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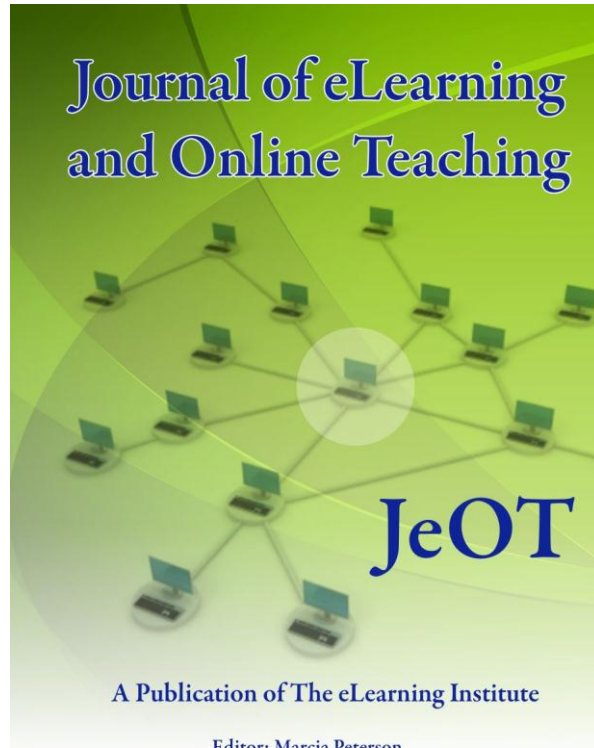
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The 6 R's of a Positive Facilitator

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ABSTRACT

In order to boost student learning in the online platform faculty members need to be in tune with the needs and personal situations of their students. Having a collective spirit of positive facilitation should be the goal of all faculty members in all types of learning situations. How can this be achieved in the online setting when face-to-face contact is not available? This paper endeavors to answer that question with regards to the nontraditional, adult learner, and provide simple yet practical ways to accomplish positive facilitation in the online platform.

THE 6 R's OF A POSITIVE FACILITATOR

*“A positive attitude causes a chain reaction of positive **thoughts, events, and outcomes.***

It is a catalyst and it sparks extraordinary results”

(Wade Boggs).

Extraordinary results are what every true educator strives to achieve during the course of a career. Not just because the individual wants to be recognized as an extraordinary instructor, but because the true educator experiences the personal fulfillment that is derived entirely from the extraordinary accomplishments of her students. With this concept in the forefront this group of educators set out to define what a positive facilitator looks like in the online environment. Research suggests that online, adult learners are unique and complex, but that they have some very basic needs, which if met can lead to extraordinary results (Bransford, Donovan, & Pellegrino, 2000).

A positive classroom is a series of actions. There are several critical components that are recognized as necessary to support the adult learner in the classroom (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005; Bransford, et al, 2000).

- Adult learners need to be **relaxed** and at ease in the learning environment.
- Adult learners should be **respected** as partners in the learning process and asked for feedback about the course throughout the learning process.
- Adult learners should be **recognized** for their input about their learning goals.
- Adult learners need to **relate** to the instructor and each other as well as share their expertise and experiences.

- Adult learners should be **remembered** as having other needs outside the classroom and receive graded assignments back quickly with meaningful feedback.
- Adult learners need to be able to **reflect** on the relevance of instruction.

Within these statements there are 6 foundational words that can be further elaborated upon to help an instructor become a positive online facilitator. By relaxing, respecting, recognizing, relating, remembering, and reflecting any instructor can become a positive facilitator.

Relax

Many adults learn best when they are psychologically and physically relaxed (Bransford, et al, 2000). To relax means to become less tense, less formal, or less restrained, and assume a friendlier manner. Feeling defensive or anxious can block learning. Adult learners need an environment where they feel safe and supported; individual needs and uniqueness are honored; and abilities and life expectations are acknowledged and respected (Knowles, et al, 2005; Wlodkowski, 2008). Developing a relaxed of atmosphere on day one of class can set the tone for the rest of the term and put your students at ease.

Respect

Because nontraditional students are often disaffected learners, it is important to foster mutual respect to diminish those feelings of discontentment and disloyalty (Ciaccio, 2004). When you respect someone you tend to take notice of them; you regard them with special attention and care for them. Respecting adult learners is the foundation of mutually supportive relationships. When adult learners feel respected they feel important.

Most learners, whether child or adult, look to their instructors to model appropriate interpersonal interactions not only between them and the instructor, but with their fellow classmates as well. As instructors of adult learners it is important respect the fact that adults have

a sense of self that leads them to feel responsible for their own decisions and they want to be respected as being capable of self-direction and self learning (Knowles, et al, 2005). The role of the positive facilitator is to respect that need for self-directed learning and create experiences that foster that kind of learning environment and mutual respect through all members of the course room.

A positive facilitator can foster a learning environment, which is mutual respectful by applying some basic andragogical principles. To do this a positive facilitator should respect the adult learner's need to know why they are required to learn something (Knowles, et al, 2005). One should also be respectful of the learner's time and provide for timely learner feedback. Providing timely feedback fosters respect for learners meeting academic deadlines (i.e. grade work on time) (Ciaccio, 2004; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2000). Respecting the learners' experiences is also a critical component to building a positive learning environment. "Adult learners come into an educational activity with both a greater volume and a different quality of experience from that of youths" (Knowles, et al, p. 65). It is important to respect the practical knowledge they already have by becoming more like coaches/mentors and not just resorting to the same authoritative teacher/student paradigms that exist between adults and youth. There is an associated emotional bonding with learners who are respected as equals, and it engenders high self-respect and increased student achievement (Ciaccio; Lawrence-Lightfoot).

When relationships are respectful the overall tone of the classroom becomes more positive and more productive. There are several resulting phenomena. Respectful relationships differentiate self-states (both thoughts and feelings) from others' states through self awareness, reflection, and applied imagination. These types of relationships allow learners to engage in reflective and analogical processing to understand classroom dynamics. Furthermore, respectful

relationships mobilize a dynamic between thinking and feeling in self and others, which enhances learning. Finally, respectful relationships allow students to demonstrate intelligent caring; use mirroring and affirmation effectively; and it allows them to commit to the well-being and development of self and others (Arnold & Hughs, 2005).

Recognize

When you recognize someone you show an awareness of the individual person. In the process of building respectful relationships, the facilitator must not view the learners simply as a collective, but she must individualize the learning experiences by recognizing the personal needs and characteristics of each learner within the learning community. Instructors must recognize that each learner has his or her own motivational drive and purpose behind learning, and the positive facilitator uses personal recognition to provoke learning. Some simple tips that the online instructor can use to personally recognize learners include the following concepts. Use the learners name in all communications. Name recognition is important for the social interaction between instructors and students (Aiken, 1989). Make sure that recognition is meaningful and not simply recognition for the sake of recognition. “To affirm or recognize student work is not to approve or disapprove; it is to declare that what happened matters and is important. Affirmation suggests significance and thus attaches importance to the event or action” (IntelEducation, 2007, para. 2). When you individually recognize learner achievements and personal contributions it makes his or her efforts authentic while conveying to the group that this learner’s efforts have value within the learning community. Subsequently, you need to make sure recognition of one learner is not framed as a denigration of others' efforts or personal character. A positive facilitator must have the integrity of character to not be judgmental.

Relate

The most effective teachers are relational. When you relate to someone you establish a social or sympathetic relationship with him. Carl Rogers (1969) espoused that a critical element to the role of a [positive] facilitator is the personal relationships between the facilitator and the learner.

In order to do this the positive facilitator should:

1. Connect with students personally
2. Share personal experiences with their classes
3. Take personal interest in students and find out as much as possible about them
4. Visit the students' world (view student web-pages, connect via IM sessions; ask for photos)

In order to support the above statements one must build relationships that are valuable to the adult learner; the facilitator must possess three distinct qualities: “(1) realness or genuineness; (2) nonpossessive caring, prizing, trust, and respect; and (3) empathic understanding and sensitive and accurate listening” (Knowles, et al, 2005). This can be done in the online classroom if an instructor works to build a collaborative community of online learners. The instructor should demonstrate a consistent “presence” in the classroom. Whether we realize it or not, students tend to look to each other and the instructor for connection, validation, and feedback (Lassiter, 2008). Cultivating a sense of belonging by reaching out to students and giving them opportunities to succeed in the course is critical in relating to your learners. Furthermore, it is important to communicate with students about their progress. If students are struggling, offer additional instruction or connect students with resources that can provide assistance. Finally, provide emotional support and promote self-esteem; have compassion!

Remember

When you remember someone you keep that individual in mind because he or she is worthy of consideration or recognition. The use of the 3 H's (Head, Hands, Heart) imparts great wisdom in this area. The first "H" is "Head", which represents your knowledge of the subject you are teaching. Students want to know you know what you are talking about. The belief that their lecturers have a sound knowledge of the subject is very important as far as students are concerned. It gives learners confidence in their instructor.

Then there is "Hands", which represents your teaching skills. As an instructor you need to be clear and systematic in presentation of material. You need to teach at the right level by using learning aids, arousing the learner's interest, by encouraging active learning, and stimulating the learner to think. The final 'H' stands for "Heart". Love what you do and let it show! Be concerned for your students' learning. You should be helpful by not providing unnecessary obstacles. As a fellow adult, we should have empathy for their situations; we have **all** been there. Finally, love the subject you are teaching; if you do not do not teach it!

Most teachers are remembered for the content of what they teach AND the emotional/personal connections that are made while in the class. When students reminisce about their instructors, they recall more often the personal (qualitative) traits of memorable teachers rather than academic (quantitative) qualifications (Walker, 2008). Some useful tips to help you be remembered by students are:

1. Build a thirst for knowledge by consistently communicating expectations of course outcomes
2. Begin and end seminars and communications (phone calls, emails) with a positive tone
3. Remember to be creative and laugh with your students

4. Be interested and enthusiastic in what you are teaching, and care that your students become as interested and knowledgeable in the subject as you are
5. Appreciate the fact that they may have difficulties: see those difficulties from students' perspectives, and work to help them learn and understand (Kwan & Jones, 1999).

Reflect

Finally, a positive instructor must then ponder or meditate carefully on her teaching and allow her students to do the same. Reflection can assist facilitators in organizing their thoughts and deriving meaning from various types of learning events. Reflection should give rise to inquiry and goal setting as well as support a model of learning that views teaching as an ongoing process of knowledge building while promoting conversations and collaboration in the course room (Boreen, Johnson, Niday, and Potts, 2000). The positive facilitator must be a people watcher! She must keep in mind the view of the whole developing student, which can be done by reflecting on her practices at 3 levels. First is the technical level. At this level the instructor focuses on what she is doing. This level addresses the quality of her teaching. At the contextual level, the facilitator should focus on the cause and effect relationships that include the facilitators and learners, but also includes the broader course room of learners. Finally, there is the critical level. This level of reflection must go deeper and broader - outside the individual - and must focus on such things as the personal, ethical, and political dimensions of teaching ("Self-Reflective", 2005).

In order to assist students in reflection as part of your role as a positive facilitator an instructor should:

1. Ask questions about the context of a unit
2. Ask for explanations to the answers learners give on the discussion board

3. Probe in additional areas to help the learner go beyond the technical level of reflection to the contextual and critical levels.
4. Share similar experiences and what they meant.
5. Pose alternative answers to questions to stimulate discussion/reflection.
6. Pose alternative cause-effect relationships that might be underlying an event to stimulate discussion/reflection (“Self-Reflective”, 2005)

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, a positive instructor can empathize with her students. She champions the success of all her students. Raymond Wlodkowski (2008) asserts, “As instructors we do not want to make people fail” (p. 67). The work of a positive facilitator should be “a living composition”; one that evolves with the learner and is always a work in progress. Learning should be joyful and something that each adult learner enthusiastically wants to engage in. With the help of a positive facilitator who remembers to respect the individual by relating through relationship building in a relaxed and reflective environment, this can be accomplished. We believe you can begin this journey by bearing in mind the 6 “R”s we have outlined in this paper.

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