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Wearing Four Pairs of Shoes: The Roles of E-Learning Facilitators
By Ed Hootstein

In this model, an e-learning facilitator "wears four pairs of shoes"--acting as instructor, social director, program manager, and technical assistant.

The emergence of e-learning comes at a time when education and training are undergoing important transformations. The teacher-centered model that has dominated instruction for centuries is slowly giving way to a learner-centered model with instructors in the roles of facilitators or "guides on the side." E-learning is no exception. But e-learning's use doesn't preclude facilitators' responsibilities for structuring learning experiences. The effectiveness and success of e-learning programs are dependent on facilitators' roles in delivering and managing instruction.

One of the leading conceptualizers in the field of distance learning, Zane Berge, broke down an instructor's role in computer conferencing into four separate parts. I propose a similar model, in which an e-learning facilitator "wears four pairs of shoes"--acting as instructor, social director, program manager, and technical assistant.

Instructor: consultant, guide, and resource provider

An e-learning facilitator's role as instructor is consistent with seminal adult learning research in which instructors guide self-directed learning in problem-centered environments. E-learning facilitators don't hold all the answers: They offer their own unique insights as they help learners acquire knowledge and develop skills. As Berge suggests, e-learning facilitators' primary instructional tasks are to

- provide information to help learners complete assignments
- suggest ideas or strategies for learning
- help learners connect content with prior knowledge.

E-learning facilitators-as-instructors carry out those tasks with the following methods:

Fostering learner-centeredness. E-learning facilitators humanize self-directed learning by focusing on learners rather than technology. The essential quality of learner-centeredness is most relevant when learners are personally challenged with a problem to solve, a project to complete, or a dilemma to resolve. Facilitators and learners often participate together as partners in learning activities. Facilitators

manage the distribution of learner-selected activities and scaffold them with comments and support to guide learner achievement.

Specifically, facilitators guide learners to play a part in determining course direction by discovering content on their own, carrying out assignments and projects, and creating learning opportunities to meet their own needs. In asynchronous environments, learners are often expected to participate in establishing an agenda, defining objectives, and assessing outcomes. In synchronous environments, learners may share the responsibility for programs when facilitators take roles as mutual learners.

Structuring problem-based learning and authentic work. E-learning facilitators acting as instructors create realistic problem-based experiences to make content more personally meaningful for learners. Information is adapted to the settings, purposes, and tasks to which it will be applied. Facilitators use project-based rather than didactic approaches in which learners ask questions, perform investigations, and act on their findings. Facilitators also use strategies such as small-group discussions, simulations, case studies, and collaborative activities to engage learners in problem solving. Facilitators ask questions, closely monitor learners' efforts, and make themselves available for assistance.

E-learning can contribute to problem-based learning by providing a highly authentic environment and access to resources and expertise to help learners solve problems. E-learning facilitators help learners use the conferencing capabilities of the Web to access expert thinking and modeling. Learners can practice what experts in their discipline do each day, with facilitators helping them revise and try again. The uses of email, Webconferencing, Web databases, groupware, and audio- and videoconferencing significantly increase the extent and ease of interaction amongst all participants. The vast array of electronic tools available for analysis, design, planning, problem solving, and giving presentations enable learners to perform sophisticated and complex tasks and solve problems in creative ways.

Providing informative feedback. Some educators believe that the most important facilitator behavior is timely and personal response to learner contributions and questions. Facilitators-as-instructors provide informative feedback that offers learners guidance about how they might improve their performance. Both what facilitators say and how they say it has an impact on learners. If praise is given, facilitators must communicate why performance is positive. For example, "Your speech is clear and concise" provides more constructive feedback than "Good job, I like the way you speak." Facilitators may offer praise or encouragement, however a preferred alternative is to encourage learners to evaluate their own responses.

Feedback is even more critical in e-learning than traditional classrooms because learners may feel isolated and detached due to lack of environmental and nonverbal signals. Constructive and extensive feedback to individuals often takes the form of email messages about assignments. Facilitators may also summarize or synthesize individual responses on a topic or activity by posting messages in a discussion forum or conference.

The element of timely feedback is especially important. Facilitators should establish a standard such as a forty-eight hour turnaround time. Learners should provide feedback to each other, too. Facilitators must establish peer feedback as an expectation in delineated guidelines posted at the beginning of a course (though those guidelines may be discussed and negotiated by all learners).

Social director: creator of collaborative environments

The second "pair of shoes" that an e-learning facilitator wears are those of social director, fostering collaborative learning. Underlying this type of learning is the belief that learners achieve best in social interactions based on consensus building and cooperation. As facilitators promote interpersonal relationships and help learners work together, they guide a developing sense of community within and between small groups. Perhaps the most meaningful facilitation in this collaborative structure, suggests

learning communities experts Rena Palloff and Keith Pratt, is modeling interaction techniques and assuming the role of a group member who contributes to learning.

Facilitators stimulate learner participation and interaction by using small group discussions, collaborative projects, case studies, didactic learning partnership exchanges, and one-on-one exchanges. In addition, they monitor and participate in discussion forums or conferences to identify misconceptions or guide more fruitful directions. Effective facilitators keep discussions focused on the topic, bring out multiple perspectives, and summarize and synthesize main points. They use questions and probes to help learners connect around shared problems, interests, and experiences.

Encouraging and ensuring a high degree of interactivity and participation is one of the most important facilitation skills according to e-learning experts. Interactions among learners may be almost as important as content-oriented goals. Therefore, facilitators should begin a course by posting introductions and encouraging learners to seek areas of common interest as they meet in distinctive gathering places, such as chat rooms. Facilitators can encourage interaction among learners, facilitators, and subject-matter experts via the Internet using email, listservs, newsgroups, multi-user discussions (MUDs), forums, instant messaging (IM), and conferencing. Because facilitators can't be in control of everything learned-- given the limitations of time and access to the learner population--they should guide learners in working together to become more skilled in such collaborative skills as scheduling, project management, time management, consensus building, and leadership.

Program manager: director of the agenda

The third role that an e-learning facilitator is that of manager, responsible for organizational, procedural, and administrative duties. For example, many facilitators develop study guides for courses to help ease learners' anxiety and address both content and technical concerns. These guides can provide introductory information, describe learning activities and resource materials, and provide additional information about course components or procedures.

Facilitators should be available to help learners manage their time and avoid information overload--many learners may not be accustomed to the increased independence and vast array of available information that e-learning provides. In addition, Berge suggests that e-learning facilitators demonstrate leadership, guiding interactions proactively by defining expected learner behaviors through guidelines, protocols, and netiquette.

Technical assistant: model of proficiency

Facilitators as technical assistants help learners become comfortable with systems and software and prepare learners to resolve any technical difficulties that may occur. The ultimate technical goal for facilitators, according to Berge, is to "make the technology transparent." When this occurs, learners may concentrate on the academic task at hand. The more familiar facilitators are with the technology, the more they can focus on learners rather than technology.

Effective facilitators must feel comfortable using media and communication tools. Ideally, they use a variety of media (text, graphics, audio, and video) to present material. Such variety may accommodate individual learning styles and provide approaches for both visual and auditory learners. As an example, Gen-Xers typically prefer fast-paced presentations with visual images and frequent feedback.

As e-learning facilitators put on and take off the four different pairs of shoes that define their roles-- instructor, social director, program manager, and technical assistant--they should keep these action items firmly in mind:

- address the needs of adult learners by guiding self-directed, realistic, problem-based learning experiences
- structure learning opportunities in which learners make their own meanings by discovering content on their own
- encourage high degrees of participation and interactivity
- offer prompt, informative feedback
- provide strong leadership
- help learners feel comfortable with technology.

Steps should be taken to develop standards for facilitators' roles in developing and implementing quality e-learning programs. Defining the roles is a step towards that goal, in helping facilitators be more cognizant of their efforts.

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