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## The Virtual Classroom

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### A Dynamic Learning Environment

#### Overview

The rapidly changing nature of technology has had a striking impact on students' modes of expression. The online environment emphasizes empowerment through the written word, and our new group of online learners has grown up in the Web 2.0 world of texting, blogging, and tweeting. Today's students often utilize several social networking sites to interact with their peers, and as they participate in such activities, they consistently frame their ideas and opinions in writing. Due to the pervasive impact and popularity of such sites, today's youth may interact more easily with computers than they do in face-to-face contexts.

In this chapter, we provide the theoretical framework that shapes and defines our teaching philosophy as it relates to online instruction, and we will discuss how implementing that ideology translates into creating and building an effective online classroom. When we first started teaching, Social Constructivist Theory framed our methodologies, and interactive learning and teaching served as the core of our classroom ideology. Our experience has shown us that the most productive learning environments tend to be the ones where the student and teacher co-create the educational experience. Paulo Freire refers to this as *co-intentional* education, whereby both student and teacher become equalized in the pursuit of knowledge.<sup>1</sup> Such an

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<sup>1</sup>Freire, Paulo. (1997). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 51.

egalitarian concept serves a highly useful purpose in online education as students learn more when they are equal participants. As you will read in this chapter, creating a dynamic, interactive environment functions as the core of a successful online classroom.

## Social Constructivist Theory and the Online Learning Environment

Social Constructivist Theory provides, unintentionally or intentionally, the foundation of the Learning Management System (LMS). As discussed in more detail in Chapter 2, an LMS is a software application that your educational institution has licensed, enabling courses to be taught online. The founders of the disparate LMSs developed their systems with the idea that student and teacher co-develop the dialogue of the class. Social Constructivist Theory focuses on learners as “active constructors rather than passive recipients of knowledge.”<sup>2</sup>

Our institution, California State University, Northridge (CSUN), currently uses the open source software Moodle for its online courses. Moodle (originally an acronym for Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment) follows the Social Constructionist pedagogy in its very design. The Moodle community (along with many other LMSs) supports co-intentional education and Constructivist Theory as its components create a platform that encourages all participants to share the roles of teacher and learner. Through use of interactive discussion, teachers move from being “the source of knowledge” to being an “influencer, role model, and moderator,” and students begin to engage in a “deeper reflection and re-examination of their existing beliefs.”<sup>3</sup>

Within such a proactive environment, the teacher no longer functions as the sole authority figure. Successful LMSs capitalize on this idea by making the student the focus of the learning environment. By emphasizing the interactive nature of online teaching, the use of an effective LMS helps maintain a high level of enthusiasm for learning. For those of you who already implement Social Constructivist Theory in your classrooms, you will gravitate easily to the learning structure provided by the LMS; for those who teach primarily lecture-based courses, this may prove to be a revolutionary

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<sup>2</sup>Lewis, Barbara A., & MacEntee, Virginia M. (2005). Learning Management Systems Comparison. *Proceedings of the 2005 Informing Science and IT Education Joint Conference*. Retrieved January 15, 2011, from <http://www.informingscience.org/proceedings/InSITE2005/P03f55Lewis.pdf>

<sup>3</sup>Philosophy. (2009). *Moodle*. Retrieved September 17, 2010, from <http://docs.moodle.org/en/philosophy>

shift from the teacher-oriented to the student-oriented classroom. Whichever category you fall into, you will discover that Social Constructivism creates an effective base for the virtual classroom.

By having Social Constructivism serve as their foundation, LMS creators provide a variety of synchronous (live, real-time) and asynchronous (time-arranged) platforms upon which instructors can develop their classes to appeal to the broad spectrum of the population that encompasses today's learners. Based on our experience, today's online learners function better in environments where they have some level of responsibility for their own educations.

## Re-imagining Classroom Roles: Today's Online Learners

Online education assists us in re-imagining traditional classroom roles in non-traditional classroom settings. Web-based discussion establishes a mutual interchange in which the student is both participant and audience, demonstrating Paulo Freire's theory of co-intentional education, where all persons in the classroom (teacher and students) share the task of unveiling, critically analyzing, and re-creating knowledge.<sup>4</sup> Incorporating learning technologies such as small group and whole-class forums or blogs and live chats can foster such student interaction and ingenuity.

When you require participation, you create a student-centered pedagogy in your online classroom and vastly improve the depth of your discourse. By applying Paulo Freire's theory of empowerment to encourage students to feel like masters of their own thinking, you will

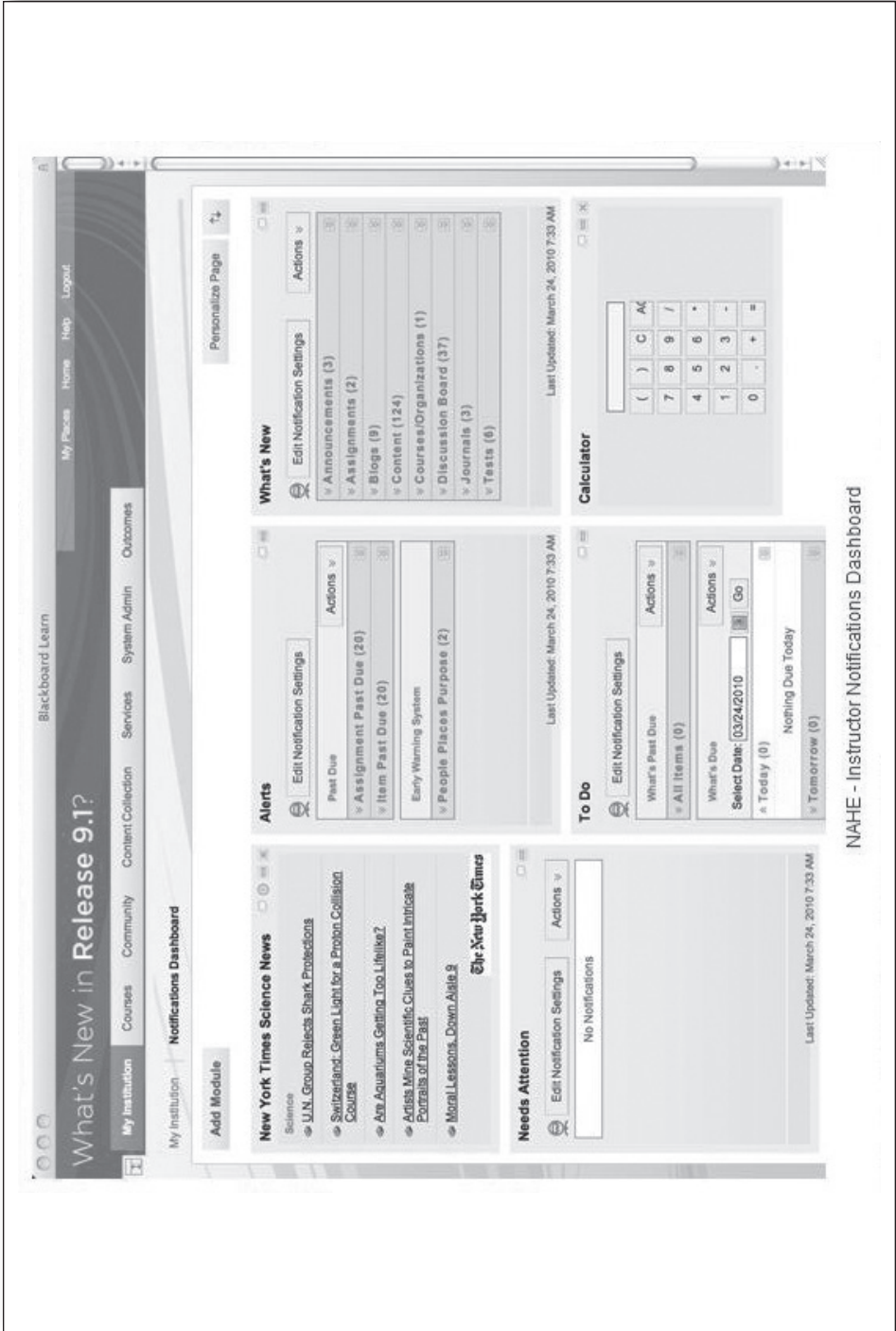
- equalize all voices;
- empower and motivate students;
- promote student-to-student interaction (and collaboration);
- create a community of writers;
- provide a larger audience base, resulting in a heightened focus on clarity, substance, preciseness, literacy, and critical thinking; and
- increase exposure to a multitude of voices and points of view.

Following these guidelines, you challenge students to re-think stereotypical and simplistic viewpoints. By encouraging counter-opinions, students begin to analyze their own thinking processes. The result is a deeper relationship with the material at hand as students are more likely to utilize their learned knowledge once they are no longer in the classroom.

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<sup>4</sup>Freire, Paulo. (1997). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 51.

Screen Capture 1.1 A look inside Blackboard's LMS interface: the instructor notifications dashboard.



NAHE - Instructor Notifications Dashboard

Scholars have noted the sagacious dialogue present among students during online discussions. In their comparative study of Learning Management Systems, Lewis and MacEntee stress the social nature of online learning, and in keeping with contemporary constructivist theory, they recommend the use of dynamic and interactive online course components to meet the needs and expectations of today's active social learners. Course content with a student-centered approach (including a variety of discussion modules) will allow participants to play active roles in their own learning experiences.<sup>5</sup> In their analysis, Lewis and MacEntee also point out key differences between traditional and online students:

Students who take on-line courses tend to be self-directed learners. They show initiative, independence, and persistence in learning. As they accept responsibility for their learning, they see problems as challenges rather than obstacles. They share a high degree of curiosity, a strong desire to learn, and the capacity for self-discipline. They can set goals, make plans, organize their time, and set an appropriate pace for learning.<sup>6</sup>

With regard to the type of student who signs up for online courses, we need to note an additional observation. As we teach at a state university, budgetary constraints dictate course offerings. At our university, several types of students, therefore, sign up for online courses. Most will be self-motivated, while others may enroll in an online course because their school's funding cuts may have reduced the offering of traditional courses. Be aware of a potential diverse group of online learners registering for your online course; economics may force less "self-directed" learners into your virtual classroom.

## Your Role as Online Instructor

As an instructor in an online classroom, your role is multi-faceted; of course, your primary concern is to teach your subject matter. However, how you construct your course activities is of equal importance. Once again, a key concept to keep in mind (one that defines the online environment of the LMS) is the social nature of learning. Lewis and MacEntee maintain the necessity of choosing the right course components—student-centered

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<sup>5</sup>Lewis, Barbara A., & MacEntee, Virginia M. (2005). Learning Management Systems Comparison. *Proceedings of the 2005 Informing Science and IT Education Joint Conference*. Retrieved January 15, 2011, from <http://www.informingscience.org/proceedings/InSITE2005/P03f55Lewis.pdf>

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

content such as forums and chat discussions that emphasizes active, reflective, and social learning.<sup>7</sup> In creating a comfortable setting, students will thrive in environments where they serve as active participants in the pursuit of knowledge.

Student-to-student interaction constitutes one of the core concepts of the efficacious virtual environment; consequently, you'll want to incorporate a variety of discussion formats into your classroom, allowing the students to connect with the material and one another on deeper and more meaningful intellectual levels. Although technology offers varied modes of discussion that can seem sterile compared to in-person dialogue, some of these platforms actually provide deeper means of connecting between students and teacher, resulting in a greater authenticity of written and spoken communication. If you can find a way to integrate synchronous and asynchronous course elements, then you'll find you can more readily guide and monitor student interaction with the material, and the students will more effectively grasp and connect with the topics discussed.

In *Empowering Education: Critical Teaching for Social Change*, Ira Shor espouses the value of student empowerment:

Participation is the most important place to begin because student involvement is low in traditional classrooms and because action is essential to gain knowledge and develop intelligence. . . . People begin life as motivated learners, not as passive beings. . . . But year by year their dynamic learning erodes in passive classrooms. . . . Their curiosity and social instincts decline, until many become nonparticipants. . . . Participatory classes respect and rescue the curiosity of students.<sup>8</sup>

Active use of technology, whether in an asynchronous or synchronous classroom, elevates the atmosphere to one where the motivated learner thrives, contributing to more fruitful dialogue among students and between the students and teacher. In constructing meaningful dialogue with your students, you allow participants a greater voice and a greater willingness to have their voices heard. Embrace Ira Shor's philosophy of open participation, and your students will find themselves more inclined to dialogue with you and with the course material.

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Shor, Ira. (1992). *Empowering Education: Critical Thinking for Social Change*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 17–18.

## Summary

When you first approach your online classroom, establish an atmosphere where open dialogue thrives, and you will create a successful learning environment. Have your students serve as co-creators in the construction of your virtual classroom, and you will find that they will retain the course material more effectively. Remember—your role is to guide your students, to demonstrate to them that they have active roles in their own learning processes. By creating a student-centered curriculum, you will find that your fear will lessen and your online classroom will become defined by dynamic cooperation.

Due to the popularity of the Web 2.0 social networking sites, most students already engage in active communication and will be receptive to trends in Social Constructivist Theory and co-intentional learning. The current LMS design inherently supports today's active social learning environment and facilitates success in the virtual classroom. Encourage active participation, and your online community of self-directed learners will flourish.

