

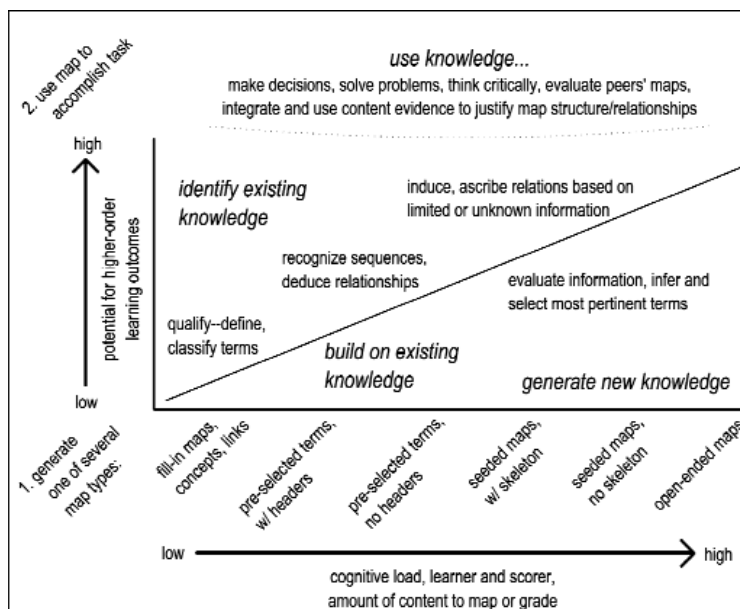
JULY 2007

Strategies for Online Concept Mapping, Part 2

By Kevin Oliver, PhD, and C. Dianne Raubenheimer, PhD

In the last issue, we introduced online concept mapping as a valuable teaching strategy for distance instruction. We shared several strategies for generating concept maps, from fill-in-the-blank maps to preselected, seeded, and open-ended maps (see Figure 1). In part two, we discuss several strategies for using concept maps in the classroom after a concept map has been generated. Again, we use the free Cmap Tools software to support all listed activities (IHMC, 2007).

Figure 1. Concept mapping framework.



Strategies for

Individuals interested in applying concept mapping in the classroom should consider not only the basic thinking skills supported by the act of

CONTINUED ON PAGE 3 >>

TIPS FROM THE PROS

Ensuring Online Course Quality

When reviewing online courses for quality assurance, the focus should be on the course, not the instructor, says Mary Wells, development director for Quality Matters, a peer-based approach to quality assurance in online education.

Faculty are far more accepting of quality assurance processes that are not tied to faculty evaluation. They are more likely to participate in a process that is not a "pass/fail test," but a chance to improve course design in a supportive environment, Wells said.

Faculty are also more accepting of processes that keep their schedules and time commitments in mind. For instance, Quality Matters' course evaluation rubric focuses on just 8 areas, including a course's

- overview and introduction
- learning objectives
- assessment and measurement
- resources and materials
- learner interaction
- course technology
- learner support
- ADA compliance @

IN THIS ISSUE

2
Lurking: A Valid Learning Style?

4
Online Teaching Fundamentals:
(Not) Making It Hard(er) to Learn, Part 5

6
Teaching Online With Error: On the Road Again:
Keep Your Computer Happy

7
Making Visible the Invisible



President: William Haight
(whaight@magnapubs.com)

Publisher: David Burns
(dburns@magnapubs.com)

Managing Editor: Rob Kelly
(robkelly@magnapubs.com)

Creative Services Manager: Mark Manghera

Customer Service Manager: Mark Beyer

ADVISORY BOARD

Randy Accetta, Ph.D., Eller College of Management, The University of Arizona, accetta@eller.arizona.edu; Thomas D. Bacig Ph.D., Morse Alumni Distinguished Teaching Professor of Humanities, Department of Sociology/ Anthropology, University of Minnesota-Duluth, tbacig@d.umn.edu; Toni Bellon, Ed.D., School of Education, North Georgia College and State University, Dahlonega, GA tbellon@ngcsu.edu; Sherry McConnell, DVM, Department of Anatomy and Neurobiology, Colorado State University-Fort Collins, CO, Sherry.McConnell@ColoState.EDU; Frank Moretti, Ph.D., Executive Director Columbia Center for New Media Teaching and Learning, Columbia University, New York, NY, fmoretti@columbia.edu; Dennis O'Neil, Ph.D., Professor of Anthropology, Palomar College, San Marcos, CA, doneil@palomar.edu; Lawrence C. Ragan, Ph.D., Director-Instructional Design and Development, Penn State's World Campus, lcr1@psu.edu; Henry R. van Zyl, Ph.D., Director of Distance Learning Programs, Thomas Edison State College, Trenton, NJ phvanzyl@tesc.edu; John Wager, Ph.D., professor of philosophy, Triton Community College, River Grove, Ill. J.wager@triton.cc.il.us; Shirley Waterhouse, Ed.D., Director of Education Technology, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, shirley@db.erau.edu

Online Classroom (ISSN 1546-2625) is published monthly by Magna Publications Inc., 2718 Dryden Drive, Madison, WI 53704. Phone 800-433-0499. Copyright © 2007. One-year (12 issues) subscription: \$167. Send change of address to: Online Classroom, 2718 Dryden Drive, Madison, WI 53704. E-mail: custserv@magnapubs.com; Website: www.magnapubs.com

To order back issues, call Customer Service at 800-433-0499. Back issues cost \$20 each plus shipping and handling in the U.S. You can pay with MasterCard, VISA, Discover, or American Express.

This publication is designed to provide accurate and authoritative information in regard to the subject matter covered. It is sold with the understanding that the publisher is not engaged in rendering legal, accounting, or other professional service. If legal advice or other expert assistance is required, the services of a competent professional should be sought. Authorization to photocopy for internal or personal use, or the internal or personal use of specific clients, is granted by Online Classroom for users registered with the Copyright Clearance Center (CCC) Transactional Reporting Service, provided that 50 cents per page is paid directly to CCC, 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923; Phone: 978-750-8400, www.copyright.com. For those organizations that have been granted a photocopy license by CCC, a separate system of payment has been arranged.

LEARNING STYLES

Lurking: A Valid Learning Style?

By Jennifer Freeman and Michael Anderson

It has been well established that one of the hallmarks of successful online courses is frequent and meaningful student interaction with their course content, their instructor, and their peers. This is essential in maintaining motivation, reducing a student's feelings of isolation, and fostering the creation of a learning community. Therefore, most online courses require students to interact with each other using asynchronous discussion areas, chats, and other tools.

But what are we to do about students who do not post in the discussion area or participate in chat sessions? Are these "lurkers" accurately labeled as passive or lazy? Are they robbing their peers or themselves of valuable interaction? Or are we, in our zeal to engage our students, employing an overly narrow definition of interactivity that results in a prohibitive environment for certain types of learners?

Why do lurkers lurk? Several papers on the topic of lurking cite reasons that range from slow typing skills to the need for more time for reflection prior to replying. Students may be new to online communication, or confused by the technology, or intimidated by their more vocal peers. To avoid situational problems that can lead to lurking, some preemptive measures can be taken during the course design process.

Detailed instructions, student orientation activities, and reliable technical support can be provided for students who are new to online communication tools and technology. Greeters, mentors, prompt instructor feedback, and social areas for early conversations can also be helpful. Anonymous surveys and rating activities can serve as early

assignments that provide nonthreatening opportunities for student engagement. Basic "netiquette" guidelines and the prompt censure of inappropriate posts will also help to create a user-friendly, inviting environment.

But even in the best-designed courses with plenty of student support, some students will simply prefer to watch and listen due to shyness, language issues, or a need to process and reflect. For these lurkers, the traditional requirement to post often on discussion boards can be daunting and could decrease their satisfaction and impede their learning.

Are lurkers learning? An informal study was recently conducted by the UT TeleCampus to determine whether a student's success is related to the number of posts made to the discussion area. Conventional wisdom would suggest that few posts equals little interactivity, indicating an unsuccessful student. Students' final grades were compared to the number of posts they made in two groups: courses in which the discussion requirement was greater than 50 percent of the course grade and courses in which the requirement was less than 50 percent. These groups were randomly sampled. Both sets of courses showed only a slight correlation between students' final grades and the number of posts they made during the course, and the scatterplots and distribution curves of grades were nearly identical.

These results indicate that students who post only to fulfill the minimum requirement have the same average levels of success as those who are very active and post more often than is required of them. It seems that students who are only

CONTINUED ON PAGE 5 >>

<< FROM PAGE 1

generating concept maps, but also the higher-level thinking processes supported by students using finished maps to meet a goal such as decision making or problem solving. As noted by Presseisen (2001) in her summary of thinking skills, basic thinking skills are often employed and used in support of higher-level thinking processes, so building and using maps can serve different but complementary purposes.

Using maps in collaborative critiquing. Each student can be required to create his or her own personal map, and when students feel ready to share their maps with assigned group members, they exchange passwords to access one another's maps. Each group member then accesses the others' maps and uses the annotation feature in Cmap to make comments and suggestions for improvement. The students utilize others' comments to edit their maps prior to final submission.

Using maps in decision making. In one graduate class we teach, students prepare open-ended concept maps in small groups tied to three different technology integration models. These models have similarities and differences that students are asked to visualize in their cross-representation. After representing the models, students role-play a school technology committee and identify the five most important criteria from their maps that they will use to select one model for implementation (e.g., the degree to which a model supports student-centered learning). Students are scored on both their maps and on a word-processed grid in which they reflect on how well the different models apply to their selected criteria.

Using maps in planning. In the same technology integration class, students in small groups prepare an

open-ended concept map tied to factors that influence the success or failure of technology programs in schools. After completing their maps, groups must use the collected details to develop a technology plan with five primary goals, such as professional development and leadership. Each goal is detailed with specified strategies, indicators, and benchmarks, as drawn from details in the map space.

Using maps in problem solving. Students in an instructional design class we teach read case studies pertaining to design practice in schools and industry. They are first tasked with representing the known facts about a case in concept map form, usually including some dilemma or problem to be resolved. Next, they must reflect on specific questions posed for each case and suggest solutions for the case problems. Students map what is known about a case in one assigned color (e.g., black lines and words) and the ideas they generate for their case in a second assigned color (e.g., blue lines and words) to visually depict where they are generating new ideas in support of the known.

Student reactions to concept maps

Even though concept mapping can be difficult for students initially because it requires a different way of thinking about and manipulating course concepts, student reactions to concept maps in our classes have been largely favorable. On class post-surveys, more than 90 percent of students across six sections employing multiple concept map strategies have agreed or strongly agreed that the method is useful and encourages learning (n=90+). Many students provided written comments indicating Cmap was their favorite course element and that it helped them connect concepts within a topic and between topics in the course:

"I wanted to let you know that the

concept map was an excellent assignment. It has helped me to connect the dots, so to speak."

"It forced me to understand and make connections between essential course concepts."

"It allowed me to connect all the articles and ideas together for each session."

When asked to choose an assessment strategy among Cmap, traditional tests, and applied projects, a majority of students (46 percent) selected concept mapping, while another 33 percent preferred a combination of methods. Finally, most of our graduate students are in-service teachers or community college instructors who have provided written comments indicating they have applied or intend to apply concept mapping strategies with their own students:

"The Cmap activity was immensely useful because it armed us with at least one strategy that we could immediately use in our classrooms."

"I loved them! We will be doing these in my class in 2006-07!"

References

IHMC. (2007). *Cmap tools: Knowledge modeling kit*. Retrieved February 14, 2007, from <http://cmap.ihmc.us/>.

Presseisen, B. Z. (2001). Thinking skills: Meanings and models revisited. In A. L. Costa (Ed.), *Developing Minds: A Resource Book for Teaching Thinking* (3rd ed., pp. 47-53). Alexandria, Va.: ASCD.

Kevin Oliver is an assistant professor of instructional technology at North Carolina State University. Dianne Raubenheimer is direct of assessment in the College of Engineering at North Carolina State University. @

(Not) Making it Hard(er) to Learn, Part 5

By Patti Shank, PhD, CPT

Learning online can be an incredibly valuable experience but it is not without frustrations. This article, the last in a series on reducing frustrations for online learners (and online instructors too, as they have to deal with frustrated online learners), will discuss a common theme around frustration in learning, online or not. The term for this common source of frustration is **cognitive load**.

Cognitive load is a term used to describe the amount of current brain resources, or working memory, being utilized by the task at hand. Cognitive load theory describes the need to reduce *unnecessary* brain resources while learning in order to have adequate brain resources needed to facilitate the long-term memory associated with learning and usable skills. As the brain's working memory becomes overloaded, mental processing capacity diminishes and learning becomes very challenging indeed.

Working memory, how the brain temporarily stores and processes information, has very limited capacity. You have probably heard the adage that we can only process 7 ± 2 units of information at a time. After that, working memory becomes overloaded. Recent research suggests that 7 ± 2 may be too high in many cases, especially for learners who are new to the topic, and is dependent on the complexity of the content.

What impacts cognitive load?

The amount of cognitive load imposed by a learning task is affected by many things, including the complexity of the task and its content, the number of items the learner needs to attend to at the

same time, the design of the site, how familiar the tools are, and how much knowledge of the topic the learner already has.

Dr. John Sweller, an educational psychologist who has written extensively about cognitive load and its impact on design of instruction, explains that instruction should be designed to reduce unnecessary load on working memory because unnecessary load reduces learning capacity and interferes with long-term memory.

Unnecessary cognitive load

Should we attempt to get rid of all cognitive load, then? No, just as much unnecessary cognitive load as possible. Some unnecessary load can be attributed to inadequate design or poor use of media. For example, I recently reviewed some materials on how to use a foam roller for neck, shoulder, and back exercises. The graphics for each exercise were too small to be useful. And the descriptions were hard to follow without the picture. In other words, the materials were pretty useless.

Other things that commonly create unnecessary cognitive load in online courses are complex navigation, unclear or inadequate directions, poorly organized content, and gratuitous graphics or media.

Our role in helping to eliminate as much unnecessary cognitive load as possible is to reduce frustrations caused by design and organization of course content. Here are some concrete ways you can reduce *unnecessary* load.

- Make certain that course navigation is simple and clear.
- Make directions clear and concise. (Consider having a discussion forum dedicated to answering

course and assignment questions.)

- Organize your course into logical, chronological or topic-oriented chunks and organize content in each chunk similarly (for example readings, activities, discussions...).
- Don't include gratuitous or extraneous graphics or media.

Necessary cognitive load

Some cognitive load is both beneficial and necessary. When concepts are new to the learner and he or she doesn't yet understand the domain, cognitive load can be especially high, but it's part of the learning process so it must be managed (having brain resources available to do this is another reason to get rid of *unnecessary* cognitive load). Necessary cognitive load is inherent in the learning process and while it might be frustrating, it can only be managed, not eliminated.

Our role in helping learners manage necessary cognitive load is to support the learning process. Here are some concrete ways you can help learners manage necessary load.

- Help prospective learners assess whether they have the prerequisite knowledge and skills for success in the course, so they aren't enrolling in a course they are unprepared for.
- Provide a road map or course-at-a-glance to help learners see where they will be going (learning objectives) and how they will get there (content, activities, and assessments).
- Segment complex content into manageable, well-sequenced chunks with clear headings and subheadings.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 5 >>

<< FROM PAGE 2

lurking (listening) are interacting vicariously and are indeed learning.

Learning styles. Research on learning styles is plentiful and useful in identifying the range of student personalities and the styles of learning that serve each student best. The Myers-Briggs questionnaire can help us to identify introverted and extroverted learners, and Felder and Solomon cite the differences in the active versus the reflective learner. The extroverted, active learner who is happy to post one thought after another may be ideally suited to the pace and culture of online discussions. But the introverted, reflective learner will want to watch the conversation thread unfold, get a “big picture” view, and reflect/process before responding. Many lurkers will be listening and learning but not choosing to participate in the discussion at all.

Still, there are ways to engage and encourage participation from these introverted and/or reflective students: we simply need to broaden our definition of interactivity.

Respecting the lurker. How do we respect the lurker’s learning style and accommodate it while continuing to stress the importance of interactivity? We can start by using the term “listener” instead of “lurker”! More opportunities for student success can be provided when we

define interaction in a broad sense that recognizes and supports the contributions and strengths these learners can provide to the online community and by exploring the value listeners bring to the class. When we recognize introverted, reflective listening as a form of cognitive apprenticeship and design learning activities accordingly, listeners can and will contribute.

Benefits of listening behavior. Reflective and/or introverted learners frequently don’t have preformed opinions or ideas and are in an ideal position to bring together concepts or see connections. They can serve to present new views and raise new questions, which increases the breadth and depth of the discussion.

Listeners can provide valuable thread or topic summaries by using their reflective skills for the group. The extra time they need to collect their thoughts may serve to provide them with insights not immediately apparent in the spontaneity of a discussion area.

They can be given a supportive role in group assignments, for instance the role of researcher, while someone else presents the findings. Case assignments, e-portfolios, and summary assignments can be used in addition to traditional “post and reply” activities or group projects.

By broadening our definition of interaction and participation, we can

create a more meaningful and more respectful environment to all students and their various learning styles. We will find ourselves with a more inclusive community of learners capable of speaking with each other in various learning style languages, including the dialect of listening. Isn’t that what we strive for in interaction?

Jennifer Freeman is an award-winning instructional designer and has been with the UT TeleCampus since 1999. She recently presented this topic at a Texas Distance Learning Association session titled “Lurkers as a New Learning Style,” along with Michael Anderson, UTTC assistant director, Course Development and Technology. She partnered with Jennifer Rees, UTTC assistant director, Communication Services—a self-professed lurker/listener—to compile that presentation into this article.

The UT TeleCampus works with all 15 institutions in the University of Texas system to build and deliver high-quality collaborative and interactive online courses, degree programs, and support services. UTTC serves approximately 10,000 online enrollments annually for the UT system. See www.uttc.org for more information. @

<< FROM PAGE 4

- Explain visual media with concise text or audio (but not both).
- Use graphics, animation, or video to help learners understand spatial concepts and to show relationships.
- Put together instructional elements that need to be used at the same time.
- Provide worked problems, partially worked problems, and exemplary completed assignments.
- Point out the most critical aspects

of the content with call-outs, arrows, or bolded or italicized text (use bold and italics with moderation!).

Resources

Wikipedia has some informative articles on cognitive load and working memory:

- Cognitive Load: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive_load
- Working Memory: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Working_memory

- The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus 2 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Magical_Number_Seven%2C_Plus_or_Minus_Two

Patti Shank, PhD, CPT, is a widely recognized instructional designer and instructional technologist, writer, and author who facilitates learning and builds and helps others build good online and blended courses. She can be reached through her website, www.learningpeaks.com. @

On The Road Again: Keep Your Computer Happy!

By Errol Craig Sull

Well, it's that time again: summertime, and thus more online instructors are on the road than at any other time of the year. Of course, in addition to the "usual suspects" of clothes, money, cameras, etc., that will tag along, that indispensable umbilical cord to the classroom will also be coming: the laptop. For the class and its students can't be left alone for too long; it and they need you, and thus your summer journeys hither and yon must include that portal of connection to both.

In this annual summer column, I offer you the latest tips to keep your hassles with online teaching to a minimum while you enjoy a well-deserved break or two during these warm months:

- **Bring a laptop first aid kit.** On the road you may not have access to a convenient computer store, so it's best to bring both your "this I need" and "this I might need" items with you, including a can of air, screen wipes, Ethernet and flashdrive cords, a small flashlight, contact information in case of a computer problem, and an extra flashdrive.
- **Travel with a cigarette lighter plug-in.** Several airlines now provide outlets on board so laptops need not run down their batteries. These are the same size and shape as the old cigarette plug-in lighters, so you'll need to bring an adapter to use them—but they will help save your laptop's battery life (for when you really do need it) and give you a tad brighter screen.
- **Bring along copies of important PC files.** Do a thorough check of files on your PC to determine

which ones you might need on the road; copy them onto a flashdrive. And don't worry about bringing along those "It's very unlikely I'll need these" files—you probably will find you need at least one, and it's much better to have it with you than to bemoan that you could have used it but it's back home. (By the way: always back up your data in case you and your laptop become "separated!")

- **Know the ins and outs of airport (and other) wi-fi hot spots.** The following four websites are comprehensive and include worldwide airports and just about every other worldwide public location you can think of:
 - **U.S. airports (free and for a fee wi-fi):** www.travelpost.com/airport-wireless-internet.aspx
 - **U.S. airports (free wi-fi):** www.wififreespot.com/airport.html
 - **Worldwide (bars, marinas, shops, etc.):** www.ezgoal.com/hotspots
 - **Worldwide airports: (free and for-a-fee wi-fi):** <http://usatoday.jtwire.com/hotspots-hot-spot-airport-directory-browse-by-country.htm>
- **Be aware of hotel's Internet access policies.** Most middle-to-upper-scale hotels have Internet access in the rooms, but some have it available only in their lobbies or other public spots; and there are many hotels and motels that don't have any Internet connection. Check this out before leaving on your trip, including any fees involved.
- **Remember that laptops do not like liquid, sand, humidity, or heat.** While laptops can go

anywhere, don't get careless and forget about their aversion to liquid, sand, high humidity, and heat. Be careful of drinks being passed over your laptop and sitting too close to a pool with your laptop; also, don't bring it to the beach: with sand, water, high humidity (possibly), and heat in ample supply, your laptop is a disaster waiting to happen.

- **Be up front with any late student correspondence resulting from your travels.** Nearly all online schools require that faculty respond to student correspondence—of any kind—within 72 hours max. If you expect to have difficulty in meeting this deadline because of an out-of-town trip, let your students know so they can plan accordingly—and will not think you've lost interest.
- **Additional air travel tips can prove very helpful.** Look into exit rows on planes if you have a large laptop screen (these laptops will often not fit in the space available in other seating, except First Class); many airlines allow you to purchase these, if available, online for a small fee. Don't forget your power cord when you go through airport security (and keep your eye on your laptop!). Finally, there is no need to worry about exposing your laptop to the airport security X-rays: these are very low level and will not harm your laptop or its contents.
- **Protect your laptop from thieves.** When not using your computer, keep it locked in its case (this prevents someone from taking your accessories and/or laptop). Label both your laptop and case in the event it is stolen

CONTINUED ON PAGE 8 >>

Making Visible the Invisible

By Denise Tolan

How do great teaching moments happen? For me, great ideas usually come from watching bad television. One night, I found a show on the Discovery Health channel called *I Lost It*. The basic premise of the show is that you hear the motivational tales of people who lost weight. In the episode I watched, a woman told the story of her move to a small town in Colorado when she was 16 years old. The town had a population of 1,500 and the woman and her family were the only African-Americans in the community. On top of that, this young woman, at 16, was six feet one inch tall. Her discomfort at being “different,” she recalled, was soothed by food. When she graduated from high school, she enrolled in online courses because she wanted “to disappear and be like everyone else.” She quit her online classes after a few weeks because she felt “disconnected.” Hmm, I thought.

It just so happened that while I was thinking about this idea of “disappearing” into an online course, I also began teaching one. Each semester I use an icebreaker during which students have to tell the class something about their past, their present, and their future. Over the years I have become accustomed to seeing the lists of three things appear on the discussion board, so I was surprised when checking the board one evening to see a short post from a student in the class: “Are there any (*insert racial designation*) in here?”

I read it.

I froze.

I wondered if the term had been offensive to anyone.

I wondered if anyone had read it yet.

I deleted the post and I wrote the student, asking why she had posted the comment. The next morning she wrote back: “Oh, I was just wondering if there was anyone else like me out there.” She wanted to “see” who was in the class. She wanted a cultural connection. She wanted to make visible the invisible.

Online teaching is in a double bind as to how to balance the freedom of relative anonymity with potential isolation or the loss of diversity. Much has been written about the online classroom being a level playing field, but I wonder if a level playing field necessitates the stripping away of gender, age, and racial and ethnic identities. How do we honor diversity when we can’t see it? Should we even try?

I thought about my own online classrooms. The semester after the war in Iraq began, the discussion board was lit up with students heatedly discussing (and I mean *discussing*) both sides of the issue. In spite of my vigilance in maintaining a safe environment for students to openly discuss hot-button issues, some students did make hostile remarks about Iraq and the people of that country. Toward the end of the semester, one of the students revealed that she was an Iraqi woman who had married an American man 11 years prior and had moved to Texas. In the following days I got a lot of email from students who said things like, “If I had only known we had a person from Iraq in class, I would have....” Would have what, I wondered? Been more thoughtful, sensitive, restrained, considerate?

I thought of all the students I had taught in previous online classes who hailed from Finland and Uruguay and Uganda, and how they sometimes had names like Bob and

Shay and Ben—names that enabled the cloak of invisibility to remain in place. What if I had asked those students if they would share their diverse lives with the class? I would never pass up teaching opportunities like that in the face-to-face classroom, so why should it be any different in an online class?

Of course, that is my emotional response to issues of diversity. But even in a practical sense, honoring diversity in an online classroom is critical. Each semester, I know there might be some form of cultural distance in my classroom, so I try to find a way to bridge those gaps. I believe some students are at a loss in the online classroom because of issues with language. Some don’t comprehend written sarcasm while some fear the permanence of language and the power of the written word. My own mother, for whom English is not the native language, takes time to read every word of a document because, to her, the written word means power. But while there are studies on how to work with issues of cultural distance in regard to tangible academics, it is the *essence* of culture that is often ignored or overlooked in an online course.

So how can you incorporate cultural issues into the online classroom? The discussion board is the place to begin. Students can “reveal” themselves in a personal way on the board. Ask a question every week on the discussion board that extends the ideas from a major assignment and lends itself to exposing and honoring differences. For example, if you are asking your students, as I do, to come up with an argument of definition, ask them to also tell you how a person from another race, gender, age, or other

CONTINUED ON PAGE 8 >>

<< FROM PAGE 7

able-ness might define the same issue. In another exercise, my students go to the Pulitzer.org website and pick an image from the photographic or editorial cartoon winners, and I ask them to tell us what visual argument the author has made. In another paragraph, they have to consider what a person “other” than themselves might say in response to that argument. It is astonishing how colorful those black-and-white text blocks can become when students are aware that who we are makes a difference in how we teach and learn.

Is posting a picture of each student enough to identify culture in your online class? For mine, probably not. I can see the differences in skin color and age and sex, but I won't see what it is that makes you who you are unless I have the opportunity to hear you and learn from you. I begin the semester with the *Where I'm From* poem. (It's easy

to find—just Google it.) The poem is student-friendly and allows them to talk about their families, their neighborhoods, the foods they grew up with, and the languages they heard. I might have them do a culture collage—either a PowerPoint or a Word document or any program whereby they can introduce items and images that represent who they are. I also honor these cultural ideas by giving them a grade. Students see through empty gestures pretty well.

Okay—don't we have enough to do? Students have reading issues, learning issues, writing issues, issue issues—why should we care about culture in an online class? Isn't this the one place I can stop thinking about who sits before me? I can only answer these questions for myself: I want my students to be better global citizens. I want a rich cultural environment in all of my classrooms. I want to learn and to grow and I want the joy of sharing new things with my students.

I recognize the irony inherent in sitting on the couch watching a television show about losing weight. I know I have to get up and move if I want to be on that show one day! But I also see irony in online teachers complaining about the lack of engagement in their classes and then rolling out the same class, semester after semester. Where is the point in not utilizing the diverse backgrounds of all students? Who knows—in the process, students might even see themselves in one another and connect in a meaningful way. After all, for some of us, the cultural education within the classroom is the one that has the most impact once students leave us. I hope so anyway. That is why I teach.

Denise Tolan is an English professor at Northwest Vista Community College in Texas. @

<< FROM PAGE 6

or misplaced. Never let anyone use your laptop unless you are absolutely sure the person can be trusted. If you need to leave the laptop in your hotel room, keep it as unobtrusive (and out of sight) as possible; be sure your windows and doors are locked.

- **Carry proper documents.** If you are leaving the country with your laptop, be sure to bring along proof of purchase, as well as register it with U.S. Customs before you depart. Duty is levied each time you re-enter the United States with electronic equipment that was not manufactured here, unless you can prove that you owned the equipment before you left the States. To do this fill out a Certificate Of Registration For Personal Effects Taken Abroad (CF4457) for each foreign-manufactured product you are taking that has a serial number. You can find a printable PDF version of

this form at the U.S. Customs & Border Protection website (www.cbp.gov), and be sure to include the item's serial number in the Description of Articles box.

- **Keep a low profile.** When using your laptop in a public area, try to find as much privacy as possible: you do not want someone having easy access to private information you may have on the screen (especially bank account numbers and passwords) or to offer easy pickings for someone out to steal a laptop. And if using a PC in an Internet café or the like, shield the screen from others as much as possible (and never leave any files on any computer but your own).
- **Universal adapter and surge protector.** If traveling abroad, it's imperative that you have a universal adapter so you can use your power cord with another country's electrical system (nearly always different from ours). Also, bring along a surge protector to shield you from any “hiccups” in

another country's electrical system.

REMEMBER: Treat your laptop on travels as if your favorite pet and it will remain loyal, dependable, and healthy—for a long time.

Please let me hear from you, including sending along suggestions and information for future columns. You can always reach me at erolcraigsull@aol.com. And, as always, with each of my columns I offer a sampling of whatever subject I've discussed. For this column, I'll send you an updated copy of last summer travel tips; just drop me an email!

*Errol Craig Sull has been teaching online courses for more than 12 years and has a national reputation in the subject, both writing and conducting workshops on it. Presently teaching online courses, he is putting the finishing touches on his fourth book—a collection of his online teaching activities titled *Pebbles: A Most Unusual Approach to Very Effective Writing*. @*