creativity and find their place in the medium. The IT presence in the program allays common new-instructor fears. Some have said, "My computer skills are not that sophisticated." This should not be a concern. Rather, the ability to communicate on the Internet and understand the medium as an instructional vehicle are the prime characteristics of online instructors using

e-Personality techniques. IT specialists help us make that jump to using technology to support pedagogy.

The success of the fusion of e-Personality and IT expertise has come from the belief that what makes for physical classroom success makes for Internet classroom success. With vital IT input, each and every trick of the trade used in front of a physically present class can be used "in front of" an online asynchronous class.

What instructional techniques make for success? First, the instructor must "be there" and create a "there" that is palpable to everyone. Internet delivery requires the talent to transcend invisibility and become a living participant in a shared learning environment. When Internet communication works, the medium becomes a place, as a physical classroom is a place. The shared experiences of the lectures and the discussion forums create a shared memory of incidents and events. The space is shared.

Time is also shared. When a student logs on, time starts for that student. When the instructor created the course, time started and then paused until the course was published, and then time began to run again. The clock stops and starts with each individual log-on, but it all adds up to a bundle of time shared by participants through the medium of their written communication as they post in the forum or e-mail the instructor.

Lastly, a word on design: in choosing courseware for Internet delivery, thought must be given to the aesthetics of online pedagogy. Just as any measurement of instructional success should take into account the effect of the instructor's particular pedagogical style and method, so too any measure of the success of online teaching should refer to the design and dynamic of the online course. The human element, companionability, and presence, once thought impossible to create on the Internet, all have been successfully thought through and delivered. The particular techniques employed to bring these features into being display an artistry and intelligence of the highest order, or perhaps of a new order.

"Magic" takes place in the traditional classroom when the teaching is successful—we all remember those moments, as teachers and perhaps more vividly as students. Internet delivery of university courses has now ascended to the level of artistry and magic, all based on a very concrete, proven method that fuses technology with pedagogical technique. *e*

Endnote

1. I first used this term during a September 2000 Connecticut Department of Higher Education hearing.

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